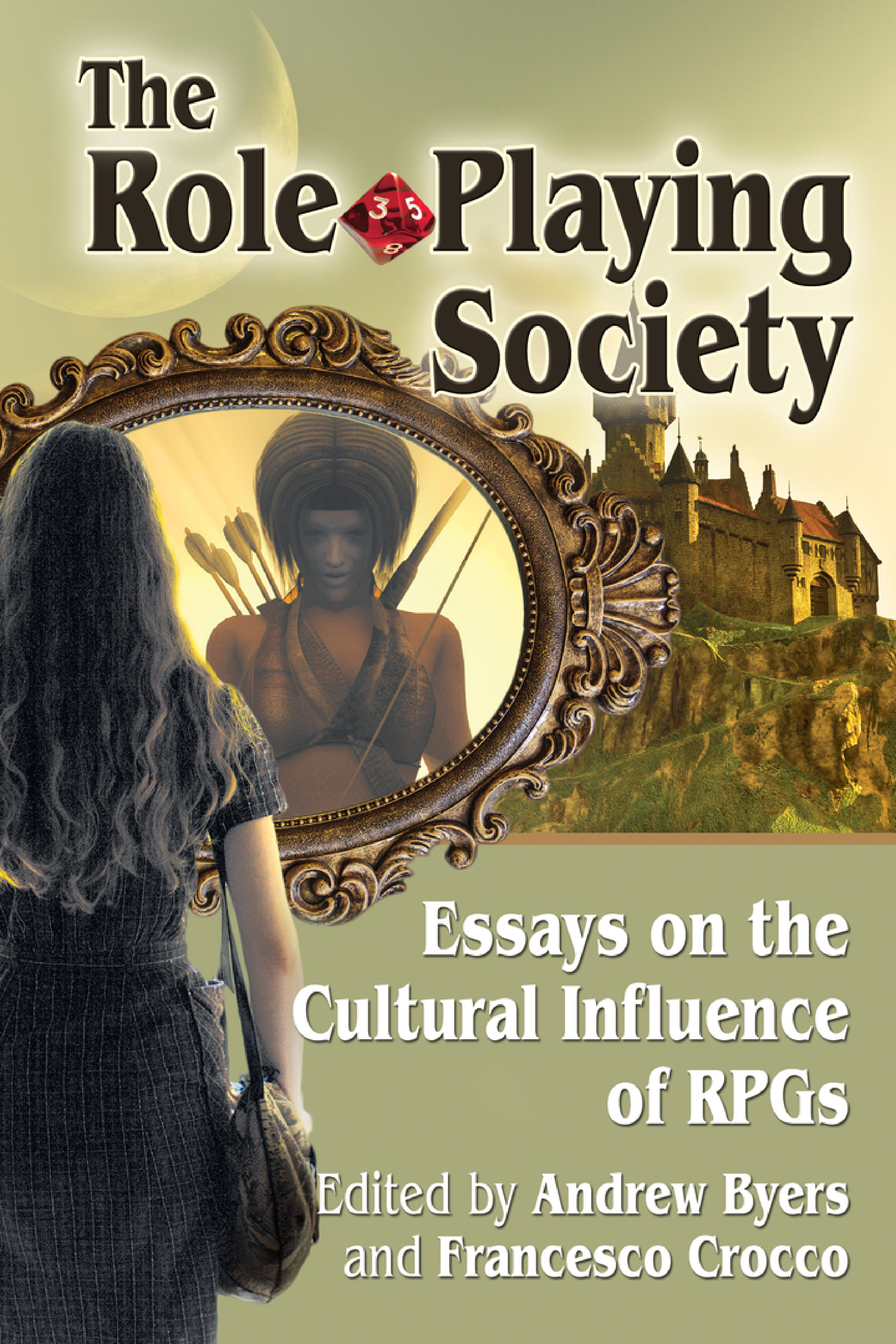
The Role-Playing Society



Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs

Edited by **Andrew Byers**
and **Francesco Crocco**

The Role-Playing Society

This page intentionally left blank

The Role-Playing Society

Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs

Edited by
Andrew Byers *and*
Francesco Crocco

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Byers, Andrew, editor. | Crocco, Francesco, editor.
Title: The role-playing society : essays on the cultural influence of RPGs / edited by Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco.
Description: Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016000395 | ISBN 9780786498833 (softcover : acid free paper) ♾
Subjects: LCSH: Fantasy games—Social aspects.
Classification: LCC GV1469.6 .R65 2016 | DDC 793.93—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2016000395

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

ISBN (print) 978-0-7864-9883-3
ISBN (ebook) 978-1-4766-2348-1

© 2016 Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco. All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Front cover images © 2016 iStock

Printed in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com

To George R. Byers, who had no idea what he
was getting me into when he gave me that
D&D *boxed set on Christmas 1981.*
—Andrew Byers

To the Forge, my best and bravest
adventuring party.
—Francesco Crocco

This page intentionally left blank

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Part I. The Player's Guide: The Psychological and Cultural Impact of a Game Genre

The Satanic Panic and *Dungeons & Dragons*: A Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective
Andrew Byers 22

Psychological Effects of Fantasy Games on Their Players: A Discourse-Based Look at the Evidence
Andreas Lieberoth *and* Jonas Trier-Knudsen 46

Building the Culture of Contingency: Adaptive Choice in Ludic Literature from Role-Playing Games to *Choose Your Own Adventure* Books
Tim Bryant 72

Part II. The Tome of Knowledge: Playing to Learn in and across the Disciplines

Raiding the Last Frontier: Overcoming the Language Barrier in the ESL Classroom
Timm Woods 98

"Do you want to be Dr. Frankenstein or Edna Pontellier?": How Getting into Character Enhances Literary Studies
Jonathan M. Bradley 122

Playing Between the Lines: Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies with Virtual Worlds
Reneta D. Lansiquot, Candido Cabo *and* Tamrah D. Cunningham 143

Part III. The Book of Change: Enacting Social Transformations

Teacher as Dungeon Master: Connected Learning, Democratic Classrooms, and Rolling for Initiative
Antero Garcia 164

Playing for Change: *FreeMarket* and the Rise of Serious Tabletop Role-Playing Games
Troy Leaman 184

Leveling Influence: Klout and the Introduction of Social Leveling
Joseph B. Meyer 208

Part IV. The Manual of Play: Seeding New Avenues of Gaming

Shapers, Portals and Exotic Matter: Living Fiction and Augmented Reality in Google's *Ingress*
Kai-Uwe Werbeck 234

Descent to *Munchkin*: From Pen-and-Paper to Board and Card
Cathlena Martin *and* Benton Tyler 256

The RPG Classroom: Re-Purposing Game Mechanics for the Gamification of Education
Francesco Crocco 278

About the Contributors 303

Index 307

Introduction

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*), the seminal role-playing game (RPG) first published in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules, Inc. (TSR), is now over forty years old. *D&D* and its successors have spawned a vibrant industry and subculture. In the last decade, scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum have explored the origins, characteristics, cultures, and player experiences of RPGs. Yet, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the meaningful ways RPGs have shaped and transformed society at large over the last forty years. RPGs were remarkably influential on the design of video games—perhaps in ways unknown to many contemporary video game players—and became widely represented in film, television, and other media. They have gone on to transform other areas of society, as well, including education, corporate training, and the military.

Three Decades of Scholarship on RPGs

The earliest major academic work on RPGs is Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), a seminal ethnography on the early RPG community.[1] The majority of recent publications have followed in this vein by focusing on the cultures and practices of gamers rather than examining the cultural influences of RPGs *outside* the RPG community. For instance, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) by Daniel Mackay expands upon Fine's examination of the communal practices of role-playing gamers, suggesting that the performative, theatrical, and artistic aspects of RPGs as a means of creating shared imaginative spaces has been largely overlooked.[2] Sarah Lynne Bowman provides another sociological study of role-playing gamers in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (2010), exploring the social and psychological benefits of RPGs in terms of social and problem-solving skill development, community building, and identity formation, among other areas.[3] *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games* (2006) is a collection of essays exploring gaming—including RPGs, among other types of popular games—as cultural phenomena.[4] Six of the ten essays in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* (2012) focus directly on the cultural practices of role-playing gamers, covering such topics as the multiple layers of interaction between and among gamers, player immersion and agency, and the creation of narrative via gameplay.[5]

Several studies have theorized on the significance of role-playing and narrative construction in RPGs, examining how these elements impact players and their communities. For instance, *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (2007), a collection of essays by a mix of scholars and RPG designers, examines two interrelated strands of activities conducted by role-playing gamers: role-playing itself and story creation.[6] Likewise, Jennifer Grouling Cover's study of RPGs, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2010), seeks to explore the ways that RPGs are used by gamers to create different kinds of shared narrative experiences, as well as the linguistic structures they employ to create them.[7] Chris Bateman's *Imaginary Games* (2011) examines RPGs alongside video games, board games, and collectible card games as examples of how props and rules are used for different forms of participatory storytelling.[8] Taking a unique approach, *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom* (2012) offers a collection of essays that explore some of the philosophical questions raised in and by RPGs, such as the morality of playing evil characters, the paradox of narrative games, and the relationship between *D&D* and Aristotle.[9]

With the rise of video games, digital RPGs have received significant scholarly attention in their own right. For instance, *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (2012) contributes to the growing field of game studies and new media by theorizing the unique properties and cultures of digital RPGs.[10] The edited collection *The Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming* (2007) includes essays on the cultures that develop around RPG video games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs).[11] Matt Barton's *Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (2008) elucidates the history of computer role-playing games (CRPGs), highlighting the common elements of CRPGs and distinguishing them from related genres, such as MUDs and MMORPGs.[12] Conversely, R.V. Kelly 2's *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: The People, the Addiction and the Playing Experience* (2004) focuses on the players and communities in and around MMORPGs.[13]

Apart from cultural studies and theoretical investigations, the field also includes histories and personal memoirs. The first major overview of the history of RPGs was Lawrence Schick's *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (1991).[14] It has since been followed by Jon Peterson's compendious study, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventure, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (2010), which traces the wargaming origins of *D&D*.[15] Additionally, Michael J. Tresca's *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (2011) explores tabletop RPGs as part of a broader evolution of world-building and collective storytelling.[16]

Finally, the rise of geek culture has precipitated a host of personal memoirs reflecting on player experiences with RPGs. These include Mark Barrowcliffe's *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange* (2007); Shelly Mazzanoble's *Confessions of a Part-time Sorceress: A Girl's Guide to the D&D Game* (2007) and *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-Help for Elf-Help* (2011); Ethan Gilsdorf's *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms* (2009); and David M. Ewalt's *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (2013).[17]

What Is an RPG?

While the first RPGs were tabletop affairs set in elaborate fantasy settings, RPGs have evolved into computer, online, and live-action formats, as well, and now encompass a variety of settings, including traditional fantasy, sci-fi, steampunk, and gothic. Given the rich diversity of the genre, it can be difficult to trace the lines of influence from RPGs without first defining the genre and isolating the characteristics that make it unique.

The origin of the modern RPG can be traced back to 1974 with Gary Gygax and David Arneson's publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the very first commercial tabletop role-playing game (TRPG). *D&D* reflected its creators' shared interests: a love of fantasy literature, with a particular fondness for J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) trilogy, which spiked in popularity during the 1960s with the availability of inexpensive paperback reprints; and a penchant for tabletop wargames, such as those produced by Avalon Hill since the 1950s and enjoyed by small but dedicated communities of gamers (through which Gygax and Arneson met), which allowed players to conduct complex battle simulations, historical or otherwise, using miniatures on a tabletop, with outcomes determined by the aid of statistical charts and dice. The advent of *D&D* marked the historic convergence of these two media, combining the setting, characters, and themes of the former with the rule systems and accouterments of the latter. Players still gathered around a tabletop, with or without miniatures, and used statistical charts and dice to determine outcomes, but, instead of playing armies, they played individual characters engaged in a fantasy adventure. Accordingly, Daniel Mackay sums up *D&D* and the RPG genre it later spawned with the simple formula: "Fantasy Literature + Wargames = Role-Playing Games."[18]

The combination of these media produced the RPG, a brand new medium replete with its own unique characteristics. Various scholars, game designers, and enthusiasts have attempted to identify the core features of RPGs, mostly overlapping in their classifications, but emphasizing different elements. Taking a sociological perspective, Fine distinguishes RPGs by their quality of being "shared fantasies" collectively constructed by the players.[19] Ewalt identifies three major innovations introduced by *D&D* and later adopted by newcomers to the genre: "Every player at the table controls just one character. Those characters seek adventure in a fantasy landscape. By doing so, they gain experience and become more powerful."[20] Schick emphasizes a different configuration of three core features in his definition of RPGs: "[A] role-playing game must consist of *quantified interactive storytelling*."[21] Peterson, who has written the most extensive history of *D&D* and its evolution from fantasy literature and wargaming, also breaks down the game's major features into three parts: setting, system, and character.[22] In his history of CRPGs, Barton lists several recurring features of the genre, such as high fantasy settings, an emphasis on tactical combat, random encounters, a general store, puzzles, riddles, and mazes; but he concludes that "the only common factor that stretches across the entire span of CRPGs is the statistical system that determines how characters fare in combat (or whatever other tasks they are asked to perform)."[23] Offering perhaps the most comprehensive rubric, Tresca identifies six characteristics shared by all RPGs: fellowship, narrative, personalization, risk, roles, and status.[24] Each of these classification systems touches upon different aspects of RPGs: their evolution from fantasy literature and wargaming, their emphasis on role-playing and character development, their reliance on rule systems involving statistics and randomizers for simulating action (like combat), and their use of interactive and collaborative story-telling to construct highly engaging narratives.

Based on the classification systems described above and our own experience as players, we have constructed a rubric for identifying RPGs using the core game mechanics they share. These mechanics are: role-playing, narrative, quests, collaboration and specialization, statistical systems, experience points and levels, and the game master. By using game mechanics to determine what is or is not in the family of RPGs, we are able to define the genre with greater precision and identify more subtle lines of influence since many cultural transfers from RPGs import only parts of these games into their design.

Role-Playing

Jon Peterson has noted that the original *D&D* product, a box containing three rulebooks, never mentioned the word "role-playing" either on its cover or in the rulebooks.[25] The subtitle on the box cover describes the game as "Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures." Doubtless, Gygax and Arneson were trying to market the product to the small community of wargamers through which they met. Yet, as the market for the game grew and attracted a host of imitators, Peterson explains, "Some reviewers began to note that the game didn't play like a wargame, and might better be classified as another sort of game entirely."[26] So, in mid–1976, TSR began to market *D&D* as a "role-playing game."[27] The name stuck and a new game genre was officially born. As the name implies, in a RPG, a player takes on a *character* distinct from his or her normal everyday identity. Players typically refer to their characters as "player characters" or "PCs" to distinguish these characters from the ones controlled by the game master (more on this role later), which are called "non-player characters" or "NPCs."

Narrative

RPGs were the first to combine a complex game system with an interactive narrative. This merger eventually elicited a hotly contested debate between so-called "ludologists" and "narratologists" over the nature of RPGs and the compatibility of games and narratives. Greg Costikyan boils down the problem to the issue of linearity: put simply, games must be non-linear in order to leave room for free will and agency, whereas narratives must be linear in order to be meaningful.[28] Nonetheless, Costikyan and others have conceded that engaging game systems and meaningful narratives can coexist and even complement each other, with some, such as Adam Brackin, arguing that it is precisely the unique fusion of game system and narrative that has led to the success of RPGs.[29] Taking a player-centric approach, Cover contends that whether or not theorists believe RPGs can possess true narrative qualities, the fact remains that role-playing gamers experience them as such.[30] RPG narratives possess unique properties. For one thing, they are collaboratively created, which is why Fine calls them "shared fantasies." Furthermore, because the imaginary settings for these shared fantasies are often adapted from pre-existing materials, such as fantasy or science-fiction novels, myths, fables, and even folklore, they enable players to go beyond passively reading about or viewing these imaginary worlds and actually *inhabit* them, a quality that has led Mackay to dub them "imaginary-entertainment environments."[31]

Quests

The overarching game narrative of an RPG, sometimes called a "campaign," is often broken down into smaller units called "quests." Quests are tasks with clear and actionable objectives that help prepare players for the final adventure. Jeff Howard traces the origin of the quest to the tradition of quest narratives in literature, which includes Homer's *The Odyssey*, medieval romances about the Holy Grail, and, more recently, the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and J. R. R. Tolkien.[32] The study of quest narratives was formalized in the work of scholars like Joseph Campbell, who identified certain monomyths found in quest narratives, such as the "hero's journey," and Northrop Frye, who outlined a basic quest structure consisting of an overarching "major quest" comprised of a series of "minor" or "side" quests.[33] Howard demonstrates a line of continuity from the literary tradition of quest narratives to quest games like *D&D* and *World of Warcraft*, which adopt the formal characteristics of the quest to structure episodic play and provide players with meaningful choices.[34]

Collaboration and Specialization

In addition to collaborating on narrative construction, most RPGs also encourage players to collaborate in the game by forming adventuring parties or guilds capable of completing dangerous quests. Tresca attributes the strong collaborative elements of RPGs to their literary roots in Tolkien high fantasy. In the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, an epic cast of heroes is assembled into a "fellowship" and tasked with saving the realm from great evil. Because of Tolkien's formative influence on the genre, Tresca argues that the idea of players working together as a party to accomplish epic feats has become "a fantasy staple that has been consistent across gaming mediums."[35] The need to cooperate is so strong that, as Fine has observed, it tends to cancel out the natural tendency for players to report cheating because cheating by any single player, say by mis-reporting dice rolls to the game master, actually helps the party improve its chances of success.[36] Since effective party collaboration often requires players to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses by specializing their characters, RPGs usually provide players with a plethora of ways to do so, including customization of character generation and growth.

Statistics

Barton notes that the formal study of statistics boomed in the first half of the twentieth century as the computational needs of rapid industrialization, an increasingly complex tax structure, and the administration of new social programs like Social Security, as well as older activities such as the census, required more sophisticated forms of analyses and the aid of computers.[37] The normalization of statistical analyses in everyday life had surprising outcomes for how people spent their leisure time, engendering such pastimes as fantasy baseball and wargames, both of which featured rule systems that relied on heavy doses of statistics, dice-rolling, and math to determine the success or failure of any gambit.

Having evolved from wargaming, *D&D* and other RPGs down to the latest MMORPGs wedded their signature statistical systems to fantasy and science-fiction settings. However, a key difference between RPGs like *D&D* and their wargaming predecessors is that instead of controlling armies, players control individual characters. As Peterson puts it, "*Dungeons & Dragons* drew on the fundamental system concepts invented by the wargaming tradition to create a novel and compelling simulation of reality that went beyond modeling imaginary armies, and entered the new realm of modeling imaginary people."[38] This requires that every character's skills and abilities be quantified on special character sheets (for TRPGs) or in heads-up displays and menus (for CRPGs and MMORPGs). These character statistics determine the probability for success in any given action, and this information conditions players to favor certain choices over others depending on their characters' strengths and weaknesses.

Experience Points and Levels

While RPGs innovated upon wargaming by having players control individual characters rather than whole armies, they also added the ability for characters to grow over time. RPG systems accomplish this by awarding players with experience points, often called "XP" for short, after each play session. When players earn enough XP, their characters level up and unlock new powers. Ewalt explains that the ability to grow one's character makes RPGs a "uniquely visceral experience" since players share the joy of victory as their characters succeed and level up, but also experience the agony of defeat when a character dies.[39] According to Bateman, the opportunity to earn XP and level up also "create[s] highly compulsive circumstances, encouraging players to keep going, keep earning more points, keep getting more powerful."[40] XP thus function as an addictive game mechanic, one that Mackay points out can serve as a highly effective way for the game master to discipline player behavior.[41] XP can play yet another important role in the game: since RPG narratives can go on indefinitely, Peterson notes that the accumulation of XP can serve as a "substitute for victory"[42] when a final win condition is absent or indefinitely deferred.

The Game Master

Wargaming relied on referees to arbitrate outcomes. TRPGs adapted this feature by designating one player the game master (GM), alternatively called the "dungeon master" (DM) or "storyteller." The GM's job is to organize the "shared fantasy" of the game by authoring or selecting the game setting and major plot lines, playing all NPCs, arbitrating outcomes in the case of fuzzy rules, and awarding XP. A talented GM, as many players and scholars have noted, is one who balances the demands of narrative cohesion with the desire for player agency. Accordingly, legendary *D&D* writer Frank Mentzer has stated, "The ideal game is a player-driven game. They are not acting in a play that you wrote. You are presenting a setting, you are doing the stage dressing and letting *them* come up with the play."[43] CRPGs and MMORPGs, which do not rely on human GMs, utilize pre-programmed algorithms to adjudicate outcomes. More recently, some indie RPGs, most notably *Capes*, *Cosmic Patrol*, and *Fiasco*, have begun experimenting with GM-less systems using a variety of designs ranging from GM-less, to GM-full, to a rotating GM, to player vs. player.

The Popular Influence of RPGs

Although the concept of role-playing did not originate in 1974 with the advent of *D&D*, nonetheless, many of the game mechanics, settings, and themes introduced by *D&D* and adopted by subsequent TRPGs have proven particularly enduring and influential, spawning a variety of other games and applications that have adopted or appropriated these qualities. The fact that traditional RPGs now need to be qualified as "tabletop" or "pen-and-paper" to differentiate them from computer and other kinds of RPGs begins to suggest the widespread embrace of RPG and RPG-like qualities in other games. RPGs have inspired board games, card games, computer games, and even live-action role-playing games (LARPs). The enduring influence of TRPGs on the development of computer games that focus on role-playing is a case in point. Early computer RPGs like *Wizardry* and the *Ultima* series established many of the new genre's conventions in the early 1980s. The computer RPG industry had a kind of golden age in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the development of the best-selling *Might and Magic* and *Bard's Tales* series of games, among many others. New games released in the late 1990s like *Diablo* and *Fallout*, along with a variety of *D&D* spinoffs, continued the genre's popularity as it expanded into multi-platform and video game console releases. The increasingly popular (and lucrative) MMORPGs, which leverage both role-playing mechanics and settings as well as the gaming potential of the web, likewise owe their existence and foundational elements to TRPGs. The last two decades, however, have brought new interest in RPGs from outside traditional gamer communities. Groups as diverse as educators, the military, and private-sector corporations have appropriated RPGs and their core mechanics to enhance the serious activities they oversee. Furthermore, RPGs have also received considerable attention in popular culture, with depictions of RPGs—usually *D&D*—and gamers in film, television, music, and popular literature.

Educators have come to embrace the pedagogical potential of RPGs. The use of role-playing for educational purposes caught on in the 1970s around the same time as the arrival of *D&D*, spawning a genre of manuals and materials for educators looking to improve how they teach. One of the earliest examples, *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening through Simulation-Games* (1975) by Lynn Q. Troyka and Jerold Nudelman, features sample role-plays for generating student writing, such as a population control simulation replete with detailed information about setting, roles, rules, goals, and permissible actions.[44] By the turn of the century, the idea that game design had something to offer pedagogical and curricular design had become firmly entrenched in the literature with seminal studies such as Marc Prensky's "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants" (2001), which argued that Millennials' brains had evolved to thrive in the multimodal, interactive environments of video games, and James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003, 2007), which derived thirty-six valuable learning principles embedded in the design of commercial video games that could be copied to revamp education.[45] From the beginning, RPGs were an explicit and prominent part of the conversation about games and learning, as is evidenced by the fact that Gee draws many of his key learning principles from commercial RPGs, including *Arcanum*, *Deus Ex*, the *Elder Scrolls* series, the *Gothic* series, *System Shock 2*, *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft*, and *D&D*. RPGs have entered the classroom in a variety of ways—from off the shelf applications of commercial RPGs, to so-called "serious games" designed with educational rather than entertainment applications in mind, to numerous attempts to "gamify" learning by importing key RPG mechanics such as XP, quests, and party-building into the curriculum. Lee Sheldon's book *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (2012), which documents his own and several other case studies involving the gamification of learning through the application of RPG mechanics, offers a compelling case in point for the incursion of RPGs into education.[46]

The private sector, too, has sought to harness the power of RPGs to augment many serious activities. A variety of corporations in different sectors have embraced role-playing as a form of interactive training, "particularly for 'soft skills' such as interviewing, communication coaching, sales, and the like."[47] Additionally, companies like Bunchball and Badgeville have utilized

RPG mechanics such as role-play, quests, XP, and leveling systems to gamify work processes for corporate clients seeking to maximize employee engagement and productivity. Meanwhile, a wide array of mobile apps have increasingly adopted RPG mechanics to entice and retain customers; these include social networking apps such as Foursquare and augmented reality games such as Google's *Ingress*. Other mobile apps, such as Klout, have focused instead on quantifying user's social influence by applying the RPG leveling mechanic to social networking data, which is having a dramatic impact on hiring practices, among other things. On the other hand, some private organizations and NGOs have opted to harness RPGs as platforms for promoting political agendas and social justice issues. For instance, *A Closed World*, a game modeled after the gameplay aesthetics and mechanics of Japanese RPGs, puts players in control of a character of ambiguous gender in order to raise awareness about the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth.

Role-playing of various kinds has also come to be used for training and recruitment by the U.S. Defense and State Departments, as well as by a variety of federal law enforcement agencies. These developments build upon a long history of military simulations dating back to the early nineteenth century with the Prussian wargame *Kriegsspiel* (1811), which prompted many Western militaries to adopt tabletop and live-action wargames for training and tactical development. Military simulations also inspired the development of tabletop wargames for civilian hobbyists, beginning with H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* (1913); these, in turn, eventually spawned the modern RPG in the 1970s. Modern military simulations now draw upon the RPGs that they previously inspired. For instance, specialized military contractors provide governments with cadres of experienced role-playing actors who offer "realistic," scenario-based training, often in unfamiliar environments. In the wake of U.S. operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, entire villages populated by speakers of Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages have been constructed across the United States for military training purposes so that military personnel can participate in role-playing exercises designed to increase cultural familiarity with U.S. theaters of war.[48] Furthermore, the U.S. Army's hit video game, *America's Army* (2002), which provides civilians with a sense of the experience of soldiers, draws upon many of the conventions of popular CRPGs to aid with recruitment efforts.[49]

RPGs have also received considerable attention in popular culture, though many depictions of games and gamers have revolved around stereotypical or comedic portrayals of gaming and gamers. Perhaps the earliest depiction of an RPG in film was in Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) in which the protagonist Elliott, his friends, and older brother are shown enjoying playing *D&D*. It is important to note that playing *D&D* here bears no sense of social ostracization or awkwardness; it is simply shown as a fun group activity for a group of boys. The next filmic depiction of RPGs would not be so positive, but it set the tone for many of the 1980s depictions of RPGs in popular culture: the made-for-television movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), starring Tom Hanks in his first major role, is loosely based on the infamous James Dallas Egbert III case, in which RPGs were initially blamed for the disappearance of a mentally-ill college student.[50] The film treats role-playing as indicative of deep psychological disturbance, with players only able to achieve maturity and adulthood once they abandon RPGs altogether. This negative depiction of role-playing as the product of harmful delusions by troubled youth, perhaps with connections to Satanism and the occult, would become a common trope in the 1980s as *D&D* became embroiled in the so-called Satanic panic of the period, which sought to blame popular media for the moral corruption of American youth.[51]

Despite some of the increasingly negative media attention for *D&D* in the 1980s, TSR, the original publisher of *D&D*, created the *Dungeons & Dragons* animated television show, which was broadcast for three seasons on CBS as part of its Saturday morning cartoon line-up from 1983 to 1985. In 2000, the animated series would finally be followed up by a (unrelated) film, also titled *Dungeons & Dragons*. Though poorly received by fans and critics alike, the film was followed by two sequels: *Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (made-for-television, 2005) and *Dungeons & Dragons: The Book of Vile Darkness* (direct-to-video, 2012). Following TSR's example, other RPG developers have also sought to parlay their games into film productions. This includes the short-lived Fox television show *Kindred: The Embraced* (1996) based on White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade*, an RPG that focuses on the machinations of feuding vampire clans. All of these productions adopt character archetypes, nomenclature, settings, plots, and themes from the original games.

Beyond these franchised productions, a variety of shows—mostly situation comedies—have referenced RPGs. For example, an episode of the animated *Dexter's Laboratory* (1996–2003) showed the diabolical Dexter playing an unnamed RPG with a character named "Gygax." In an episode of the long-running *The Simpsons* (1989–present), Homer Simpson played a game of *D&D* with some new geek friends, explaining that he played "for three hours … then I was slain by an elf." Similar kinds of brief scenes of people playing RPGs have popped up in *NewsRadio* (1995–1999), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *That '70s Show* (1998–2006), and *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007–2010), among others.

Other TV shows have featured lengthier portrayals of role-playing games and gamers. For instance, the cult classic *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000), which focused on the experiences of social misfits in an early 1980s high school, included a positive scene of gaming in its final episode in which the character Daniel is punished by school authorities by having to join the Audio/Visual

Club, but soon comes to find himself enjoying playing *D&D* with the other club members. There were *D&D* references in several episodes of the animated *Futurama* (1999–2013)—Gary Gygax appeared in one episode, providing his own voice—and the *Futurama* tie-in film *Bender's Game* (2008) referenced *D&D* extensively and was dedicated to Gygax, who died during the film's production. All of the major characters of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present) are role-playing gamers, as well as inveterate geeks, and references to *D&D* are common; in the episode "The Love Spell Potential," the characters play *D&D* for the entire episode and introduce their girlfriends to gaming. While *The Big Bang Theory* has been alternatively praised and criticized for its complicated depictions of the show's geeky protagonists, the sitcom *Community* (2009–present) has featured *D&D* prominently, and perhaps more positively, in two episodes, "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons" and "Advanced Advanced Dungeons & Dragons," which emphasize the game's social and collaborative qualities by depicting it as a venue for building personal relationships and a vehicle for emotional healing.

Role-playing gamers themselves have been the focus of a number of films, as well, mostly comedic but generally providing positive views of gamers while gently poking fun at their foibles. For example, the geek-friendly independent film company Dead Gentlemen Productions has created three films that revolve around the adventures of several groups of *D&D*–style adventurers (and their players): *The Gamers* (2002), *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising* (2008), and *The Gamers: Hands of Fate* (2013). The comedy film *Zero Charisma* (2013), the *Fear of Girls* (2006–2014) series of short mockumentaries, and even the documentary *The Dungeon Masters* (2008) all tend to depict gamers as infantilized, socially awkward outcasts struggling to differentiate their TRPG interests from reality, a common trope in popular depictions of gamers. It is no coincidence that almost all filmic depictions of role-playing games and gamers are comedies.

The inclusion of RPGs in film and television is not a uniquely American phenomenon. *D&D* made appearances in the British sitcom *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013) and the Canadian sitcom *Corner Gas* (2004–2009). The Icelandic film *Astrópía* (2007) offers a remarkably positive depiction of gaming culture when an attractive socialite takes a job at a gaming store and learns that the stereotypes of gamers she has absorbed are inaccurate.

It seems clear that RPGs have come to have significant influence over the last forty years, impacting areas as diverse as education, business, politics, the military, entertainment, and popular culture. To what can we attribute the extensive and enduring influence of RPGs? In part, RPGs are simply fun, offering highly-engaging mechanics, settings, and themes, but also a gratifying chance to socialize with other people. The appeal of fantasy for escapist purposes also cannot be ignored, especially since role-playing invites active participation rather than passive consumption of entertainment by spectators. To be sure, some of the continued influence of RPGs must also be attributed to nostalgia, as former gamers turned professionals, such as writers in the entertainment industry like Joss Whedon and George R. R. Martin, reflect fondly on the experiences of their youth and incorporate elements of their old gaming activities into their current work.[52] Relatedly, some of RPGs' influence is also likely a product of the increasing mainstreaming of geek culture in the last fifteen years. So, while there are probably not as many active role-players in the twenty-first century as there were during the hobby's heyday in the early 1980s, there now exist a multiplicity of different RPGs, *kinds* of RPGs—some increasingly experimental in nature—and *spin-offs* from RPGs that offer a broad potential appeal.

This Collection

This collection contains a variety of essays that illustrate RPGs' broad appeal and impact. It is organized into four parts. Part I looks at some of the broader cultural and psychological influences of RPGs. In the first essay, Andrew Byers looks back at the so-called "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s and early 1990s in which RPGs—among other popular media—were blamed for encouraging adolescents to engage in antisocial and even violent activities while under the "occult" influences of RPGs like *D&D*. A great deal has been written asserting that RPGs are capable of exerting tremendous psychological effects—positive and negative—on players, and, in the next essay, Andreas Lieberoth and Jonas Trier-Knudsen examine the competing claims of this body of literature. In the third essay, Tim Bryant explores the issues of uncertainty and contingency—critical components of every RPG—through the context of the Cold War and nuclear war planning, as well as the parallel and intertwined connections between the development of RPGs and the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of the 1970s and 1980s.

Part II examines the growing pedagogical significance of RPGs in education. In the first essay here, Timm Woods focuses on the use of RPGs to improve communication skills in the ESL classroom and draws attention to several TRPGs that are being used to do so. In the next essay, Jonathan M. Bradley shifts the focus to the efficacy of RPGs for promoting literary studies. He explores how RPGs develop empathy, engagement, and identification through role-play, and presents an application of RPGs designed to improve character analysis in a literature course. Taking an interdisciplinary and design-based approach to teaching and learning, Reneta D. Lansiquot, Candido Cabo, and Tamrah D. Cunningham next identify the advantages of using RPG-inspired virtual worlds (e.g. *OpenSimulator* and *Second Life*) and game design software (e.g., *Alice* and *RPG Maker VX Ace*) for teaching computer programming and creative and technical writing skills by having students design their own RPGs.

Part III takes a different approach by looking at the kinds of social transformations that RPGs can help promote. Antero Garcia compares the roles of teacher and game master, and argues that the concept of teacher as game master facilitates radically new modes of learning engagement that sustain democratic interactions in the classroom, enhances learning and literacy, and provides students with potentially "real world" contexts for learning. Not all RPGs are intended purely for entertainment or pedagogical purposes, and Troy Leaman explores the potential that some "serious" TRPGs have for provoking their players to begin thinking about radically new ideas and explore avenues for social change. Joseph B. Meyer then examines the effects of Klout, which rates individuals on their online social influence, and the emergence of the idea of "social leveling," which takes a cue from RPGs that also attempt to quantify individuals' abilities, suggesting a transfer of RPG mechanics and cultural logics into broader cultural norms and social control.

Finally, Part IV focuses on the ways that RPGs have shaped and engendered new avenues of gaming. Kai-Uwe Werbeck draws attention to Google's popular augmented reality game, *Ingress*, which utilizes new media and mobile devices to turn reality into an epic RPG adventure with competing camps. Conversely, Cathlena Martin and Benton Tyler examine RPGs' influence on the design and aesthetics of more conventional game media—RPG-inspired board games and card games, such as *Descent* and *Munchkin*. Lastly, Francesco Crocco explores the rise of gamification in education, business, and elsewhere, highlighting its reliance on core RPG mechanics. Emphasizing the gamification of education in particular, he provides several examples that demonstrate how gamification is bringing the hallmark features of RPGs to traditional and online learning.

The essays in this collection scratch the surface of the broad, popular embrace of RPGs and their cultural logics that has taken place over the past forty years. While there is a need for greater attention to illuminate the myriad subtle and not-so-subtle ways that RPGs have infiltrated popular culture—either in whole or in part through the appropriation of RPG mechanics to modify and enhance serious activities, or through symbolic representations—this collection at least begins to raise awareness about the increasing normalization of role-playing values, concepts, and practices. It suggests that what is emerging is nothing short of a role-playing society.

NOTES

1. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Fine's iconic study was recently revisited

in Katherine Castiello Jones, "Gary Alan Fine Revisited: RPG Research in the 21st Century" in Evan Torner and William J. White, eds., *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 87–107. A scattered array of cultural studies on RPGs followed Fine's study over the next decade and a half, including Terri Toles-Patkin's "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon," Kurt Lancaster's "Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?," and Michele Valerie Ronnick's "Classical Mythology in the 'Dungeon.'" These pieces reflect broad interest in the nature of RPGs as well as an attempt to address (and debunk) the concerns of social critics of *D&D*, who became especially vocal in the 1980s as fears of Satanism and suicide among teenage gamers began to circulate. Terri Toles-Patkin, "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon," *Journal of Popular Culture* 20:1 (1986): 1–14; Kurt Lancaster, "Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:2 (1994): 67–79; and Michele Valerie Ronnick, "Classical Mythology in the 'Dungeon'" *The Classical Bulletin* 73:2 (1997): 111–118. Lancaster's subject was taken up again in 2005 in David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (Spring 2005).

2. Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).

3. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

4. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, eds., *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

5. Evan Torner and William J. White, eds., *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).

6. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds., *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

7. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

8. Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).

9. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox, *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom* (Chicago: Open Court, 2012).

10. Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock, eds., *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

11. J. Patrick Williams and Jonas Heide Smith, eds., *The Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

12. Matt Barton, *Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008).

13. R.V. Kelly 2, *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: The People, the Addiction and the Playing Experience* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004).

14. Lawrence Schick, *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991). Erik Mona's brief "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons*" in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, sought to expand on the history of the development of D&D. Erik Mona, "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons*," in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 25–30.

15. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventure, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012).

16. Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

17. Mark Barrowcliffe, *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange* (New York: Soho Press, 2007); Shelly Mazzanoble, *Confessions of a Part-time Sorceress: A Girl's Guide to the D&D Game* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2007); Shelly Mazzanoble, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-Help for Elf-Help* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2011); Ethan Gilsdorf, *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms* (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2009); and David M. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (New York: Scribner, 2013).

18. Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 17.

19. Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 12.

20. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men*, 65.

21. Schick, *Heroic Worlds*, 10.

22. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, xvii.

23. Barton, *Dungeons & Desktops*, 5.

24. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*, 21–22.

25. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, xiii.

26. *Ibid.*, xix.

27. *Ibid.*, 80.

28. Greg Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String," in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 6.

29. Adam Brackin, "You Got Your Gameplay in My Role-Play!," in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Open Court, 2012), 252.

30. Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, 86.

31. Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 29.

32. Jeff Howard, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008), 2.

33. *Ibid.*, 5–10.

34. *Ibid.*, 10–19.

35. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*, 23.

36. Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 99.

37. Barton, *Dungeons & Desktops*, 15.

38. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 204.

39. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men*, 22.

40. Chris Bateman, "The Rules of Imagination," *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Open Court, 2012), 235–36.

41. Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 94.

42. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, xiv.

43. Cited in Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men*, 237.

44. Lynn Quitman Troyka and Jerrold Nudelman. *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening Through Simulation-Games* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

45. Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001): 1–6; James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Rev. ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

46. Lee Sheldon, *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (Boston: Cengage, 2012).

47. Marc Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2007), 160.

48. See for example, Alexandria Zavis, “U.S. Diplomats Use Military Role-Playing to Prepare for Iraq Assignments,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2009, accessed June 26, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/08/local/me-diplomats-at-war8, for a discussion of one such program developed at the U.S. Army’s National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California.

49. *America’s Army* and similar games, co-developed by the U.S. Department of Defense and private-sector computer game companies, have been described as being part of the “military-entertainment complex,” suggesting that these games contribute to a militarization of civilian society. See Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Daily Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008). For a history of the development of *America’s Army* and the U.S. military’s foray into game-based recruitment efforts, see Corey Mead, *War Play: Games and the Future of Armed Conflict* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

50. William Dear, *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) and Rona Jaffe, *Mazes and Monsters* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

51. For an overview of the Satanic panic and *D&D*’s role within it, see Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), among other accounts. For the most infamous claims of Satanic influences of *D&D*, see Patricia Pulling, with Kathy Cawthon, *The Devil’s Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, Inc, 1989).

52. On the nostalgic appeal of role-playing games, see Darren Allan Crouse, “There and Back Again: The Construction of Nostalgia in *Advanced Adventures*” (M.A. thesis, Brock University, 2010).

Bibliography

Barrowcliffe, Mark. *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange.* New York: Soho Press, 2007.

Barton, Matt. *Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games.* Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Bateman, Chris. *Imaginary Games.* Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011.

______. “The Rules of Imagination.” *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, edited by Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox. Chicago: Open Court, 2012, 225–238.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Brackin, Adam. “You Got Your Gameplay in My Role-Play!” In *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, edited by Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox. Chicago: Open Court, 2012, 239–254.

Cogburn, Jon, and Mark Silcox. *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom.* Chicago: Open Court, 2012.

Costikyan, Greg. “Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String.” In *Second Person:*

Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, 5–14.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Crouse, Darren Allan. "There and Back Again: The Construction of Nostalgia in *Advanced Adventures.*" M.A. thesis, Brock University, 2010.

Dear, William. *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

Ewalt, David M. *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It.* New York: Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2013.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Rev. ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Gilsdorf, Ethan. *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms.* Guilford: Lyons Press, 2009.

Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

Howard, Jeff. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives.* Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Jaffe, Rona. *Mazes and Monsters.* New York: Delacorte Press, 1981.

Jones, Katherine Castiello. "Gary Alan Fine Revisited: RPG Research in the 21st Century." In *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, 87–107.

Kelly, R.V., 2. *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: The People, the Addiction and the Playing Experience.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004.

Lancaster, Kurt. "Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:2 (1994): 67–79.

Mackay, Daniel. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001.

Mazzanoble, Shelly. *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-Help for Elf-Help.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2011.

Mead, Corey. *War Play: Games and the Future of Armed Conflict.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

Mona, Erik. "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons.*" In *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, 25–30.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventure, from Chess to Role-Playing Games.* San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

Prensky, Marc. *Digital Game-Based Learning.* St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2007.

_____. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001): 1–6.

Pulling, Patricia, with Kathy Cawthon. *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, Inc, 1989.

Ronnick, Michele Valerie. "Classical Mythology in the 'Dungeon.'" *The Classical Bulletin* 73:2 (1997): 111–118.

Schick, Lawrence. *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games.* Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991.

Sheldon, Lee. *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game.* Boston: Cengage, 2012.

Toles-Patkin, Terri. "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon." *Journal of Popular Culture* 20:1 (1986): 1–14.

Torner, Evan, and William J. White, eds. *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.

Tresca, Michael J. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Troyka, Lynn Quitman, and Jerrold Nudelman. *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening Through Simulation-Games.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Turse, Nick. *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Daily Lives.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.

Victor, Jeffrey S. *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend.* Chicago: Open Court, 1993.

Voorhees, Gerald, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock, eds. *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game.* New York: Continuum, 2012.

Waldron, David. "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (Spring 2005).

Williams, J. Patrick, and Jonas Heide Smith, eds. *The Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming.* Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2007.

Williams, J. Patrick, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, eds. *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.

Zavis, Alexandria. "U.S. Diplomats Use Military Role-Playing to Prepare for Iraq Assignments." *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 2009. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/08/local/me-diplomats-at-war8.

This page intentionally left blank

Part I

The Player's Guide: The Psychological and Cultural Impact of a Game Genre

The Satanic Panic and *Dungeons & Dragons*

A Twenty-Five-Year Retrospective

ANDREW BYERS

Introduction: Panic and Fears of Satanism and Popular Entertainment

From fears of Beatniks and rock 'n' roll in the 1950s to fears of hippies, drugs, and the sexual revolution in the 1960s, to the urban law and order panic of the 1970s, the second half of the twentieth century was a period of intense concern about moral subversion and degradation in American society. Never was this more in evidence than in the host of moral panics in the 1980s that collectively focused on the allegedly deleterious effects of new cultural phenomena—heavy metal and rap music, drugs, drunk driving, and the new fantasy role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), among others—on American youth.[1] First published in 1974, by the early 1980s *D&D* was an extraordinarily popular pastime, especially among teenage boys in the United States. Exact figures of players are impossible to determine; though it seems clear that the game peaked in popularity during the 1980s, at least 7.5 million players were still gaming at least once a month in 1990 and 5.5 million in 2000.[2] Superficially, *D&D* was simply a new kind of game that used elements of the fantastic to encourage players to create their own adventures with friends,[3] so what was it about *D&D* that elicited so much concern? Undoubtedly, some parents and religious leaders were uncomfortable with the magical elements of the game that capitalized on the rise of the fantasy genre in the wake of the popularization of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* beginning in the late 1960s. Concerns peaked when the suicides of two troubled players of the game—James Dallas Egbert in August 1980 and

Irving "Bink" Pulling in June 1982—were blamed on *D&D*. The host of other problems both young men were battling—social ostracization by their peers, problematic relationships with parents and family, drug abuse, and mental illness—was largely ignored in favor of blaming the strange, unfamiliar game of *D&D* for wreaking havoc on the bodies, minds, and souls of American adolescents.

With the benefit of twenty-five years of hindsight, this essay looks back at the criticisms against *D&D*, examining the claims made about the alleged Satanic influences of the game. It evaluates and analyzes the content of the game as well as responses from within the RPG community and industry to the allegations lodged against them, all the while situating the conflict between opponents and proponents of *D&D* within the larger framework of the Satanic panic of the 1980s. The essay also offers a reflection on the aftermath of the Satanic panic and the evolution of non-gamer reactions to *D&D* after the Satanic panic had (mostly) subsided.

Moral Panics, D&D *and the Satanic Panic*

Fears of *D&D* in the 1980s have been described as a kind of "moral panic." Sociologist Stanley Cohen popularized the term "moral panic" in his classic study of youth culture and the media in the 1960s. For Cohen, a moral panic occurs when a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests."[4] Mass media helps promulgate the panic, often in sensationalistic fashion, as articulated by media figures, religious and political leaders, and other members of the public concerned about an apparent breakdown in the social order. Self-proclaimed but widely recognized "experts" diagnose the causes of the panic and propose solutions, which are often used to produce new social and legal policies. The problematic condition then disappears or becomes less visible over time, sometimes suddenly and without warning, eventually reappearing in a different form some time later when the cycle of moral panic begins anew.

Yet, even if they are not accurately presented by the media, moral panics are always about *something*; they do not arise *ex nihilo*.[5] Likewise, the moral panic that arose over *D&D* did not arise in a social or cultural vacuum. Rather, the *D&D* moral panic was part of a constellation of moral panics in the 1980s originating from concerns about adolescents, either from dangers posed *to* them—fears of kidnappers, child molesters, and pornographers, for example—or problems caused *by* them, as in cases of misbehavior allegedly inspired by dangerous entertainment media that encouraged drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and suicide, among other such behaviors. Given the anxieties of many Christian fundamentalists over the growing secularization of American society, it is unsurprising that the panic over *D&D* also became part of a much larger narrative of widespread Satanic influence and conspiracy throughout the decade. Many of *D&D*'s detractors came to see *D&D* as one strand of a larger Satanic plot to corrupt the nation's youth, turning adolescents into a new generation of Satanists and devotees of the occult. In some cases adolescent role-playing gamers themselves were perceived as threats to their peers. As sociologist Kenneth Thompson has pointed out, "No age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of 'youth.'"[6] Teenagers frequently exist in a marginal or liminal state in American and other modern societies; no longer children but not yet adults, they represent a problem of social order and a source of cross-generational conflict as their elders attempt to inculcate particular moral values and regulate teen behavior. In the case of the Satanic panic and associated concerns over *D&D*, teens were perceived as being both at risk and as potential threats to other teens who had not yet fallen under the sway of Satanism. By framing their children's suicides, drug use, behavioral problems, and criminal activities as products of a wider Satanic conspiracy rather than as mental health issues, parent-child relationship problems, or simply as typical teenage rebellion, at least some parental critics of *D&D* were able to abrogate their responsibilities as parents of troubled teens and blame their families' problems on purely exogenous factors beyond their control. In the case of the moral panic surrounding *D&D*, it may have been less about teens playing a game that some adults and moralists found grotesque or offensive because of its outré elements, like demons and magic spells, and more about teenage contempt for parental and moral authority; abandonment of traditional organized religious beliefs, middle-class values and normative behavior; and parents and religious leaders attempting to reassert control over teenage behavior.

The Satanic panic had at least three major, interrelated expressions.[7] At its heart was the belief in a powerful, hidden network of Satanic groups present in Western society that was active in committing a variety of illegal and taboo acts, including animal mutilations; kidnappings; sexual abuse of children; ritual mutilation, sacrifice, and murder of children and adults; and ritualized cannibalism. Increasingly, many anti–Satanic crusaders (and members of the public) came to believe that large numbers of Satanists with access to children—parents, daycare workers, teachers, police, clergy, kidnappers—had engaged in extreme forms of physical and sexual "ritual abuse" of children, many of whom had been brainwashed to forget or had otherwise repressed memories until they later remembered, often with the help of therapist-advocates of this epidemic of ritual abuse. Lastly came the belief that Satanists had infiltrated various aspects of the entertainment industry and were using popular media—books, films, videogames, heavy metal music, and RPGs—to influence the adolescents who consumed these forms of entertainment. Because secret Satanic cabals of murderers and child molesters were difficult to locate, and popular media by their very nature were readily available to the public, these forms of entertainment became particular sites of criticism and attack by anti–Satanic groups.

Though it exploded into prominence in the early 1980s, the Satanic panic had been building slowly since the 1960s, with anxieties about the rise of the counterculture, increasing interest in the occult and "New Age" beliefs and practices, and the growing number of new religious movements usually described by the short-hand term "cult," which took on increasingly violent and fanatical connotations after Jim Jones' People's Temple mass murder-suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978.[8] Post-Jonestown, the threat posed by "cults" seemed very real and very dangerous to many Americans, with all cults being perceived and understood through the lens of Jonestown. Beginning in the late 1970s, the so-called Christian Right—mostly socially conservative Protestants, with some traditional Catholics—became increasingly politically, socially, and culturally influential in American life, and many such individuals were profoundly concerned with the state of American morality. The embrace of the Satanic panic by various sects of Pentecostal, fundamentalist, and evangelical Protestant Christianity should probably not be surprising: in an increasingly secularized American society, these religious groups often discussed the tangible presence of evil, as embodied in Satan and other demonic forces, frequently describing themselves as being engaged in continuous "spiritual warfare."[9] These beliefs included a perception that these demonic forces were in league with human worshipers—Satanists—who sought to enlist others to their cause, particularly impressionable youths. Indeed, Gallup polls since the 1960s have shown a growing belief among Americans in the existence of Satan: from just 37 percent in 1964 to 50 percent by 1973 and 55–60 percent by 1990.[10] The percentages are far higher among fundamentalist Protestants, with mainline Protestants and Catholics much likelier to believe that Satan, if he exists, is an impersonal force or personification of evil rather than an actual being.[11]

Fears of the scope of Satanic activities continued to expand throughout the 1980s, ultimately forming a vast web of horrendous crimes that moral crusaders could point to just beneath the surface of American society.[12] Moral panics over missing and abused children arose in the 1980s in the wake of several infamous cases of kidnapped and murdered children. In light of this, it is probably to be expected that moral crusaders would come to view child abuse through the lens of Satanism. Several high-profile serial killers, including David Berkowitz ("Son of Sam") and Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker"), only seemed to offer further evidence that Satanic-inspired murderers were walking the streets of America and killing indiscriminately in the name of Satan. A number of high-profile cases of alleged Satanic ritual abuse emerged, beginning with the 1983 McMartin Preschool case in Los Angeles, in which members of the daycare's staff were accused of torturing, murdering, raping, and cannibalizing toddlers as part of Satanic rites.[13] While these acts never occurred, years of investigations and a twenty-eight month long trial followed, with one accused left incarcerated for five years until he could post a $1.5 million bond. Claims of the wide reach of Satanists in America became increasingly extreme, with radio evangelist Bob Larson claiming in his 1989 book *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* that 95 percent of all missing children had been abducted by Satanic groups.[14]

Just as the number of claims of Satanic crimes grew throughout the 1980s, so too did the number of claims-makers. One study in 1989 identified at least 33 anti–Satanic organizations and more than 90 individual "experts."[15] These occult experts, many with backgrounds in similar anti-cult and anti-counterculture moral panics in the 1960s and 1970s, became particularly important figures in promoting the Satanic panic because of their relentless self-promotion and ties with media and law enforcement, all of which went a long way to legitimize their claims. The careers of these anti-occult experts and organizations represented a blend of moral crusaders and lucrative business enterprises. For example, before going on to become one of the country's most popular speakers on the topic of Satanism, Mike Warnke published his book *The Satan Seller*, selling more than three million copies, in which he revealed that before his conversion to evangelical Christianity, he had been a Satanic high priest with more than 1,500 followers under the supervision of the Illuminati, an alleged secret society that has provided fodder for conspiracy theorists for centuries.[16] The 1980 publication of *Michelle Remembers*, co-written by a psychiatrist and his patient (the pair later divorced their spouses and married each other), purported to reveal a lifetime of Satanic physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Michelle Smith's parents, teachers, and clergymen.[17] Smith's account was notable because it provided the template for thousands of other cases of "recovered memories" of similar Satanic abuse throughout the decade. Therapists involved in helping their clients remember such abuse via hypnosis and other means coined the term "Satanic Ritual Abuse Syndrome."[18] The Satanic rumor mills, promoted by a legion of moral crusaders and occult investigators and popularized by the mass media, helped spark dozens of rumor-panics about Satanism in communities around the country. In a long-running study, sociologist Victor Turner identified at least 62 rumor-panics about Satanism and Satanic activities taking place from 1982 to 1992, with 1988–1989 as the peak years.[19] The anti–Satanism movement was extremely adept at using mass media to promote its claims; occult "experts" and those claiming to have been victims of Satanic ritual abuse frequently appeared on the talk shows of the day: Phil Donahue, Geraldo Rivera, Sally Jesse Raphael, and Oprah Winfrey, among others, regularly featured Satanic expose segments on their programs, often unquestioningly repeating the fantastical claims of anti–*D&D* crusaders.[20]

It is important to note that a number of careful studies by journalists and scholars have found no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the widespread Satanic cult activities, including mass murders, kidnappings, and ritual abuse of children, ever took place inside the United States. To be sure, some criminals, particularly adolescents, have committed crimes such as trespassing, vandalism, and even animal mutilations using Satanic graffiti, trappings, and imagery. The claims of those caught up in the Satanic panic are not borne out by the evidence though. One 1988 study found that in over 100 cases of alleged Satanic ritual abuse of children, none were the product of Satanic activity (and in many cases there was no evidence of any kind of child abuse at all).[21] Another study by sociologist David Finkelhor focused on allegations of Satanic abuse at daycare centers.[22] Finkelhor collected information on over 270 cases of daycare abuse that local law enforcement or child protective agencies considered "substantiated" (i.e., allegations the authorities believed to be true). Of these, Finkelhor identified 36 of these cases (13 percent of the total) as alleged Satanic ritual abuse; Finkelhor's subsequent investigations of these cases cast serious doubt that any involved actual Satanic or ritual elements. Occult experts often went to elaborate lengths to explain why no evidence of widespread Satanic activities was ever found, going so far as to suggest that the very absence of evidence was itself highly suspicious.[23]

*The Anti–*D&D *Movement and Its Claims*

Critics of *D&D* made a series of linked claims about the game and its effect on players, in particular alleging that *D&D* was directly linked to Satanism.[24] They generally did so by pointing to specific game elements present—e.g., the existence of demons as one of the types of monsters that could be encountered in the game, various types of magic spells that could be cast by magic-users and clerics, and the presence of deities—and alleging that these elements were proof of *D&D*'s Satanic origin. Indeed, as sociologists Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine have pointed out, the claims made by critics may even have a kind of surface plausibility because of the presence of monsters, demons, gods, and spells in *D&D*.[25] Critics also alleged that the game produced a kind of mind control effect on players, causing them to become obsessed with playing the game and making them susceptible to its alleged Satanic aspects. Many occult experts and police consultants argued that playing *D&D* was a kind of "gateway" activity that would, almost inevitably, lead to greater involvement in occult or Satanic activities.[26] Many critics asserted that violent crimes would directly result from playing *D&D*, as players were lured deeper into the allegedly Satanic world of *D&D* and begin acting out violent activities in the real world rather than restricting these activities to fantasy gameplay. To support this argument critics often pointed to suicides, assaults, or murders committed by individuals who had played *D&D*, alleging a cause and effect relationship between playing *D&D* and committing acts of violence. *D&D* was thus seen as the first step along a progression that would end with murder and suicide.[27]

Several notable cases fueled concerns that *D&D* was linked with teenage suicide. The 1979 disappearance and eventual suicide of James Dallas Egbert III, a student at Michigan State University, was initially linked to *D&D* before it became clear that Egbert was dealing with severe mental illness, drug addiction, and a variety of personal problems. Egbert had attempted suicide multiple times previously and disappeared for several weeks; he was initially believed to have ventured down into the steam tunnels under Michigan State while attempting to reenact a *D&D* game (Egbert, it was later discovered, had simply fled the area). The case generated significant publicity and spawned a "true crime" monograph written by a private investigator (*The Dungeon Master*), and a novel (*Mazes and Monsters*) that was adapted as a feature-length made-for-television movie starring Tom Hanks as an analogue of Egbert.[28] Other cases included Jackson Franklin "Hatchet" Morgan, who was convicted of child molestation and was alleged to have used *D&D* to attract children and teens, and Raymond Malin, who raped and murdered a young girl, and was said to have suffered from a dissociative disorder that would have made discerning the differences between the fantasy world of *D&D* from reality difficult.[29] Patricia "Pat" Pulling, who became the leading opponent of *D&D* in the 1980s and 1990s, was the mother of Irving "Bink" Pulling, a sixteen-year-old boy who committed suicide in 1982. Pulling came to believe that her son killed himself as a result of playing *D&D*. Pulling attempted to sue TSR (*D&D*'s manufacturer) and the school official who had allegedly introduced Bink Pulling to the game and allowed him to play at school, but both cases were thrown out of court.[30] She went on to found the organization Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons (BADD) in 1983 to bring wider attention to her fears of the Satanic influences of *D&D* on adolescents.[31]

Pulling, like all the anti–Satanic crusaders, made exaggerated and entirely unsupported claims about the scope of Satanism, alleging that at least 8 percent of the U.S. population was involved in Satanism.[32] Pulling's "statistics" on the number of deaths that were directly attributed to *D&D* varied, but she generally claimed that the game had caused from 95 to 150 deaths, mostly suicides.[33] One BADD brochure flatly described *D&D* as "addictive and evil…. It is a device of Satan to lure us away from God. It is occult."[34] In her book *The Devil's Web*, Pulling described the game as leading its players to commit violent acts first inside the game, and then eventually in the real world outside the game: "During the course of most *D&D* games, characters must commit robbery and murder, and may choose to commit rape, mutilation and other atrocities. These activities are expected and condoned."[35] Pulling went on to quote Darren Molitor, a former *D&D* player who was later convicted of murdering his girlfriend, as saying

> the game is played or imagined entirely in the mind … if it is played, let's say three to five times a week, four to eight hours each time, the conscious mind becomes accustomed to violence. Suddenly you are no longer in total control of your mind. The "fantasy game" becomes a "reality game." You begin to live it for real. Everything you do or say involves … the game itself. You no longer play the game for enjoyment; you play it because you feel you have to. [Your mind] is possessed by the game. It is more dangerous than I can fully explain.[36]

Elaborating on this idea in her book, under the sub-heading "Hypnotic Control," Pulling discussed her concerns that the use of magic and worship of non–Christian deities by *characters* in *D&D* would lead *players* to believe they possessed magical abilities and/or worship other deities.[37] Pulling's argument, in part, was the familiar "slippery slope" argument:

> The child who is obsessed with occult entertainment [as she characterized *D&D*] may not stop there, but he often moves on to Satanic graffiti and cemetery vandalism. From that point, he easily moves into grave robbing for items needed for occult rituals, and he is just a step away from blood-letting. Blood-letting begins with animal killings and mutilations and progresses to murder if intervention does not take place.[38]

Pulling's comment is a useful one because this perceived progression—from playing *D&D* to vandalism to murder—is one present explicitly and implicitly in many critiques of the period. Pulling was concerned not only with what she perceived as the violent influences of *D&D* on its players, but also on the "occult" nature of this violence. She contended: "The vast majority of the information in the *D&D* manuals is violence-oriented. It consists of detailed descriptions of killing including occultic human sacrifice, assassination and premeditated murder as well as sadism and curses of insanity which include suicidal and homicidal mania. Much of the material draws upon ancient systems of demonology."[39]

Along with Pat Pulling, Thomas E. Radecki, MD, JD, co-founder of the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), was a close ally of BADD who gave testimony as an expert witness at a number of legal cases in which he stated that playing *D&D* led to a marked increase in violence by teenage players. Like Pulling, Radecki was used as an expert defense witness for Darren Molitor during his trial for murder. Molitor did not contend that he was suffering from a mental illness when he murdered his victim, but rather that he had become "desensitized" to violence because he had played *D&D* prior to the murder. Both Radecki and Pulling testified to that effect, alleging that this was a possible effect of playing *D&D*. Their argument did not apparently help sway the jury, who convicted Molitor.

A staunch activist against the depiction of violence in any form in various media, Radecki was also a board member of the Parents Music Resource Center and research director at both the International Coalition Against Violent Entertainment and Doctors & Lawyers for a Drug Free Youth. However, he expressed a particular concern about the violence present in *D&D*:

> The evidence in these cases is really quite impressive. There is no doubt in my mind that the game *Dungeons and Dragons* is causing young men to kill themselves and others. The game is one of non-stop combat and violence.... Based on player interviews and game materials, it is clear to me that this game is desensitizing players to violence, and, causing an increased tendency to violent behavior.[40]

Anti–*D&D* activists embarked on a multi-pronged campaign against *D&D*.[41] Pulling and others compiled a list of the "victims" of *D&D*, i.e., those said to have died as a result of the game, ultimately claiming that over 125 young people had been murdered or committed suicide as a result of *D&D*.[42] They lobbied members of Congress and petitioned the Federal Trade Commission and the Consumer Products Safety Commission to either remove *D&D* from the marketplace or require it to carry a warning label, an effort that never gained traction. Anti–*D&D* activists appeared on a variety of television talk shows and gave interviews to print journalists whenever possible to spread their message. They lectured around the country—usually for pay—on the "occult" nature of *D&D* and the Satanic "epidemic" in general. They also appealed to local religious leaders, politicians, and school officials to denounce *D&D* and forbid it from being played by teens in schools and elsewhere. This may have been their most effective tactic, as *D&D* was forbidden from dozens, possibly hundreds of schools around the nation, and pressure from religious leaders undoubtedly influenced a multitude of parents to forbid their children from playing the game. These activists also gave "expert" testimony whenever possible in legal cases on the occult aspects of crimes[43]; Pulling and Radecki were especially active in traveling around the country and testifying in high profile murder trials and the like, always with a theme of blaming *D&D* and heavy metal music.

There are several ironies embedded in the various criticisms of *D&D*. First, as I will explore in more detail later, most games of *Dungeons & Dragons* are set on worlds other than Earth in which neither the Christian God nor Satan exist. To be sure, the existence of a host of active deities who grant the ability to cast divinely inspired spells to their priesthoods is posited in *D&D*, and present in all published settings, but these deities are taken from either historical mythological pantheons or are made up out of whole cloth. Some of the deities described in *D&D* official products are evil, but Satan is not one of them. Second, while there is no evidence to suggest that a significant (or even measurable) fraction of *D&D* players believed in the existence of actual magic spells or magical abilities that could be accessed in the real world, Satanic or otherwise, many of *D&D*'s harshest critics during the 1980s—especially those with a fundamentalist Protestant religious background—*did* actually possess a magical world view that indicated belief in the power of Satan to grant his followers the ability to use magic in the real world (presumably for malign or self-serving purposes). In speaking to a reporter, for example, one Protestant minister demonstrated his own confusion over the difference between fantasy and reality, saying that *D&D* is "very anti-religious. I have studied witchcraft and demonology.… These books are filled with things that are not fantasy but are actual in the real demon world, and can be very dangerous for anyone involved in the game because it leaves them so open to Satanic spirits."[44] The "File 18 Newsletter," produced by a lieutenant in the Boise Police Department and regularly sent to law enforcement agencies around the country, warned law enforcement agencies that they were at risk of encountering actual supernatural forces when investigating "occult" crimes: "…you may be battling with forces which are impervious to your wrist-twists, your batons, or your service firearms—and they may destroy you. These things are unseen by most of us.… But, in our natural state we are helpless to defend against unseen enemies: spiritual training and spiritually effective tools are required."[45]

The critics of *D&D* were never able to provide a clear link between playing *D&D* and committing acts of violence. In all cases in which players of *D&D* either committed suicide or other acts of violence, there were other significant factors present—mostly mental illnesses and/or the use of alcohol or drugs—making a definitive link impossible to establish. Several psychological studies have been undertaken to explore the effects of playing RPGs, most of which emphasize the positive impact of *D&D* on the players.[46] One study of "hyperactive" and "aggressive" pre-teenage boys who played *D&D* concluded that playing the game encouraged cooperative relationships among the boys. Another study involving an emotional stability test administered to a mix of teenage and adult "frequent" *D&D* players found no evidence of emotional instability and "healthy psychological profiles." Other studies have suggested that RPG-related activities fostered creative and imaginative thinking among children. Thus, rather than the suspect "expert" opinions of instigators of the anti–*D&D* moral panic, actual studies have shown *D&D* to be productive and beneficial to the psychology of the players, thus contradicting the slippery slope contentions of individuals like Pulling and Radecki.

The "Satanic" Content of D&D *and Responses from Game Designers*

It is worthwhile examining the actual content of *D&D* from an informed, objective perspective, free from the Satanic hysteria of the 1980s, in order to determine whether the claims made by *D&D*'s critics had any merit. Allegations made by *D&D* critics that the game contained magic spells and rules for casting such spells by player characters were demonstrably true, as were charges that the game contained information on a variety of demons and devils, as well as a wide variety of non–Christian deities. Such entities were present in the game from its earliest foundations, though they were always presented as monstrous opponents and antagonists for the player characters, who were assumed by *D&D*'s game designers to be either heroic figures or at least self-interested (neutral) parties not actively allied with evil beings.

Satan himself first appeared in the game in 1979, in an article published in TSR's *Dragon* magazine that provided supporting material for *D&D*. Alexander von Thorn's article "The Politics of Hell" contains game statistics for Satan, along with several other demonic leaders, as well as a discussion of the history of hell and its denizens and the political machinations of various demonic figures.[47] Von Thorn takes an interesting approach for explaining why Satan had not yet appeared in *D&D*: he suggests that Satan's position as ruler of Hell had been usurped by Baalzebul who was in turn overthrown by Asmodeus, a demonic figure who *was* posited to exist in the game. The article begins with a curious author's note:

> The following article cannot be considered the official doctrine of either *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* or the Roman Catholic Church. However, it is compatible with *AD&D*, and except for the parts about Asmodeus [the "highest-ranking" devil provided in official *D&D* publications] it is not in conflict with works on demonology as generally accepted by Catholic exorcists, thus enjoying tacit approval by the Church. However, this article does not have a *nihil obstat*; much of it is original, and it approaches the subject from a different angle than a religious tract would and should not be considered as such. The rise of Asmodeus is not documented in any major text on demonology, but very little original work on the subject has been done since the Middle Ages, so it is possible that the situation has changed. Perhaps Mr. Gygax has more accurate sources of information.[48]

That statistics for Satan are provided is not unusual, as TSR published game statistics and write-ups for a host of other demons, some from Jewish and Christian traditions and some entirely made up, as well as a wide variety of deities from folklore and mythology from around the world. The existence of game statistics for these entities meant that they could appear in RPG campaigns, potentially representing adversaries who could be defeated (and destroyed). Note that this article was explicitly labeled as *not* being "official," despite its publication in *D&D*'s house organ—the publication of "unofficial" and "optional" material was common in *Dragon*—and did not form the basis of future developments and discussions of demons and Hell.

Satan is seldom mentioned by name in *Dragon* magazine articles, and then only in passing or in a letter to the editor or editorial about the Satanic panic, and never in official TSR publications. For example, in the oft-cited two-part article "The Nine Hells" by Ed Greenwood, a description of the geography of Hell and some of its chief inhabitants, Satan is never mentioned.[49] Unlike von Thorn's earlier "unofficial" piece on Hell that explicitly mentioned Satan four years earlier, this "official" article appears to have entirely written Satan out of existence. Note how Greenwood opens the first part of his article: "Devils and demons have always been favorite monsters in *AD&D* play, particularly with upper- and mid-level characters. As a DM [Dungeon Master], I have been reluctant to include devils until I had done some work on the Nine Hells for the simple reason that player characters, once they are introduced to devils and find out facts about them, are sure to want to carry the fight to the enemy's home ground."[50] In other words, demons and devils are presented as monsters—high-powered ones, to be sure—to be destroyed by the player characters. The description of Hell is presented not as a place where PCs would visit to worship their demonic masters, but a location to which they would travel in order to kill demons.

In response to Greenwood's article in *Dragon* 75 and 76, he penned a follow-up piece, published in *Dragon* 91, "Eight Devilish Questions," ostensibly responding to some of the feedback and questions from readers Greenwood had received on the original article.[51] Greenwood began this piece by addressing the obvious omission of Satan:

> The perennial question is: Why did I not include Satan/Lucifer/the BIG DEVIL [emphasis in original] of Christian mythology and religious lore? Simply, I did not because Mr. Gygax has not, and I tried to adhere to official *AD&D* game rules wherever possible. His reasons for excluding Satan are best given by him; my own objections, from a game designer's point of view, boil down to the simple judgment that there is no room in the *AD&D* game system for a devil more powerful than Asmodeus. The few (in number) forces of good have enough to worry about without tipping the balance any further on the side of the diabolic.[52]

An unsatisfying response, perhaps, but it is at least an attempt to address the absence of Satan in *D&D*. In *Dragon* 93, a reader wrote in to request clarification on the apparent contradiction between the extant-but-deposed Satan posited by von Thorn and the entirely-absent Satan suggested by Greenwood.[53] To this, Greenwood responded,

> Many longtime *Dragon* readers, myself among them, consider Alexander von Thorn's "The Politics of Hell" to be one of the best, if not THE best, article that appeared in the magazine's first 50 issues, and when writing my manuscript I tried to follow it as closely as possible without contradicting official material.… I enjoyed the story of Baalzebul's overthrow [of Satan] told in "The Politics of Hell," but I leave the question of whether it actually happened or not, and indeed much of the past history of the hells, nebulous—part of every DM's elbow room, leaving him the freedom to design things as he sees fit.

Dragon's editor-in-chief Kim Mohan went on to add the following to Greenwood's reply:

> One of the key phrases in Ed's answer is 'without contradicting official material.' When he composed his original article on the Nine Hells that appeared in issues #75 and #76, Ed was careful not to go against any of the existing official system.… In contrast, Alexander von Thorn's article—excellent though it was—did not attempt to stay within the confines of the rule system. It was more of a theoretical article, describing a series of events that might have occurred to bring about the present state of affairs in the hells. As Ed suggests in his answer, "The Politics of Hell" might be excellent source material for a certain campaign purposely shaped to conform to what the article sets forth.

This reply is probably not surprising, since while TSR (via *Dragon* magazine and officially published settings and adventure modules) was unwilling or uninterested in publishing books or articles that encouraged the inclusion of Satan or other elements touching on real-world religious beliefs, it could not discourage individual players of the game from using such elements or characters in their home games.

As the official magazine of TSR and *D&D*, *Dragon* was the only means TSR had of interacting with fans in the pre–Internet age, and lively debates periodically cropped up in its pages regarding the Satanic panic and how *D&D* and TSR should respond. In *Dragon* 121, a reader named Matthew Hamilton wrote to ask "why the *AD&D* game volumes or *Dragon* Magazine has [sic] never dealt with the most important aspect of [the Middle Ages]: Christianity. I've run a Christian campaign for years and not only have I not offended my players, but I've appeased the parents of my players who previously claimed the *AD&D* game was blasphemous."[54] Four issues later another reader responded to Hamilton's letter in *Dragon* 125 (September 1987), stating "I feel that a generic role-playing game (such as the *AD&D* game) should not have any 'set' religion. If a DM wants characters to be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto, or any other religion, it should be up to the DM and the players not the game.… I have played in successful campaigns without any specific religions for five years. It's not the game that has the religion; it's the players."[55] In response, *Dragon* editor Roger E. Moore stated,

> In general, it is the policy of *Dragon* Magazine to avoid publishing material that specifically translates a modern and commonly accepted religion in to game-specific terms. We might use an article on monotheistic campaigns, or publish an article on medieval life that includes information on religious beliefs at the time, or even publish game statistics for ancient Roman deities, but … we feel that giving a campaign a specific religious background taken directly from real-world religions is the province of the DM and players involved.

Moore responded directly to the Satanic controversy in his editorial entitled "Equal Time" in *Dragon* 134 (June 1988). Noting his experience as a mental health counselor for the U.S. Army and mentioning several anecdotes involving past patients with religiously oriented delusions, Moore stated,

> Were I inclined to think that religion causes people to go crazy, I could certainly claim to have seen enough evidence to support the idea. Yet I know that religion does no such thing. It is a cornerstone upon which the spiritual well-being of humanity is built. Religious delusions are often seen among people with mental disorders, but the *disorders* [emphasis in original] cause the strange beliefs and behaviors—not vice versa. This situation is analogous to the claims in recent years that role-playing games are harmful in various ways to the gamers. The "evidence" linking role-playing games to antisocial or destructive behavior is often ill-made. In some cases, the material I've seen opposing RPGs approaches the status of urban legend…. Even reputable sources in the news media contribute to the mess, as CBS News did in a *60 Minutes* broadcast in September 1985, when it attempted to link a murder-suicide in Colorado to role-playing. This was interesting in light of a subsequent interview with the victim's family, carried by the Associated Press during the week after the show, which showed that the victim's mother did not believe the *D&D* game was connected with the tragedy. Even the police investigating the case dropped any connection between the game and the event—yet this tragedy is still connected in the minds of some with gaming, thanks to *60 Minutes*—which, to my understanding, never bothered to re-investigate the event.[56]

Moore revisited the theme in his editorial "Laying the Blame" in *Dragon* 151 (November 1989) in which he urged players to

> Examine the evidence [against *D&D*] with a critical and discriminating eye. Take time to think about what you read or hear on the news. Does the reporting sound reasonable, or does it leave you wondering if a lot of hype and paranoia are being used? Do you actually believe the rationales given for why certain events took place? Can you find more information on the topic that will let you make an informed decision about the matter? Don't let others do your thinking for you.

Understanding the age of many *D&D* players, Moore also urged them to

> Be reasonable. If you are a teenager and live with your parents, you will have to accept their decisions (and your school's) on whether or not they will let you play RPGs. But if you are given a chance to discuss the issue, make sure you are informed and be on your best behavior when you discuss it. People are always more impressed when they are confronted with someone who shows all the signs of being mature and responsible as well as being well informed.[57]

In response to a teenage reader's follow-up query to this editorial published in *Dragon* 160, Moore elaborated on his reasonableness point: "If your parents say no to playing the *D&D* game, you should abide by their decision. Being a parent myself, I'm not inclined to feed arguments in someone else's family."[58]

Publisher James M. Ward directly addressed the issue of "demonic" content in *D&D* in his *Dragon* 154 (February 1990) editorial, "Angry Mothers from Heck (and What We Do about Them)." Ward wrote,

> Ever since the *Monster Manual* came out in 1977, TSR has gotten a letter or two of complaint each week. All too often, such letters were from people who objected to the mention of demons and devils in that game book. One letter each week since the late 1970s adds up to a lot of letters, and I thought a lot about those angry moms. When the *AD&D* 2nd Edition rules came out, I had the designers and editors delete all mention of demons and devils. The game still has lots of tough monsters, but we now have a few more pleased moms as well.[59]

Readers reacted sharply to the announcement. Four issues later, in "Angry Mothers, Part 2: Revenge of the Readers," *Dragon* 158 (June 1990), Ward wrote a follow-up piece stating that *Dragon* had already received almost 100 letters from readers responding to the original column and were still receiving, on average, four new letters a day on the subject.[60] Ward included a variety of excerpts from readers' letters, including the following. A. Van Valin: "When I have children and they are old enough, I'll start them on *AD&D*. I hope it will be a rich experience for them, unfettered by the visions of somebody else's mother." Paul Astle: "I cannot help but feel that there is a degree of loyalty that should be shown to the players of the game who have stood by TSR and, on occasion, have had to face down, in a very literal way, these same demon-bashing, evangelistic, close-minded boors." David E. Cates: "In bending over backwards to the wishes of people who know nothing about the game, [Jim Ward] showed a total lack of consideration to the customer. Another triumph for a small but rabid minority group." John McCash: "You might as well have reduced the entire column to three words: We Cave In!!! There, that feels much better." William A. Nolan: "By the way, I would not have objected if you had said, 'We did not put demons and devils into the 2nd Edition [*Monstrous Compendium*] because we find them to be objectionable.' That isn't censorship. It only becomes censorship when an outside group dictates to you (successfully, in this case) what you should print." Ward announced, as a sop to players because of the outcry, that TSR would release an "interplanar *Monstrous Compendium* … with 96 pages of interplanar beings with unusual powers, most of those creatures being evil or chaotic in nature." Thus, by 1990 and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*' second edition, TSR had decided that the game would no longer officially include creatures called demons and devils, but it would include such creatures in all but name.[61] Demons and devils returned, by name, in 2000 in the third edition of the game.

The attacks on *D&D* did not end with the 1980s, and TSR felt the need to continue responding to the sensationalistic claims made by those opposed to *D&D* in the pages of *Dragon* magazine into the early 1990s. In Moore's response to a reader who wrote in asking which past issues had contained articles or letters about the Satanic panic in *Dragon* 182 (June 1992), he went on to attack those making outrageous claims against *D&D*:

> I've become more interested myself in reading the books that attack role-playing games, because some of those who accuse role-playing of being a dangerous hobby appear to have far more dangerous ideas themselves—ideas that are dangerous to things like the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and our religious and political freedoms, including the freedom to read and think what you want and to accept responsibility for being a free person. I have found more outright bigotry and intolerance in material that opposes gaming than I've ever seen in any role-playing rule book, and their works are intended for use in real life, not in a game of make-believe!… There are lots of people who are genuinely concerned about what they've heard or read or seen about role-playing games, and they want some answers. I understand their concern. I'm a parent, too, and there are answers for them. But there are also people out there who are making irresponsible claims about these games, offering everything except the facts to support their statements. We need to do some serious thinking about exactly what sorts of people are making these claims and what sorts of other things these people might have on their minds. Can we really take their antigaming concerns seriously? Or should we perhaps be seriously concerned about their other goals?[62]

In Moore's accompanying editorial in the same issue, "A Word of Warning About a Word of Warning," he discussed the various claims made by evangelical Christian publisher Jack Chick in his religious tracts, claims that are, as Moore points out, vicious and uninformed attacks against Judaism, Catholicism, Mormonism, Free Masonry, science, rock 'n' roll music, and the like.[63] Another reader wrote in *Dragon* 197 (September 1993) that he was still experiencing the same kinds of Satanic fears about *D&D* from teachers and school officials that he had when he began gaming a decade previously. A clearly frustrated Moore responded with a personal note about the anti–*D&D* claims:

> If involvement with role-playing games leads to Satan worship and the "influences of evil power," then I suppose that after 10 years of working here I should be one of the top evil high priests, which would probably come as quite a surprise to my family, my many friends, and those with whom I attend worship services. Though I've not conducted a poll here, it's been my experience that my 100+ co-workers at TSR, Inc. are predominately Christian, either Catholic or Protestant, with an assortment of other religions. From overhearing random conversations, I know that church-going is a part of the lives of many people here. It's interesting that in all the negative antigaming crap that I've seen, I've

> never seen anyone accuse TSR people themselves of being satanists—only the people who play the game are bad, not the ones who make it. A peculiar distinction, no?… Lots of people at TSR also have families…. No one here would tolerate or condone the publication of material that we felt was harmful to the public—and especially material that was harmful to our own families! Lots of people like our games. Some don't and that's fine, but to accuse us of producing Satanic material is worse than ignorant; it is crudely destructive and insanely stupid.[64]

Game designers and fans of the game increasingly seemed beleaguered as the 1980s wore on and *D&D*'s critics continued their assault on the game and its players in the early 1990s. There is no doubt that *D&D* included elements—demons, magic, deities other than the Christian God—that at least some parents and religious leaders found objectionable, though this is to be expected in a game that was explicitly designed to encourage its players to create fantastical settings and adventures. These clearly heart-felt editorials express the frustrations of game designers and writers who were not, in fact, Satanists, like almost all *D&D* players, but were unable to do much more than weather the storm of criticisms, ultimately out-lasting it, and attempt to reassure players (and their parents) that the game was not Satanic.

Conclusion: The (Virtual) Collapse of the Satanic Panic and a Retrospective

By the mid–1990s, the Satanic panic had all but collapsed.[65] Pulling's and BADD's legal cases against *D&D* had not borne any fruit; with no legal victories, groups like BADD had great difficulty in maintaining their momentum. By the early 1990s it had become clear that there was no support among academics for the exuberant claims of *D&D*'s critics. After all, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof, and such proof was not forthcoming: scholars had found no links between increased risk of suicide among teenage players of *D&D*. Most of the anti–Satanic moral crusaders had turned to other social and moral issues, including gay rights, which came to the forefront of national attention with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. The ministries of several of the leading anti–Satanic religious crusaders, Mike Warnke included, had collapsed after investigations uncovered financial improprieties and significant inconsistencies and untruths in statements by key figures.[66] BADD essentially ended operations in 1997 with the death of Pat Pulling. Even before her death, Pulling had long since been discredited because of her increasingly fantastical claims and complete lack of evidence. Much of Thomas Radecki's "expert" testimony against *D&D* had rested on his credentials as a psychiatrist. Radecki was a licensed psychiatrist throughout the 1980s, but his license was revoked from 1992 to 2002 because of complaints that

Radecki had engaged in "sexual activity … with one of his female patients."[67] He voluntarily surrendered his medical license in 2012 as a result of multiple allegations that he had over-prescribed medications and traded drugs to some of his patients in exchange for sex.[68]

So what is one to make of the Satanic panic of the 1980s? Was this just a particularly bizarre episode of hysteria and media hype in a peculiar decade? What were the long-term effects of *D&D*'s alleged association with Satanism? The effects of the Satanic panic on sales of *D&D* are inconclusive. Some parents, churches, schools, and other groups organized local bans, forbade adolescents from purchasing *D&D* books, and otherwise made life difficult for *D&D* players, just as similar interest groups attempted to ban or censor other forms of popular media during the 1980s and 1990s, like rap and heavy metal music, horror films, and video games. However, these bans resulting from the furor over *D&D* may have inadvertently generated additional sales as rebellious teenagers sought to acquire the game materials forbidden to them. TSR faced increasing pressure in the games industry in the 1990s, with some decline in overall sales—in part due to increased competition from video games—and several failed attempts to cash in on the booming collectible card game craze.[69] Close to bankruptcy, TSR was purchased by Wizards of the Coast, publishers of the *Magic: The Gathering* and *Pokémon* collectible card games in 1997. Wizards of the Coast was itself acquired by the multinational toy and board game company Hasbro in 1999. Under Hasbro, the third, fourth, and fifth editions of *D&D* have been published, with the most recent published in 2014. The last three editions of *D&D* do contain in-game references to demons and devils, using those terms, though this does not seem to have provoked a large-scale public outcry as it did in the 1980s.

While *D&D* has not maintained the widespread popularity it had during the 1980s, it remains a cult classic, and has spawned an entire industry of other RPGs, all of which owe their existence and popularity to the foundations built by *D&D*. With the almost complete collapse of the Satanic panic in the early 1990s, and the rise of geek culture and its increasingly mainstream appeal, media portrayals of *D&D* in the twenty-first century have changed considerably, with twenty-first century depictions typically poking fun at socially awkward "geeks" playing *D&D* rather than dangerous occultists and murderers.[70] Despite the mainstreaming of *D&D*, and its typical portrayal as a harmless pastime for geeks and the socially awkward, fears of the Satanic influences of *D&D* and similar games and books have not gone away entirely two and a half decades after the Satanic panic came to a close. Moral panics erupted over the alleged Satanic and "black magic" influences of the *Harry Potter* books and films, as well as the popular fantasy-themed collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* in the late 1990s. Additionally, the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, describing the end of the world from an evangelical Christian perspective and blending evangelical Christian millennialism, conspiracy theories, and contemporary politics, went on to sell tens of millions of copies and has spawned several feature films, videogames, graphic novels, and a music album, demonstrating that interest in the activities of Satan on Earth has continued.[71]

D&D is undoubtedly still considered of questionable morality and possible Satanic influence in some circles. For example, when Gary Gygax, co-creator of *D&D*, died in 2008, *D&D* fans raised $17,800 at a convention charity auction to be sent to one of Gygax's favorite charities, the Christian Children's Fund (CCF).[72] The CCF notified the auction organizers that they were not comfortable accepting the donation because of its association with *D&D* (the funds were instead donated to another charity, the Fisher House Foundation). Gygax himself was a lifelong Christian, though he stated in 2007 at the "Christians and Gaming" convention panel sponsored by the Christian Gamers' Guild that he had been "reticent to say the fact, you know, that I was a Christian, mainly because I was afraid that I would give Christianity a bad name because I did *D&D*. So … I kept my mouth shut. But I just decided no, I'm not going to do that any more."[73] Having weathered the storm of outrageous claims by anti–*D&D* zealots in the 1980s and 1990s, *D&D* has survived, not always perfectly understood or accepted by the broader public, but no longer so frequently charged with being one of the primary tools of an international Satanic conspiracy to corrupt the morals of America's youth.

The author would like to thank Elizabeth Schreiber-Byers and Patricia Stapleton for their feedback on earlier drafts of this essay. Any mistakes in this essay remain the sole responsibility of the author. Questions and comments are welcome; readers are invited to contact the author at andrew.byers@gmail.com.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1–2.

2. David Waldron, "Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (Spring 2005).

3. In *D&D*, one individual acts as the "Dungeon Master" (DM) who establishes the setting and context of the game using either published or original materials. The other players of the game each assume the role of a player character (PC), a fictional character that exists within the setting established by the DM. While *D&D* games are typically set in a fantasy-themed world, the popularity of *D&D* has led to the creation of a wide spectrum of many other role-playing games (RPGs) that use different rules and settings, exploring other themes and genres, such as science fiction or horror-themed games. RPGs are often described as a kind of collective storytelling. For more information on what RPGs are and how they function in play, see Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

4. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

5. For more on this point, see Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, "Grounding and Defending the Sociology of Moral Panic," in *Moral Panics and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean P. Hier (London: Routledge, 2011), 20–36.

6. Thompson, 43.

7. W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 169.

8. Victor, 8–9.

9. Poole, 95–123, 161.

10. Victor, 203.

11. *Ibid.*

12. A good chronology of the 1980s Satanic panic is found in Victor, 24–25.

13. Poole, 170.

14. Bob Larson, *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

15. Victor, 230; Robert D. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991), 269.

16. Mike Warnke, Dave Balsiger, and Les Jones, *The Satan Seller* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972). See also Victor, 230, on Warnke.

17. Michelle Smith and Lawrence Padzer, *Michelle Remembers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980).

18. Poole, 172–173.

19. Victor, 57–78.

20. Hicks, 348. Despite the widespread promulgation of Satanic claims made on television programs, the Satanic panic was not merely a creation of mass media. Instead, mass media was willingly used as a vehicle of moral crusaders for finding a larger audience for their message. For more on this point, see Victor, 253.

21. Quoted in Victor, 17.

22. David Finkelhor, *Nursery Crimes: Sexual Abuse in Day Care* (Newbury: Sage Publications, 1988). Also discussed in Victor, 110–111.

23. Hicks, 58.

24. Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine, "Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is Dungeons and Dragons a Breeding Ground for the Devil?" in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, et al. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), especially 109–119.

25. *Ibid.*, 107.

26. See for example, Robert D. Hicks, "The Police Model of Satanism Crime," in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, et al. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 175–190.

27. Note that similar claims about a progression from adolescent media consumption to the commission of violent acts in real life have emerged, with cases ranging from horror comics in the 1950s to the music of Marilyn Manson being used as a scapegoat for the Columbine killings to controversies surfacing about the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series.

28. William Dear, *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) and Rona Jaffe, *Mazes and Monsters* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1981).

29. For more discussion of these cases, see Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*, 275–282.

30. Waldron.

31. BADD was undoubtedly modeled after the influential Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), founded in 1980.

32. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*, 102.

33. *Ibid.*, 289.

34. Quoted in Martin and Fine, 109–110.

35. Patricia Pulling, with Kathy Cawthon, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, Inc, 1989), 80.

36. Quoted in *ibid.*., 80–81.

37. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

38. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

39. *Ibid.*, 83.

40. Computers for Christ, "Press Release from Washington About D&D," posted by Tim Scheele on Computer Direct BBS on May 1, 2003, accessed on May 8, 2014, http://www.believersweb.org/view.cfm?ID=663.

41. See Waldron for more specifics.

42. See Pulling and Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*, 21, for more on these specific claims

43. For a discussion of some of the legal cases allegedly involving Satanic elements, see James T. Richardson, "Satanism in the Courts: From Murder to Heavy Metal," in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, et al. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 205–217.

44. Quoted in Kurt Lancaster, "Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:2 (Fall 1994): 71.

45. Quoted in Hicks, "The Police Model of Satanism Crime," 183.

46. See Victor, 175–176; Martin and Fine, 119–120; J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W Keith Winkler, "Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social Life," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, ed. J. Patrick Williams, et al. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 8–9; and Lancaster, 73–74, for more discussion of these studies.

47. Alexander von Thorn, "The Politics of Hell," *Dragon* 28 (August 1979): 2–3, 40–42.

48. *Ibid.*, 2.

49. Ed Greenwood, "The Nine Hells, Part I," *Dragon* 75 (July 1983): 16–33; Ed Greenwood, "The Nine Hells, Part II," *Dragon* 76 (August 1983): 22–44.

50. Greenwood, "The Nine Hells, Part I," 17.

51. Ed Greenwood, "Eight Devilish Questions," *Dragon* 91 (November 1984): 38–40.

52. *Ibid.*, 38.

53. "Letters," *Dragon* 93 (January 1985): 4.

54. "Letters," *Dragon* 121 (May 1987): 44.

55. "Letters," *Dragon* 125 (September 1987): 3.

56. Roger E. Moore, "Editorial: Equal Time," *Dragon* 134 (June 1988): 4, 55.

57. Roger E. Moore, "Editorial: Laying the Blame," *Dragon* 151 (November 1989): 5, 85.

58. "Letters," *Dragon* 160 (August 1990): 5.

59. James M. Ward, "Angry Mothers from Heck (and What We Do About Them)," *Dragon* 154 (February 1990): 9.

60. All quotations from James M. Ward, "Angry Mothers, Part 2: Revenge of the Readers," *Dragon* 158 (June 1990): 8.

61. In the second edition of D&D, devils were described as an extradimensional race of creatures called the "baatezu" and demons were called "tanar'ri."

62. "Letters," *Dragon* 182 (June 1992): 5, 7.

63. Roger E. Moore, "A Word of Warning About a Word of Warning," *Dragon* 182 (June 1992): 6–7.

64. "Letters," *Dragon* 197 (September 1993): 4, 8.

65. See Waldron for more on the collapse of the anti–*D&D* movement.

66. Poole, 179. Regarding the collapse of Warnke's religious ministry and ant–Satanic financial empire, see Jon Trott and Mike Hertenstein, "Selling Satan: The Tragic History of Mike Warnke," the exhaustive exposé published in the Christian magazine *Cornerstone* 98 (1992), accessed May 16, 2014, archived at http://web.archive.org/web/20110629063019/http://www.cornerstonemag.com/features/iss098/sellingsatan.htm.

67. "Down the Tubes," *Entertainment Weekly* 150–151 (December 25, 1992).

68. Pennsylvania Attorney General Press Release, "Attorney General Kane announces arrest of Pa. psychiatrist for over-prescribing, trading opioid-addiction treatment drugs for sex," August 20, 2013, accessed May 8, 2014, http://www.attorneygeneral.gov/press.aspx?id=7132.

69. A good general history of TSR and the first three decades of *D&D* can be found in Harold Johnson, Steve Winter, Peter Adkison, Ed Stark, and Peter Archer, *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2004).

70. See, for example, many of the references to *D&D* in television shows like *Futurama*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Community*.

71. Poole, 190–193.

72. For more information on the charity auction controversy, see Live Games Auctions, accessed May 24, 2014, http://www.livegameauctions.com/CharityAuction.jsp and the Gen Con Community, accessed May 14, 2014, http://community.gencon.com/forums/t/18786.aspx.

73. Gygax's remarks on his Christian faith are available in a YouTube clip, accessed May 24, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tBx4ITJLpE.

Bibliography

Cohen, Stanley. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3d ed. London: Routledge, 2002.

Computers for Christ. "Press Release from Washington About D&D," posted by Tim Scheele on Computer Direct BBS on May 1, 2003. Accessed May 8, 2014. http://www.believersweb.org/view.cfm?ID=663.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Dear, William. *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

"Down the Tubes." *Entertainment Weekly* 150–151 (December 25, 1992).

Finkelhor, David. *Nursery Crimes: Sexual Abuse in Day Care.* Newbury: Sage Publications, 1988.

Gen Con Community. Accessed May 14, 2014. http://community.gencon.com/forums/t/18786.aspx.

Gen Con 2007 Panel Part Two. Accessed May 24, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tBx4ITJLpE.

Goode, Erich, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. "Grounding and Defending the Sociology of Moral Panic." In *Moral Panics and the Politics of Anxiety*, edited by Sean P. Hier. London: Routledge, 2011, 20–36.

Greenwood, Ed. "Eight Devilish Questions." *Dragon* 91 (November 1984): 38–40.

_____. "The Nine Hells, Part I." *Dragon* 75 (July 1983): 16–33.

_____. "The Nine Hells, Part II." *Dragon* 76 (August 1983): 22–44.

Hicks, Robert D. *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult.* Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991.

_____. "The Police Model of Satanism Crime." In *The Satanism Scare*, edited by James T. Richardson, et al. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991, 175–190.

Jaffe, Rona. *Mazes and Monsters.* New York: Delacorte Press, 1981.

Johnson, Harold, Steve Winter, Peter Adkison, Ed Stark, and Peter Archer. *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2004.

Lancaster, Kurt. "Do Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism, and Suicide Among Players as Critics Claim?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:2 (Fall 1994): 67–79.

Larson, Bob. *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989.

"Letters." *Dragon* 93 (January 1985): 4.

"Letters." *Dragon* 121 (May 1987): 44.

"Letters." *Dragon* 125 (September 1987): 3.

"Letters." *Dragon* 160 (August 1990): 5.

"Letters." *Dragon* 182 (June 1992): 5, 7.

"Letters." *Dragon* 197 (September 1993): 4, 8.

Live Games Auctions. Accessed May 24, 2014. http://www.livegameauctions.com/CharityAuction.jsp.

Martin, Daniel, and Gary Alan Fine. "Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is Dungeons and Dragons a Breeding Ground for the Devil?" In *The Satanism Scare*, edited by James T. Richardson, et al. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991, 107–123.

Moore, Roger E. "Editorial: Equal Time." *Dragon* 134 (June 1988): 4, 55.

_____. "Editorial: Laying the Blame." *Dragon* 151 (November 1989): 5, 85.

_____. "A Word of Warning About a Word of Warning." *Dragon* 182 (June 1992): 6–7.

Pennsylvania Attorney General. Press Release. "Attorney General Kane announces arrest of Pa. psychiatrist for over-prescribing, trading opioid-addiction treatment drugs for sex," August 20, 2013. Accessed May 8, 2014. http://www.attorneygeneral.gov/press.aspx?id=7132.

Poole, W. Scott. *Satan in America: The Devil We Know.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

Pulling, Patricia, with Kathy Cawthon. *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, Inc, 1989).

Richardson, James T. "Satanism in the Courts: From Murder to Heavy Metal." In *The Satanism Scare*, edited by James T. Richardson, et al. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991.

Smith, Michelle, and Lawrence Padzer. *Michelle Remembers.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.

Thompson, Kenneth. *Moral Panics.* London: Routledge, 1998.

Trott, Jon, and Mike Hertenstein. "Selling Satan: The Tragic History of Mike Warnke." *Cornerstone* 98 (1992). Accessed May 16, 2014. http://web.archive.org/web/20110629063019/http://www.cornerstonemag.com/features/iss098/sellingsatan.htm.

von Thorn, Alexander. “The Politics of Hell.” *Dragon* 28 (August 1979): 2–3, 40–42.

Waldron, David. “Role-Playing Games and the Christian Right: Community Formation in Response to a Moral Panic.” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (Spring 2005): 50–78.

Ward, James M. “Angry Mothers from Heck (and What We Do about Them).” *Dragon* 154 (February 1990): 9.

_____. “Angry Mothers, Part 2: Revenge of the Readers.” *Dragon* 158 (June 1990): 8.

Warnke, Mike, Dave Balsiger, and Les Jones. *The Satan Seller.* Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972.

Williams, J. Patrick, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W Keith Winkler. “Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social Life.” In *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, et al. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006, 1–18.

Psychological Effects of Fantasy Games on Their Players

A Discourse-Based Look at the Evidence

ANDREAS LIEBEROTH *and*
JONAS TRIER-KNUDSEN

Introduction

Is role-playing good for people? Does it improve social skills as many educational game designers would have you think? Or is immersion into violent fictional worlds bad for one's mental health, leaving one open to deep personality changes and influence from unsavory subcultures—not to mention Satan Himself?

To understand such questions, as well as their probable answers, one must survey both the cultural history that spurred such hopes and anxieties and the small body of role-playing-game-specific psychological studies that might hint at answers. This essay delves into forty years of voices framing the psychological impact of role-playing games (RPGs). Given the diverse claims, and conjectures drawn from many parallel arenas such as drama theory or videogames, this essay focuses squarely on a limited range of empirical studies that has investigated the psychological effects of the role-playing hobby itself. Half discourse analysis and half summary of the available data, we attempt to shed a little light on the debate about RPGs as potentially dangerous, or otherwise psychologically impactful compared to other hobbies. Our story starts with *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). A few, ultimately misguided, calls for alarm were highly publicized, and almost over night the relatively obscure hobby was framed as a scary cult-like activity that merged impressionable teen psyches with violent occult characters, forming a highway into Satanism, depression, and suicidal tendencies.[1] In fact, this witch-hunt discourse likely contributed to the role-playing hobby's meteoric rise in popularity among the first generations of truly post-modern youth.[2] It was new, challenging, and mysterious with its lack of conventional game trappings, drawing on a fantasy-literature full of combat, demons, and sorcery far from suburban life and bleak politics. In the eyes of conservative forces, role-playing displayed itself as an almost exact opposite to wholesome family values.

A broader cultural climate where a uniquely worried form of twentieth-century parenting[3] had intermixed with fears of spiritual movements and the occult[4] was a central factor in the negative impression of role-playing. The movement was, after all, loud enough and resonated sufficiently with public sentiments to influence communal opinion and shape lasting psychological folk hypotheses about the effects of role-playing.

Today, things are different. Gaming has steadily won acceptance in mainstream culture. The most fevered religious anxiety has died out, and almost as an exact counter-discourse, recent years have seen a rise in positively framed role-playing. For example, in the Nordic countries, live action role-playing (LARP) has become a mainstream pastime, celebrated for engaging children in healthy social and physical activities.[5]

Furthermore, role-playing is moving into education. Denmark has recently gotten its *second* boarding school based on educational role-playing, and more and more museums and public institutions are using LARPs as tools for cultural communication. Role-playing is moving from niche to mainstream, which became abundantly clear when the promotional film for the Danish *College of Wizardry*, a Harry Potter inspired LARP at a castle in Poland, got massive attention ranging from national television to *The Independent*, *BBC*, and *Good Morning America*.

As the public image of role-playing changed, so did the claims about the psychological effects of the hobby. Among practitioners and scholars particular to the hobby, role-playing, whether enacted live or played out around the dinner table, is now framed as holding a transformative potential for cognitive, psychological, educational, and social development.[6]

This essay explores psychological claims about role-playing exemplified by two of these discourses, the fevered attacks in the 1980s and the optimism that first surfaced as a counternarrative to that very anxiety, but also came to dominate practitioner-culture and hobbyist writings in the 2000s. The essay does not pose *a priori* hypotheses, but instead maps visible folk theories, and holds up a mirror to those in the form of the available data.

In the interest of analysis, we identify some notions as "hard claims."

These center on serious issues like violence, clinical disorders, and suicide that should lead to legal action and policy recommendations were they true. Along with these serious allegations, there are myriad "softer" and often more positively framed claims centering on more ill-defined constructs like social relations, creative problem solving, and non-cognitive skills.[7]

The conclusions that can be distilled from this intersection between popular discourse and published studies point to a valid position for role-playing as a space for psychological influences, but not one that is highly privileged or different from other arenas for social exchange and immersion. Looking to the literature, at least, it seems that the practices and compositions of local play communities hold as much explanatory power when it comes to issues of psychological, educational, and social development as the games played in and of themselves.

Claims About Psychological Effects: Anxious Attacks and Apologetic Rejoinders

There is no shortage of claims about the psychological effects of role-playing, though hard research on the subject is sparse. Obviously, contemporary practitioners and the 1980s witch hunters seem far apart in their opinions. The two are, however, united by a common denominator: the fundamental assumption that role-playing holds the potential for intense psychological effects. It is only the specific nature of such effects that creates the distance between the clashing discourses.

The anxiety narrative had numerous voices in the 1980s. Some, like Joan Robie, author of "The Truth about *Dungeons & Dragons*,"[8] and comic book artist Jack Chick,[9] argued mainly from a fundamentalist evangelical standpoint with psychological claims as a secondary agenda. One of the more audible proponents of the anxiety discourse was concerned mother and Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) founder Patricia Pulling. Her book *The Devil's Web* on threats from the occult in general and *D&D* in particular exemplifies claims connecting role-playing to Satanism and violent behavior, tragically motivated by the suicide of her own son. However tragic its genesis, *The Devil's Web* is a paradigmatic example of the patterns of reasoning that dominated the public concern with *D&D*. The book is a long-form argument intermixing many examples and concerns drawn from local news as well as Pulling's own tenure as an expert witness and media spokesperson.

The investigation of "teen-age devil worship" frames *D&D* books as a "how to guide" and "complete primer" on occultism. Role-playing itself is presented as dangerous because it encourages its participants to disengage from the real world. The immersive nature makes the player lose touch with reality in a manner similar to drugs—another great parental scare of the time. Players become "hooked" as the game takes over their lives, and their personality is pushed aside by the character.[10] This is described as a slow process of which the game-playing teenager is unaware. When the mental transformation is complete, the player is at risk of carrying out in-game actions like armed assault or trying to cast spells like *command* in real life, or internalizing their character's Chaotic Evil alignment.[11] Variations of this theory pervade the book.[12] Role-playing represents everything that is dangerous about losing control to new, exotic influences and distancing oneself from parents and daily life.

The second major trope visible in Pulling's book is the seductive connection to the occult. Role-playing lures its participants into occult practices and renouncement of Judeo-Christian faith. Though actual occultists probably find spells like *Feather Fall* and *Melf's Acid Arrow* amusing fictions, the reaction to descriptions of rituals and mention of demons[13] was a red flag to 1980s anti-cult sentiments. Indeed, in Pulling's view, role-playing was unique in that it provided a "how-to system, a basic primer on the occult."[14] The *Player's Handbook* describes rituals and Pulling likens it to LaVey's *Satanic Bible* and other occult manuals, but in a more insidious guise. Warnings about this influence are found throughout *The Devil's Web* via stories of occult sex-parties, drug use, and both child molestation and ritualistic murder.

The latter points to the third pervasive trope: violence. According to Pulling, "accumulated evidence now indicates that fantasy role-playing games have been significant factors in at least 125 deaths."[15] The evidence in question is an impressive series of press clippings and comments on macabre assaults, murders, and break-ins in which the perpetrator played *D&D*, or where references to fantastic terms or worlds appear somewhere in the case or press reports.[16] This collection of newspaper articles and personal reports underscores the 1980s discourse's tie to sensationalist media.

Pulling's chapters on role-playing conclude with checklists for parents and law-enforcement professionals so they can monitor at-risk traits and behaviors in children and recognize the hallmarks of occult crime. The list ranges from absent-mindedness, higher intelligence, and interest in computers to communing with demons. In short, if one's child is a stereotypical geek or is making pacts with the Devil though ritual magic, one should be concerned.

Though some of these harder claims about teen deaths and the link to Satanism seem both far-fetched and quite coarse, Pulling comes across as a genuinely concerned parent who wanted the best for the next generation. Her claims and data may be dubious, but her intentions probably were not, despite the secondary benefits of fame and attention that could easily be attributed to her motives. Indeed *The Devil's Web* is only one among many alarmist texts attacking perceived threats to 1980s youth. This "anxiety literature"[17] must be seen as a part of a wider cultural climate. Traditionalist discourses reared against counterculture and new religious movements in the wake of tragedies like Jonestown and the Mount Carmel siege. The intangible threat of seduction by unscrupulous drug dealers, cult leaders, and peddlers of alternative lifestyles loomed large as a vast and ideologically rootless middle class generation was finding its place in postmodern life. A sense of cultural innocence lost merged with the general sentiment of the vulnerable child. Early twentieth-century changes in living standards gradually repositioned children as helpless subjects to their parents' shortcomings and society's dangers, creating a mixed arms race between technologies of child development and a rapidly shifting blame-game in response to the never-ending list of things to fear propagated by the media. Pulling's book is just one among many manuals and self-help texts that began to fill the bookshelves as childrearing and personal growth were becoming commercialized.[18]

However sincere her intentions of saving a generation from sects and destructive occultism, Pulling's book thus reads as a testament to exactly the paranoia that stalked *D&D* and similar marginal participatory cultures in the 1980s. It is an expression of the pervasive discourse of anxiety that peaked in the 1980s and crystallized in the anti-cult movement and organizations like BADD.[19]

This is not to say that no one had published rejoinders to the anxious voices. *D&D* emerged from a science fiction and gaming fan base that was accustomed to voicing their views and analyses in print, but such rebuttals were mainly directed inwards in the subculture via self-published magazines. Given the limited circulation and obvious insider-problem of these voices, and the tendency for salient myths to outlast even highly qualified arguments in public awareness,[20] the positive counternarrative appears to have been largely drowned out outside player circles.

An example of the player's perspective formulated for the benefit of the wider public can be found in sometime *D&D* writer Eric J. Holmes' book *Fantasy Role Playing Games.*[21] The chapter "Are They All Crazy?" mounts several apologetic devices to defend against how "non–game-playing outsiders are likely to suspect that living so much in one's imagination is vaguely 'sick'"[22] and reactions to "all the violence and bloodshed."[23] The main story told here is that *D&D* is hard to understand from the "outside," and that what goes on around the *D&D* table is quite "normal" in terms of immersion, epic fiction, and everyday fantasies about idealized selves.

As a medical doctor, Holmes admits that undue absorption in fantasy worlds is a symptom of mental illness, but "by analogy, many mentally ill people have bizarre religious delusions, but that does not mean that the rest of us should avoid religion because we may go too crazy."[24] He asserts that as a mass phenomenon with "hundreds of thousands of game players, […] [t]he sheer number alone guarantees that some of these people will be mentally disturbed,"[25] building a case that "Fantasy role playing is not injurious to your mental health. It may even be good for you. It is very likely to be educational."[26] He relays how non-fantasy role-playing was already clinically recognized before the inception of *D&D*, likely referring to psychodrama and counterfactual role-play in therapy context.[27] As for the violence and bloodshed, Holmes does not condone the "unproven" notion that small doses of imaginary violence can function as a "homeopathic remedy" against real violent impulses, perhaps revealing a folk theory or rejoinder circulating in the fandom at the time.

To back up the suggestion that *D&D* may be therapeutic and educational for players, Holmes observes that play necessitates communication and cooperation no matter how introverted one is, and thus "forces increased socialization."[28] Interestingly, he also observes how other players are likely to police antisocial in-game behavior, such as rape and torture. On the cognitive and educational side, he notes how the game also requires "some map reading, memorization, problem solving and a fair amount of rapid arithmetic."[29]

This positive counter-discourse exemplifies many of the softer claims since examined by therapists, educators, and scientists, so it seems reasonable to assume that Holmes' voice is fairly representative of players in his time. On the one hand, he explains that *D&D* fandom was an exclusive community centered on an activity that is hard for "outsiders" to understand, and which includes a specific self-image among participants also discussed by contemporary sociologist Gary Alan Fine. On the other hand, he also reveals a perceived need among gamers to defend against an anxiety discourse centered on sickness and violence. The strategy for dealing with this is refuting the generalizability of strong anxiety claims, arguing instead that most of what goes on is quite "normal," for instance, playing up the "charm and nostalgia of 'let's pretend.'"[30] The influence of fantasy role-playing on participants is downplayed, but simultaneously (and slightly contradictorily) reframed as positive, channeling it into softer claims about social, clinical, and cognitive benefits.

As discursive exemplars, both Holmes and Pulling are revealing of the cultural climate among "game-players" and "non–game-players" in the late 1970s and 1980s, rife with repeated psychological and normative arguments. Excavating folk theories in these writings reveals interesting hypotheses, which are epistemically separate from science, but can in principle be tested empirically.

The anxiety discourse can be summed up as broadly presenting the immersive properties of role-playing as an arena for psychological internalization of largely pseudo-occult violent content. The more specific causal claims tie fantasy role-playing to psychiatric illness, teen suicide, criminality, and antisocial behavior. Sometimes it is suggested that fantasy role-playing is a recruitment tool for Satanists, pedophiles, and other unwholesome groups either through relationships developed with impressionable young minds through gaming, or by virtue of the "Satanic" content. The psychological claim here is one of social influences on "the vulnerable child,"[31] existing in parallel to that of direct psychological impact from the game itself, but the two often mix as seen in Pulling, Chick, and Robie.

On the positive side, players and their public proponents suggest "softer" clinical, cognitive, and social benefits ranging from therapeutic catharsis to self-discovery and building important skills. Claims about benefits aim to disarm the negative discourses, and, more recently, to normatively position fantasy role-playing as a natural part of contemporary youth culture. In the counternarrative, as in the more recent practitioner discourse, the hobby is regarded as either harmless or having a positive transformative potential when used, for example, in educational interventions or after-school programs.

Obviously, the anxieties and positive hopes cannot both be true. However, both claims are based on one common premise: that role-playing holds the potential for psychological consequences. Another thing that unites the two discourses is that both have had very little scientific information to go on. Indeed, arguments launched from both sides have predominantly been based on case studies or expert (sometimes a charitable term here) opinions, no doubt due to limited access to the already sparse research literature, and inflamed by cognitive biases like people's tendencies to believe what they have heard before and ideas that generally fit their existing worldviews.[32]

Given this rich cultural history of psychological propositions, we are left with the question: what hard empirical data are available on the subject of the effects fantasy role-playing might have on players?

Putting Your Data Where Your Mouth Is

As we have seen, the emergence of fantasy RPGs led to both soft and hard claims about the ways they change people. Little tangible evidence, however, was generated, although academic work describing the cultures surrounding role-playing surfaced after a time.[33] Now, after forty years, there are essays to be found in abundance from, for example, the Nordic LARP and Wyrd Con communities, but peer-reviewed research concerned with testing the hypotheses expressed in this discourse, as well as the older claims discussed above, remains sparse.

Some psychological and clinical assertions are easy to verify or refute scientifically given the right resources. After all, if there were a national correlation between game-playing and youth suicide, criminality, or psychiatric diagnoses, those patterns would be readily discernible in public statistics—from clinical records to convictions—after a short while. Hard claims are thus sometimes testable though pure correlation or intervention studies, but are always framed in an order of severity that would warrant the mentioned anxieties in addition to the assorted combinations of parental action, psychiatric treatment, litigation, policy recommendations, and torches and pitchforks for which critics like Pulling, Robie, and Chick called. Soft claims are here understood as notions like "socialization" or benefits to "problem solving"[34] that have less of an alarmist taste, but may still be of interest to practitioners or researchers.

Surveying the psychological studies available gives an additional lens, both historical and scientific, on such notions. Our recent literature review[35] without *a priori* interest in the 1980s discourses was, however, only able to turn up 15 original peer-reviewed empirical studies on role-playing's psychological effects. For the purposes of the narrative summary provided in this essay, this number can be boosted by also accepting graduate theses and case studies into the fold, but not to any impressive degree. This amount is hardly surprising as role-playing has been a marginal phenomenon, and mostly lent itself to cultural descriptions like Fine's central sociological analyses of pen-and-paper communities[36] and Bowman's more recent exploration of LARP cultures.[37] After collecting empirical evidence in one place with the early discourses that might have spurred them on, this essay concludes with a look at studies that can be said to document psychological effects of RPGs. While allowing some intervention studies to join the conversation, we put most stock in attempts at quantitative effect measurement and correlational cohort studies. This limitation is necessary to cut though the thicket of theoretical explorations, insider- and outsider-opinions, and vastly disparate case studies in order to treat "evidence" on RPGs en par with social or medical phenomena like video game violence, which has received much more attention from psychologists and policy makers.[38] We have, for instance, pragmatically opted to leave Devil worship out of the discussion, except if it shows up in relation to personality or clinical issues. Having considered evidence only through the most conservative scientific standards affords us the lenience to consider plausible effects that RPGs might have on their participants as predicted by the psychological looking glass forty years after the first *D&D* box hit the shelves.

Effect and Evidence

To set up a hard empirical threshold for both orders of claims, we have included intervention studies where psychological hypotheses reach beyond the play situation, as well as correlational and cohort studies that might reveal statistically significant differences between role-players and other people. Our weighing of evidence is based on the basic premise that data collection should be replicable and scientific claims empirically refutable.[39] Processes like ethnography, interviews, play experience mapping, and theory-building are here seen as essential to understanding the social and psychological realities of complex phenomena, and to the development of hypotheses, but not as evidence in and of themselves.[40] In other words, the remaining parts of this essay are not concerned with theories in and of themselves unless expressed as tested hypotheses, and only bothers with case descriptions if they were published through reputable scientific channels and have clear outcome variables to treat as indications of psychological effects.

Looking to these data in light of the discursive claims singled out above, empirical studies on psychological effects of role-playing can roughly be separated into dealing with clinical, cognitive, social, educational (not covered here), and personality-oriented effects, as well as some miscellaneous angles. Recent work has also focused on educational benefits of role-playing, but since that angle is covered elsewhere in this volume, we focus on the psychological domains by starting with the hardest claims visible in the 1980s discourse and then moving on to the plethora of studies addressing softer hypotheses.

Clinical and Criminological Issues

As discussed, hard claims can generally be placed within the domain of clinical psychology and criminology, suggesting depression or violent behavior. Systematically searching the research literature yields no results suggesting a higher prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses, self-harm, serious existential distress, criminality, or antisocial behavior in the role-playing population.

The only statistical treatment of suicides as related to role-playing hobbies that we know of after extensive research is a casual analysis by Lewis Wolpert[41] who used the *D&D* panic as an example of people's inability to make sound judgments about risk when information is limited in the face of worrisome stories. "The evidence [was that] twenty-eight teenagers who regularly played the game had committed suicide. But the average suicide rate for teenagers nationwide in the United States is about one in 10,000. Since some three million teenagers played the game, the number of suicides that might be expected among the players was 300,"[42] Wolpert writes without further references. Reports from the CDC acquitting fantasy role-playing in relation to teen deaths are cited around the Internet, such as the Wikipedia page dedicated to the controversies discussed here, but URL links to the original sources for this information appear to have dried up at the time of this writing.

So let us instead consider psychological constructs that can be seen as root causes for self-harm. A small cross-sectional study compared twenty male *D&D* players to other undergraduates on scores of depression, suicidal ideation, psychoticism, extraversion, or neuroticism, but found no significant differences.[43] Compared to U.S. National Guardsmen, players in another study actually reported four times *lower* feelings of meaninglessness.[44] The same study, however, also showed that feelings of meaninglessness correlated with money spent on role-playing, frequency of play, and level achieved in the game. Indeed, excessive gaming of any kind has been linked to depression.[45] Both video gamers and role-players who play 15+ hours a week had significantly higher depression and loneliness scores than those playing less, one investigation shows, but role-players scored lower on depression than did video gamers as a group. This is a finding that should not be taken lightly, even if troubles in the real world may be what stimulate problem gaming, and not the other way around. It also shows that role-playing is comparable to other kinds of gaming in this regard.

Quite inversely, a handful of studies found role-playing related to *increased* self-efficacy[46] that denotes a person's private feeling of ability to act efficaciously in the world, and thus affect his/her own life. Low self-efficacy is tied to anxiety, depression, and similar states.[47] The clinical literature suggests that increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy engendered though role-playing stem from camaraderie, a sense of accomplishment,[48] and the empowering characteristics of manipulating a symbolic framework of meaning, such as efficacious heroics in a morally meaningful world.[49]

Looking closely for negative clinical implications, only a report by Ascherman from 1993 on social and compliance problems due to a role-playing group in an in-patient unit can be found. Interestingly, the players in this study mobilized all the standard apologetic arguments, such as developing social skills through role immersion in defense of their hobby. Aside from such social issues, however, it does not seem that *any* psychiatrists or therapists have encountered cases of role-playing leading to detrimental effects that were salient enough to be reported in the clinician peer literature.

In other words, no causal links or increased prevalence of the issues brought forward in the anxiety discourse's hardest claims at the clinical and criminological level can be confirmed for role-playing in general, although deep and prolonged immersion in games can be considered a distress-signal in certain cases.

Staying in the domain of psychiatric health, but looking at more positive ideas, a number of clinical case studies[50] have examined therapeutic uses for fantasy RPGs. Most of these found some positive effect. For instance, one case study revealed a marked progress in a highly anxious and introverted subject after seven months of "*D&D* therapy."[51] In this view, the fantasy role-playing *activity*, separated from the hobby at large as observations were conducted in the confines of a clinical setting, may become a safe place to communicate emotions, gain release from anxieties, or play around with different identity facets.[52] A school of thought influenced by psychodynamic theory and psychodrama (as per Moreno & Moreno, 1959) suggests that the reason for therapeutic effects should be found in "cathartic" release and negotiation of emotions.[53] In a broader hobby context, gains have been linked to the opportunity to project inner themes onto the harmless shared fiction, almost like an interactive social Rorschach inkblot.[54] Cases and theoretical interpretations are, however, difficult to distil into clinical recommendations.[55] For instance, the "*D&D* therapy" finding is encouraging to those who are optimistic about using role-playing as a pedagogical tool for non-curriculum growth, but also hard to generalize since a seven-month period in a troubled young person's life may entail many influences, and the *D&D* sessions may simply have acted as alibis for the kind of therapeutic interaction that would be efficacious in any case. As such, without clear parameters of comparison it is hard to assess the unique efficacy of the gaming activity in and of itself.

Personality, Trait Variations and Identity

As hinted above, some effects appear to exist at a social or identity level. This brings us to how role-players negotiate their individual and collective identities. John Denman, for instance, maps how a larger group of players[56] believed themselves to be intelligent and imaginative, and set outside the mainstream culture. Heather Lee Shay[57] discusses how the formation of such "good gamer" identities revolves around the perceived traits of dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity. James Steven Martin[58] discusses the expression of manliness in the physical and competitive elements of LARPing, whereas Stephanie Fleischer in 2007 argued that masculine role-playing identities are discursively renegotiated to represent more complex and intelligent masculine stereotypes, rather than the iconic bodybuilder-barbarian.

Players, however, do not really seem to stand out on typical personality tests.[59] Addressing some of the anxiety claims, Stuart Leeds found that Satanic dabblers were higher on psychoticism and introversion than both role-players and people in general,[60] while a cohort study with relatively small samples found role-players to be less neurotic than others.[61] Yet another found that players were more likely to be introverted, intuitive, and perceptive compared to the national average.[62] So, depending on how one measures, it seems that players conform to certain personality norms when investigated within the framing of that participatory culture, but generally they differ little from the wider populace.

This perhaps supports another "geeky" stereotype propagated within the community, namely the idea that role-players are less socially adept than others.[63] This stereotype is quite old, and may not fit, for example, contemporary Scandinavian cultural standards where LARPing is a major pastime. A large study of 414 players, however, found that contemporary role-players in general do not rate themselves different from the national average on social self-efficacy.[64] In fact, time spent playing per month was slightly correlated with social skills. Indeed, as might be expected in a fandom where one player is both the leader and the creative story-boarder, game masters had social self-efficacy scores well above the national average, while players fell somewhere below.

Intelligence and Cognitive Skills

Voices from the early discourse suggest that role-players are more intelligent than their peers.[65] This is an easily measurable hypothesis, and probably due to popular stereotypes and the positive counternarrative among gamers, the claim has been tested multiple times. Only Robert Barnett discovered that role-players in a student cohort had a slightly higher IQ, while two other studies found no such relationship.[66] Several investigations employing interviews and survey measures have also shown that role-players generally sustain a self-image as a creative bunch,[67] which has been supported ethnographically.[68] For instance, using a quasi-experimental setup, Michael Kallam observed that a cohort of mildly handicapped players gradually developed more and more creative and complex solutions to in-game problems as time passed. In a study intended to support adaptive social interactions in city boys, Luis Zayas and Bradford Lewis similarly saw increased problem-solving skills at a group level.[69] Kallam's study also identified measurably increased internalization of locus of control—a concept related to identity and self-efficacy—among participants. Another by Lisa DeRenard & Linda Kline, however, found in 1990 no difference between players and controls. Accordingly, a few studies have found that role-playing can spark curiosity in educational settings.[70] Role-playing has, however, not proven easy to link to academic achievement for school children,[71] so, again, it is difficult to disentangle the actual effect of these motivational and non-cognitive factors in a broader context. It looks like local role-playing cultures may attract a cerebral crowd and support a self-image of intellectuality,[72] but even though curiosity and creative problem solving may be boosted in the game context, nothing suggests that players are born geniuses or that role-playing makes one smarter.

Social Skills and Connections

Predictably, role-playing also fosters camaraderie.[73] Players report significant social experiences from playing and develop significant relationships through the activity.[74] Even playing by mail supports enjoyment from meeting new people and talking with friends.[75]

As already discussed, studies suggest that role-playing with a trusted group of peers under relatively well-structured circumstances may increase cooperative abilities,[76] a general belief that is *also* shared among players.[77] This may be especially salient for participants who suffer from social problems and diagnoses. For instance, role-playing activities have been reported to scaffold development of impulse control.[78]

From his multi-method study of women in role-playing, Christopher Dyszelski argues that empathy can be exercised especially through character immersion.[79] Meriläinen found the belief that role-playing develops empathy to be correlated with playing characters that are very different from one's everyday self. Consistent with this proposition, Rivers found that empathy scores in role-players correlated with their absorption and fantasy proneness traits. Compared to these contemporary examinations, where empathy and deep participation seem to go hand in hand, play-by-mail players 20+ years ago showed less empathetic concern than did controls,[80] illustrating a marked difference in the audiences and cultures of participation present within the broader role-playing fandom. The immediacy of role-playing and fantasy dimensions may thus be important and possibly unique factors in the pedagogical potential of fantasy RPGs, in addition to the camaraderie, social exchange, and mutually supportive identity- and competence-building, which can be found in any number of hobbies. Indeed, a recent study of the world's first all-role-playing boarding school located in Denmark found that the addition of a role-playing layer to teaching and learning practices allowed students to engage with activities at multiple levels that had qualitatively different thresholds of entry. Oscillating between these frames of involvement gave these 8–10th graders, many of whom had social diagnoses like Asperger's syndrome and ADHD, never before experienced opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation in school practices. While many special education programs respect students' own competences and social comfort zones in a similar manner, few examples exist where challenged and "normal" kids come together around schoolwork in a comparable manner. Although isolating the causal effects of individual game elements is complicated,[81] the school as a whole has seen impressive results in terms of both inclusion and achievement on national tests.[82] These results, however, have yet to be supported via a direct link to achievement outcomes, which can be a very tricky business. Instead, they were documented with ethnography and surveys on motivational dimensions. DeRenard and Kline did document cultural estrangement among players as measured in their relatedness to mainstream media content. Such outward marginalization is commonly observed as players group together around their "weird" hobby and its accompanying identity, keeping outsiders on the outside.[83] Thus, some effects perceived and postulated by "non-players"[84] may reflect meetings with subcultural markers and social identity boundaries, rather than signs of psychological or psychiatric distress.

In conclusion, when one reads the research, it is hard to find something that definitively sets role-playing apart from other cultural communities and activities in terms of psychological effects. The hard claims must be viewed as completely unfounded in scientific data, while softer claims about social, cognitive, and psychological relationships find support in some studies, but not in others. Readers will be hard pressed to identify any clear evidence of generalizable causality in this small but diverse pool of correlational and case-based studies, full of individual, social, and cultural complexities.

Drawing Psychological Conjectures

Each study in the research should be allowed to stand for itself. It is very hard to draw precise conclusions across such a mix of methods and populations, even if they attempt to address roughly the same constructs, especially when too few quantitative results are available for a meta-analysis.[85] However, we may attempt to gather some of the threads. In light of our general knowledge from academic psychology, does the data support the notion that RPGs can be used as social, clinical, or educational tools? Or weaponized for Satan?

Looking at the data, but mostly extrapolating from the broader history of psychological research, yes, it is possible in the realm of known cognitive and social mechanisms for fantasy role-playing activities to influence players. But not to the extent that the anxiety discourses would like to claim.

An overwhelming number of studies have, for instance, found a clear relationship between exposure to violent video games with antisocial thoughts, feelings, and conduct, but never at a criminal behavioral level or at a level measurable by instruments intended for clinical screening and psychiatric diagnosis.[86] RPGs are immersive and time consuming, and the deeper we engage, the richer the participant culture, and the more hours we spend on task, the greater the chance that something will rub off. Contrary to traditional broadcast media theory, recent studies of influence also demonstrate that getting people to act is a much stronger way to influence attitudes and motivations than trying to spur action via static messages, lending credence to special properties for RPGs and other games.[87] John Hattie's massive meta-analysis of learning effects has, however, shown us that all school interventions seem to work just a little bit.[88] The question, then, is not if an activity like fantasy role-playing can affect one cognitively, socially, and identity-wise, but how much compared to other activities, such as reading fantasy books, playing Xbox, or being part of the Boy Scouts.

We therefore expect that many of the changes seen in young people engrossed in *D&D* or Nordic LARP come from a mixture of game-play, the cultural influences coming from the fandom surrounding the games, and the rapid transformations any teen goes through, rather than from the fantasy gaming activity in itself. Changes in adolescent children can be highly distressing and alienating to any parent[89] and often lead to conflicts that are experienced as more profound by caregivers than by the teen herself.[90] This conjecture is supported by the many studies referenced above where self-perceptions within the fandom were stronger than actual differences between players and the public at large. Only at very deep levels of engagement in terms of time, money, and removal from other points of cultural contact did this balance seem to shift.

If role-playing allows people to act, then influence effects are potentially strong, but only if this does not clash too directly with existing attitudes and identity features. Humans (as well as animals) are apt at telling play-acting from serious acting, and when the lines blur, situational factors outside from the game impose strong influences on us. Frames and situations matter. Indeed, acting within the magic circle or play frame should shield players from most feelings of cognitive dissonance and from acting in ways that would normally contradict their everyday self-image.[91]

Statistically, it would be inconceivable that no role-players would fall into teen depression, manifest psychoses, or slip in with the criminal element. With role-playing as a significant part of young people's lives, it is also unlikely that cases cannot not be found where the game has somehow influenced, for example, the content and valence of psychosis. But the data does not suggest that this is more statistically likely than with any other activity or culture from aggressive male sports brotherhoods to the scouts or debate club. In a way, this vindicates some of the anxiety discourse, even if it does not legitimize disproportionate generalizations. Even though based on statistical fallacy, some of the cases that brought parents, anti-cult crusaders, and religious minorities in the door may have been quite real.

Discussion

The 1980s anxiety discourses may sound like something out of an early-evening crime show. The chaos and grief surrounding investigations into tragedies like teen suicide or autoerotic asphyxiation gone wrong reveal that next of kin are willing to entertain even quite outlandish alternative explanations.[92] This holds especially true in religious communities where salvation is a factor in everyday life. Psychologically speaking, explanations adding outside agency are among the most common patterns of counterfactual reasoning,[93] which serves to alleviate the basic psychological dissonance that arises from having overlooked signs of serious mental distress in teenage children. Indeed, the informational role of cognitive authorities like religious leaders or mental health professionals is enhanced significantly in times of uncertainty or emotional distress.[94] As such, it may come as no surprise that the hard claims of the anxiety discourse do not seem well-supported by the empirical evidence available after forty years, but role-players should by no means feel that this allows them to reverse the discourse and continually propagate new, unfounded claims about how role-playing will save education and clinical practice.

While there is quite a bit of evidence available to support the softer notions that role-playing builds social skills and problem-solving capacities, in addition to central non-cognitive factors like self-efficacy, the literature is fairly sparse. It is apparent that many of the available sources, even if they have been through peer review or graduate school evaluation, are slanted in favor of the role-playing phenomenon in general. As such, we are dealing with a fairly small, diverse, and possibly biased literature sample. In the big picture, the evidence is largely unconvincing that role-playing should be any more or less psychologically effective than other activities that engender deep intellectual and active immersion in a subject within a community of practice.

There are several plausible reasons for this. Researchers may have generally been uninterested in publishing on the relatively marginal phenomenon that is fantasy RPGs, and even discouraged at a time when *D&D* was the stuff of daytime talk-shows. Later digital gaming was, comparatively, on a meteoric rise. Further, "uninteresting" null-findings may not have made it into peer-reviewed journals, which is why this essay has also included more graduate school papers than a review of psychological data would normally call for.

So, in light of both the cultural history and available data, what is needed now? We could take a look at the spirit of the times and decide what psychological claims still merit investigation and which can be safely left in the dark ages when Satanic scares and anti-cult sentiments were sweeping the Western world. For instance, some of the investigations referenced here bear replication in other times and contexts, as we have yet to see any studies convincingly mapping long term effects of role-playing outside the gaming context. The post-millennial child and youth role-playing culture, for instance, represents an opportunity to test claims of social and psychological benefits that currently draw parents and funding bodies to RPGs and LARPs.

It may sound like we do not recognize all the theoretical pieces and more descriptive studies published over the past 15–20 years. "Why so draconian about data?" one may ask. Well, first of all, while theoretical ideas and educational approaches have been reviewed at some length by, for example, Bowman[95] and Simkins,[96] no one has gone through the considerable trouble of digging out the available evidence of *effects* specific to RPGs before. Secondly, we found it more interesting to hold a mirror of evidence up to the original 1980s studies, rather than trying to counter with more theory. It is a central tenet of the scientific method that the prevailing theory should be the one that fits the available data best, and for that to be possible, the data must be made readily and visibly available. In addition to telling the story of how people have viewed the potential psychological effects of fantasy role-playing throughout the hobby's forty years of existence, that is what we have tried to accomplish here.

Conclusions

In light of the evidence available from psychological research, hard causal claims linking RPGs to violence, psychological distress, clinical diagnoses, or suicide can generally be put to rest. Soft claims about psychological and social effects—good or bad—are more varied, and thus subject to mixed conclusions. Influences on identity, problem solving, and self-efficacy are definitely within the realm of possibility and have been widely documented, but it is difficult to disentangle the influence of the fantasy RPG itself from the wider context of play, including social game groups, the fandom, and game masters' purposes like therapeutic applications of *D&D*. It is still an open question if anything sets the role-playing hobby and its participants truly apart from any number of comparable group activities, such as pro wrestling, online gaming, or religious worship. The answer to the questions discussed herein will not be found by further theorizing or proselytization, but may be realized with time by ensuring that a solid base of empirical data, ideally spread between quantitative and qualitative modes of documentation, is garnered whenever strong hypotheses and predictions are put on the metaphorical table—along with polyhedrons and character sheets.

NOTES

1. Jack Chick, *Dark Dungeons* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1984); Joan Hake Robie, *The Truth About Dungeons & Dragons* (Lancaster, PA: Starburst, 1991);

Patricia Pulling, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989).

2. Shannon Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons* (Swindon, UK: Mongoose Publishing, 2011); 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).

3. Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (London: New York University Press, 2003).

4. Anson Shupe and Susan E. Darnell, *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science, and the American Anticult Movement*, Religion and Society (London: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

5. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Educational Live Action Role-Playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (Wyrd Con 5: May 22–26, 2014, in Los Angeles, California: Published by Wyrd Con under Creative Commons License, 2014), 112–131; David Simkins, *The Arts of LARP: Design, Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015).

6. Several sources underline this tendency, for example: Jonas Yde Højgaard and Andreas Lieberoth, "Psychological Effects of Fantasy Role-Playing: A Structured Review of the Empirical Evidence," (forthcoming); Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Sandiford, "Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study," *International Journal of Role Playing* 5, no. 1 (2015): online; Lisa Gjedde, "Role Game Playing as a Platform for Creative and Collaborative Learning In *Proceedings of The 7th European Conference on Games Based Learning, ECGBL 2013* (Porto: Instituto Superior de Engenharia Do Porto [ISEP], 2014), 190–197; Gregory Brooks Smith, "The Correlation Between General and Social Self-Efficacy and Participation in Fantasy Roleplaying Games" (Ph.D. diss., Walden University, 2013); John Hughes, "Therapy Is Fantasy: Roleplaying, Healing and the Construction of Symbolic Order," in Anthropology IV Honours, Medical Anthropology Seminar, Dr. Margo Lyon, Dept. of Prehistory & Anthropology (Australian National University, 1988); Cason Snow, "Dragons in the Stacks: An Introduction to Role-Playing Games and Their Value to Libraries." *Collection Building* 27, no. 2 (April 18, 2008): 63–70; Anissa Rivers, "Empathic Aspects of Absorption and Fantasy Proneness in Fantasy Role Players" (Ph.D. diss., The Adler School of Professional Psychology, 2006); Julien G. Rosselet and Sarah D. Stauffer, "Using Group Role-Playing Games with Gifted Children and Adolescents: A Psychosocial Intervention Model," *International Journal of Play Therapy* 22, no. 4 (2013): 173–192; Heather Lee Shay, "I Am My Character: Role-Playing Games as Identity Work," (Ph.D. diss., North Carolina State University, 2013); George Enfield, "Becoming the Hero: The Use of Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy," in *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin, 1st ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 2006), 227–241; Andreas Lieberoth, "Are You the Daddy? Comparing Fantasy Play in Children and Adults Through Vivian Gussin Paley's A Child's Work," in *Playground Worlds: Research & Theory*, ed. Markus Montola and Jakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropeconry, 2008), 206–215.

7. For a definition, see Paul Tough *How Children Succeed* (London: Random House, 2013).

8. Robie.

9. Chick.

10. Pulling, 81.

11. *Ibid.*, 87.

12. *Ibid.*, 77, 84, 90, 97.
13. *Ibid.*, 83.
14. *Ibid.*, 84.
15. *Ibid.*, 45.
16. *Ibid.*, 45 ff.
17. Stearns.
18. Stearns; Steven Salerno, *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2005).
19. Shupe and Darnell.
20. Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin and Robert B. Cialdini, *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion* (London: Profile, 2007).
21. Eric J. Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games—Dungeons, Dragons and Adventures in Fantasy Gaming* (London: Arms and Armor Press, 1981).
22. *Ibid.*, 204.
23. *Ibid.*, 207.
24. *Ibid.*, 210.
25. *Ibid.*, 206.
26. *Ibid.*, 210.
27. For example, Moreno and Moreno; Shaw; and Spence; Carson, and Thibaut.
28. Holmes, 204.
29. *Ibid.*, 207.
30. *Ibid.*, 211.
31. Stearns.
32. Uri Gneezy and John A. List, *The Why Axis, Hidden Motives and Undiscovered Economics of Everyday Life* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); Daniel Kahneman, "A Perspective on Judgment and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality," *The American Psychologist* 58, no. 9 (2003): 697–720.
33. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Gary Alan Fine and Jeffrey Victor, "Satanic Tourism: Adolescent Dabblers and Identity Work," *Phi Delta Kappan* 76, no. 1 (1994): 70–7; John F. Denman, "Misfit Dragons: The Psycho-Social Implications of Fantasy Role-Playing Games" (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988).
34. Holmes.
35. Højgaard and Lieberoth.
36. Fine, *Shared Fantasy.*
37. Bowman, "Role-Playing: An Enthnographic Exploration."
38. Andreas Lieberoth, Kaare Bo Wellnitz, and Jesper Aagaard, "Sex, Violence and Learning: Doing Effect Assessment for Games," in *Game Research Methods: An Overview*, ed. Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2015), 175–192; Douglas A. Gentile, "Media Violence and Public Policy: Cutting Through the Hype," *Pediatrics and Parents* 25/7, no. 8 (2009): 20–23; Douglas A. Gentile, Muniba Saleem, and Craig A. Anderson, "Public Policy and the Effects of Media Violence on Children," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (December 7, 2007): 15–61.
39. Carl Popper, "Conjectures and Refutations," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, edited by Theodor Schick (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1963), 9–13.
40. Robert Carter and David Lester, "Personalities of Players of Dungeons and Dragons," *Psychological Reports* 82, no. 1 (1998): 182; Andreas Lieberoth and Andreas Roepstorff. "Mixed Methods in Games Research: Playing on Strengths and Countering

Weaknesses," in *Game Research Methods: An Overview*, ed. Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk. (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2015), 271–290.

41. Lewis Wolpert, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast—The Evolutionary Origins of Belief* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006).

42. *Ibid.*, 13.

43. Carter.

44. Lisa A. DeRenard and Linda Mannik Kline, "Alienation and the Game Dungeons and Dragons," *Psychological Reports* 66, no. 3 Pt. 2 (1990): 1219–1222.

45. David Pezzeca, "Depression, Social Isolation and Fantasy Role-Playing Game Use Among Young Adults: Comparing Tabletop to Videogame Formats" (Ph.D. diss., Chestnut Hill College, 2009).

46. See for example, Hughes, Rosslet, Shay, and Shanun Almog, "TTRI: A Phenomenological Research Project Using a New Role-Play Intervention" (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2011); Luis H. Zayas and Bradford H. Lewis. "Fantasy Role-Playing for Mutual Aid in Children's Groups: A Case Illustration," *Social Work with Groups* 9, no. 1 (1986): 53–66.

47. Albert Bandura, Concetta Pastorelli, Claudio Barbaranelli, and Gian Vittorio Caprara, "Self-Efficacy Pathways to Childhood Depression," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 258–269; Peter Muris, "Relationships Between Self-Efficacy and Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders and Depression in a Normal Adolescent Sample," *Personality and Individual Differences* 32 (2002): 337–348.

48. Zayas.

49. Hughes.

50. Hughes; Enfield; Almog; Zayas; Wayne. D. Blackmon, "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 48, no. 4 (1994): 624–632.

51. Enfield, 227–241.

52. Blackmon; Lee I. Ascherman. "The Impact of Unstructured Games of Fantasy and Role Playing on an Inpatient Unit for Adolescents," *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 43, no. 3 (1993): 335–344.

53. Hughes and Blackmon.

54. Denman.

55. David L. Sackett, William M. C. Rosenberg, J. A. Muir Gray, R. Bryan Haynes, and W. Scott Richardson, "Evidence Based Medicine: What It Is and What It Isn't." *The BMJ* 312 (1996): 71–72.

56. Denman.

57. Shay.

58. James Steven Martin, "Epic Glory: Nerd Identity, Manhood Acts, & Dagorhir at a Northeastern College Campus" (M.A. thesis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2013).

59. See Carter; James L. Carroll and Paul M Carolin, "Relationship Between Game Playing and Personality," *Psychological Reports* 64 (1989): 705–706; Armando Simón, "Emotional Stability Pertaining to the Game Vampire: The Masquerade," *Psychological Reports* 83 (1998): 732–734 and "Emotional Stability Pertaining to the Game of Dungeons & Dragons," *Psychology in the Schools* 24, no. 4 (1987): 329–332; Suzanne Abyeta and James Forest, "Relationship of Role-Playing Games to Self-Reported Criminal Behaviour," *Psychological Reports* 69, no. 3f (1991): 1187–1192; Stuart M. Leeds, "Personality, Belief in the Paranormal, and Involvement with Satanic Practices Among Young Adult Males: Dabblers Versus Gamers," *Cultic Studies Journal* 12, no. 2 (1995): 148–165; Gary T. Rosenthal, Barlow Soper, Earl J. Folse, and Gary J. Whipple. "Role-

Play Gamers and National Guardsmen Compared," *Psychological Reports* 82 (1998): 169–170; Neil A. Douse and I. C. McManus, "The Personality of Fantasy Game Players," *British Journal of Psychology* 84 (1993): 505–509.

60. Leeds, 148–165.

61. Abyeta.

62. David Louis Wilson, "An Exploratory Study on the Players of Dungeons and Dragons" (Ph.D. diss., Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California, 2007).

63. See Denman and Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-Perceived Effects of the Role-Playing Hobby on Personal Development: A Survey Report," *International Journal of Role Playing* no. 3 (2011): 49–68.

64. Smith.

65. Pulling; Holmes.

66. Barnett; Douse; Simón.

67. Denman; Meriläinen; Wilson.

68. See Shay; Bowman, "Role-Playing…"; Michael L. Kallam, "The Effects of Simulation Game Play upon Oral Language Development and Internalization of Locus of Control Among Mildly Handicapped Adolescents" (M.A. thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1984).

69. Zayas.

70. For example, Kallam; Hughes; Enfield.

71. Matthew M. White, "Level 10 Human Student: The Effects of Non-Curricular Role-Playing Game Use on Academic Achievement and Self-Efficacy" (M.A. thesis, The University of New Brunswick, 2008).

72. Denman.

73. Almog; Zayas.

74. Meriläinen.

75. Douse.

76. Huhges; Rosslet; Almog; Zayas.

77. Bowman, "Role-Playing…"; Meriläinen.

78. Rosslet; Enfield.

79. Christopher J. Dyszelski, "Encounters at the Imaginal Crossroads: An Exploration of the Experiences of Women in Role-Playing Games" (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 2006).

80. Douse.

81. Lieberoth, "Are You the Daddy?"

82. Gjedde.

83. For example, Denman; Ascherman; Fleischer.

84. Holmes.

85. Lieberoth, "Sex, Violence and Learning"; Sackett.

86. Gentile, "Violent Video Game Effects…"; C. J. Ferguson et al., "Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation?," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 3 (March 1, 2008): 311–332; Tobias Greitemeyer and Dirk O Mügge, "Video Games Do Affect Social Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Effects of Violent and Prosocial Video Game Play," *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* (January 23, 2014): online.

87. Adam Ferrier, *The Advertising Effect: How to Change Behaviour* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand, 2014); Robert B. Cialdini, "What's the Best Secret Device for Engaging Student Interest? The Answer Is in the Title," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2005): 22–29.

88. John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

89. Stearns.

90. Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013).

91. Lieberoth, "Are You the Daddy," 73; Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Sebastian Deterding, "The Game Frame: Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory," in *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* (Proceedings of DiGRA 2009); Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Sergio M. Pellis and Vivien C. Pellis, "On Knowing It's Only Play: The Role of Play Signals in Play Fighting," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (1996); J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth, "Similarity of Social Information Processes in Games and Rituals: Magical Interfaces," *Simulation & Gaming* 43, no. 4 (2011): 528–549.

92. Roy Hazelwood, *Dark Dreams: A Legendary FBI Profiler Examines Homicide and the Criminal Mind* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2002).

93. Ruth M. J. Byrne and Vittorio Gitotto, "Cognitive Processes in Counterfactual Thinking," in *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, edited by K. Markman, W. Klein, and J. Suhr (Hove: Psychology Press, 2009), 151–160.

94. Harviainen and Lieberoth, 2011.

95. Bowman, "Educational Live Action Role-Playing Games…," 112–131.

96. Simkins.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abyeta, Suzanne, and James Forest. "Relationship of Role-Playing Games to Self-Reported Criminal Behaviour". *Psychological Reports* 69, no. 3f (1991): 1187–1192.

Almog, Shanun. "TTRI: A Phenomenological Research Project Using a New Role-Play Intervention." Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2011.

Appelcline, Shannon. *Designers and Dragons*. Swindon, UK: Mongoose Publishing, 2011.

Ascherman, Lee I. "The Impact of Unstructured Games of Fantasy and Role Playing on an Inpatient Unit for Adolescents." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 43, no. 3 (1993): 335 344.

Bandura, Albert, Concetta Pastorelli, Claudio Barbaranelli and Gian Vittorio Caprara. "Self-Efficacy Pathways to Childhood Depression." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 258–269.

Barnett, Robert Charles. "Fantasy Role Players: Imagination, Dissociation and Suggestibility." M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1995.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Blackmon, Wayne D. "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult." *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 48, no. 4 (1994): 624–632.

Bloom, Paul, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil.* New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. "Educational Live Action Role-Playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review." In *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah

Lynne Bowman. Wyrd Con 5: May 22–26, 2014, in Los Angeles, California: Published by Wyrd Con under Creative Commons License, 2014, 112–131.

_____. "Role-Playing: An Ethnographic Exploration." Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2008.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne, and Anne Sandiford. "Educational LARP in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study." *International Journal of Role Playing* 5, no. 1 (2015): online.

Byrne, Ruth M., and Vittorio Girotto. "Cognitive Processes in Counterfactual Thinking." In *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, edited by K. Markman, W. Klein, and J. Suhr. Hove: Psychology Press, 2009, 151–160.

Carroll, James L. and Paul M. Carolin. "Relationship Between Game Playing and Personality." *Psychological Reports* 64 (1989): 705–706.

Carter, Robert, and David Lester. "Personalities of Players of Dungeons and Dragons." *Psychological Reports* 82, no. 1 (1998): 182.

Chick, Jack. *Dark Dungeons*. Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1984.

Cialdini, Robert B. "What's the Best Secret Device for Engaging Student Interest? The Answer Is in the Title." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2005): 22–29.

Denman, John F. "Misfit Dragons: The Psycho-Social Implications of Fantasy Role-Playing Games." M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988.

DeRenard, Lisa A., and Linda Mannik Kline. "Alienation and the Game Dungeons and Dragons." *Psychological Reports* 66, no. 3, Pt 2 (1990): 1219–1222.

Deterding, Sebastian. "The Game Frame: Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory." In *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, 2009.

Douse, Neil A., and I. C. McManus. "The Personality of Fantasy Game Players." *British Journal of Psychology* 84 (1993): 505–509.

Dyszelski, Christopher J. "Encounters at the Imaginal Crossroads: An Exploration of the Experiences of Women in Role-Playing Games." Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 2006.

Enfield, George. "Becoming the Hero: The Use of Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy." In *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, edited by Lawrence C. Rubin. 1st ed. New York: Springer Publishing Co., 2006, 227–241.

Ferguson, Christopher J., Stephanie M. Rueda, Amanda M. Cruz, Diana E. Ferguson, Stacey Fritz, and Shawn M. Smith. "Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation?" *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 35, no. 3 (March 1, 2008): 311–332.

Ferrier, Adam, *The Advertising Effect: How to Change Behaviour*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand, 2014.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Fine, Gary Alan, and Jeffrey Victor. "Satanic Tourism: Adolescent Dabblers and Identity Work." *Phi Delta Kappan* 76, no. 1 (1994): 70–72.

Fleischer, Stephanie K. "Playing with Identity Literacy, Discourse, and Identity in Role-Playing Gaming." Ph.D. diss., University of Louisville, 2007.

Gentile, D. A., and W. Stone. "Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents—a Review of the Literature." *Minerva Pediatrica* 57, no. 57 (2005): 337–358.

Gentile, Douglas A. "Media Violence and Public Policy: Cutting Through the Hype." *Pediatrics and Parents* 25/7, 8 (2009): 20–23.

Gentile, Douglas A., Muniba Saleem, and Craig A. Anderson. "Public Policy and the

Effects of Media Violence on Children." *Social Issues and Policy Review* 1, no. 1 (December 7, 2007): 15–61.

Gjedde, Lisa, "Role Game Playing as a Platform for Creative and Collaborative Learning." In *Proceedings of The 7th European Conference on Games Based Learning—ECGBL* 201.3 Porto: Instituto Superior de Engenharia Do Porto (ISEP), 2014, 190–197.

Gneezy, Uri, and John List. *The Why Axis. Hidden Motives and Undiscovered Economics of Everyday Life*. New York PublicAffairs, 2013.

Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Goldstein, Noah J., Steve J. Martin and Robert B. Cialdini. *Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion*. London: Profile, 2007.

Greitemeyer, Tobias, and Dirk O Mügge. "Video Games Do Affect Social Outcomes: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Effects of Violent and Prosocial Video Game Play." *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* (January 23, 2014): online.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas, and Andreas Lieberoth. "Similarity of Social Information Processes in Games and Rituals: Magical Interfaces." *Simulation & Gaming* 43, no. 4 (2011): 528–549.

Hattie, John. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2008.

Hazelwood, Roy. *Dark Dreams: A Legendary FBI Profiler Examines Homicide and the Criminal Mind*. New York: St. Martins Press, 2002.

Højgaard, Jonas Yde, and Andreas Lieberoth. "Psychological Effects of Fantasy Role-Playing: A Structured Review of the Empirical Evidence" (forthcoming).

Holmes, Eric J., *Fantasy Role Playing Games—Dungeons, Dragons and Adventures in Fantasy Gaming*. London: Arms and Armor Press, 1981.

Hughes, John. "Therapy Is Fantasy: Roleplaying, Healing and the Construction of Symbolic Order." In *Paper Presented in Anthropology IV Honours, Medical Anthropology Seminar, Dr. Margo Lyon, Dept. of Prehistory & Anthropology.* Australian National University, 1988.

Kahneman, Daniel. "A Perspective on Judgment and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality." *The American Psychologist* 58, no. 9 (2003): 697–720.

Kallam, Micheal L. "The Effects of Simulation Game Play upon Oral Language Development and Internalization of Locus of Control Among Mildly Handicapped Adolescents." M.A. thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1984.

Leeds, Stuart M. "Personality, Belief in the Paranormal, and Involvement with Satanic Practices Among Young Adult Males: Dabblers Versus Gamers." *Cultic Studies Journal* 12, no. 2 (1995): 148–165.

Lieberoth, Andreas. "Are You the Daddy? Comparing Fantasy Play in Children and Adults Through Vivian Gussin Paley's A Child's Work." In *Playground Worlds: Research & Theory*, edited by Markus Montola and Jakko Stenros, 206–215. Helsinki, Finland: Ropeconry, 2008.

_____. "Shallow Gamification: Psychological Effects of Framing an Activity as a Game." *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2015): 249–268.

Lieberoth, Andreas, and Andreas Roepstorff. "Mixed Methods in Games Research: Playing on Strengths and Countering Weaknesses." In *Game Research Methods: An Overview*, edited by Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2015, 271–290.

Lieberoth, Andreas, Kaare Bo Wellnitz, and Jesper Aagaard. "Sex, Violence and Learning: Doing Effect Assessment for Games." In *Game Research Methods: An Over -*

view, edited by Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2015, 175–192.

James Steven Martin. "Epic Glory: Nerd Identity, Manhood Acts, and Dagorhir at a Northeastern College Campus." M.A. thesis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2013.

Meriläinen, Mikko. "The Self-Perceived Effects of the Role-Playing Hobby on Personal Development: A Survey Report." *International Journal of Role Playing* no. 3 (2011): 49–68.

Moreno, J. L., and Z. T. Moreno. *Psychodrama*. Kansas City: Beacon House, 1959.

Muris, Peter. "Relationships Between Self-Efficacy and Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders and Depression in a Normal Adolescent Sample." *Personality and Individual Differences* 32 (2002): 337–348.

Pellis, Sergio M., and Vivien C. Pellis. "On Knowing It's Only Play: The Role of Play Signals in Play Fighting." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (1996).

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

Pezzeca, David. "Depression, Social Isolation and Fantasy Role-Playing Game Use Among Young Adults: Comparing Tabletop to Videogame Formats." Ph.D. diss., Chestnut Hill College, 2009.

Popper, Carl. "Conjectures and Refutations." In *Readings in the Philosphy of Science*, edited by Theodor Schick, 9–13. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1963.

Pulling, Patricia. *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Children for Satan?* Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1989.

Rivers, Anissa. "Empathic Aspects of Absorption and Fantasy Proneness in Fantasy Role Players." Ph.D. diss., The Adler School of Professional Psychology, 2006.

Robie, Joan Hake. *The Truth about Dungeons & Dragons*. Lancaster, UK: Starburst, 1991.

Rosenthal, Gary T., Barlow Soper, Earl J. Folse, and Gary J. Whipple. "Role-Play Gamers and National Guardsmen Compared." *Psychological Reports* 82 (1998): 169–170.

Rosselet, Julien G., and Sarah D. Stauffer. "Using Group Role-Playing Games with Gifted Children and Adolescents: A Psychosocial Intervention Model." *International Journal of Play Therapy* 22, no. 4 (2013): 173–192.

Sackett, David L., William M. C. Rosenberg, J. A. Muir Gray, R. Bryan Haynes, and W. Scott Richardson. "Evidence Based Medicine: What It Is and What It Isn't." *The BMJ* 312 (1996): 71–72.

Salerno, Steven. *Sham: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2005.

Shaw, Malclolm E., and Raymond J. Corsini. *Role Playing, a Practical Manual for Group Facilitators*. Highland, CA: University Associates, 1980.

Shay, Heather Lee. "I Am My Character: Role-Playing Games as Identity Work." Ph.D. diss., North Carolina State University, 2013.

Shupe, Anson, and Susan E. Darnell. *Agents of Discord: Deprogramming, Pseudo-Science, and the American Anticult Movement*. Religion and Society. London: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

Simkins, David. *The Arts of LARP: Design, Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015.

Simón, Armando. "Emotional Stability Pertaining to the Game of Dungeons & Dragons." *Psychology in the Schools* 24, no. 4 (1987): 329–332.

_____. “Emotional Stability Pertaining to the Game Vampire: The Masquerade.” *Psychological Reports* 83 (1998): 732–734.

Smith, Gregory Brooks. “The Correlation Between General and Social Self-Efficacy and Participation in Fantasy Roleplaying Games.” Ph.D. diss., Walden University, 2013.

Snow, Cason. “Dragons in the Stacks: An Introduction to Role-Playing Games and Their Value to Libraries.” *Collection Building* 27, no. 2 (April 18, 2008): 63–70.

Spence, Janet T., Robert C. Carson, and John W. Thibaut. *Behavioral Approaches to Therapy*. New York: General Learning Press, 1976.

Stearns, Peter N. *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*. London: New York University Press, 2003.

Tough, Paul. *How Children Succeed*. London: Random House, 2013.

White, Matthew M. “Level 10 Human Student: The Effects of Non-Curricular Role-Playing Game Use on Academic Achievement and Self-Efficacy.” M.A. thesis, The University of New Brunswick, 2008.

Wilson, David Louis. “An Exploratory Study on the Players of Dungeons and Dragons.” Ph.D. diss., Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA, 2007.

Wolpert, Lewis. *Six Impossible Things before Breakfast—The Evolutionary Origins of Belief*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.

Zalka, Csenge V. “Adventures in the Classroom Creating Role-Playing Games Based on Traditional Stories for the High School Curriculum.” M.A., East Tennessee State University, 2012.

Zayas, Luis H., and Bradford H. Lewis. “Fantasy Role-Playing for Mutual Aid in Children’s Groups: A Case Illustration.” *Social Work with Groups* 9, no. 1 (1986): 53–66.

Building the Culture of Contingency

Adaptive Choice in Ludic Literature from Role-Playing Games to Choose Your Own Adventure *Books*

TIM BRYANT

Introduction

The nuclear arms race during the Cold War inspired in the U.S. cultural imaginary the circulation of various contingency plans for nuclear war and its aftermath. In 1983, Ronald Reagan famously proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), nicknamed "Star Wars," a fantastical nuclear deterrent in space imagined to be capable of shooting Soviet ICBMs out of the sky before they reached American shores. In the decades prior to Reagan's quixotic panacea for nuclear annihilation, the federal government published countless pamphlets, film reels, and filmstrips to educate the citizenry on preventive measures for inevitable nuclear war. In government think tanks and universities, game theory supplemented the discipline of military history by offering new ways of plotting probabilities in political and economic systems, including those attached to the likelihood of nuclear war. Popular television shows and movies did their part to rivet citizens' attention to fearful projections of nuclear attack and its aftermath. Television mini-series *Testament* (1983) and *The Day After* (1983) depicted the human costs of nuclear war, while the Hollywood blockbuster *WarGames* (1983) portrayed the previous model of nuclear deterrence, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), as an ever re-playable, but ultimately unwinnable game of tic-tac-toe. The Hollywood blockbuster *Red Dawn* (1984) accounted for another fantastical contingency, that of ground invasion of the United States by Communist Russia and Cuba spectacularly repulsed by gun-toting, freedom-fighting teenagers in the tradition of the American Revolution and in the imagery of countless arcade and video games. Catalyzed by anxious desires to project survival beyond the seemingly inevitable, but simultaneously unimaginable, realities of the nuclear age, notions of contingency leaked from the sociopolitical sphere to infuse all aspects of American culture, including the most imaginative forms of recreation and play.

Games of the Cold War era adopted the technologies and tropes of the nuclear age to invest in their players joined senses of contingency and agency. For example, Atari's supremely popular *Missile Command* (1980) home video game cast players in the role of defenders of Earth, shooting alien invaders' missiles out of the sky, much like Reagan's SDI proposed to do, before they could obliterate American cities.[1] Role-playing games (RPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) further expanded the imaginary relations available to American youth in search of a positive, even enjoyable part to play within the abstracted dynamics of war in the nuclear age by imagining warfare in simpler terms. In contrast to the impersonal technologies of the nuclear age, fantasy-themed games replaced threats of annihilation from a distance with intimate swordplay between combatants vying for survival blow-by-blow. Drawing upon similarly romanticized narratives of personal empowerment and coming-of-age themes, interactive fiction, commonly referred to as "choose-able path" game books after the original *Choose Your Own Adventure* (*CYOA*) series, afforded young readers a sense of control over their imagined fates in the twists and turns these books took based on individual reader choice at multiple decision points throughout their texts. The popular *CYOA* format quickly diversified in both theme, through numerous series from several publishers, and in mechanics, under the direct influence of RPGs' more combat-oriented play. In an era defined by the unpredictable contingencies of an always-threatened and potentially all-consuming war, RPGs forged more optimistic images of self-determination through playful engagement and adaptive choice.

In response to the uncertainties attached to nuclear war and the heightened sense of a generally contingent existence, the kind of choice that emerged in RPGs and game books during the last decades of the Cold War was a contextually sensitive, but not contextually over-determined one. It was an adaptive kind of choice, informed both by the conventional aspects of credibility and verisimilitude, and, to a significant degree, by readers' and players' own desires to shape the experience of narrative play. Where contingency plans popularized by governmental efforts and the entertainment industry may have given modest encouragement to citizens in offering them proactive steps to take in preparation for nuclear war, the RPGs and game books that emerged at this time distilled a comparable, more escapist form of contingency in adaptive choice: the investment of multiple, multifaceted avenues of decision-making in the reader or player before, during, and after the events of their imaginary worlds would unfold. With this investment in self-determination through adaptive choice, RPGs and *CYOA* books challenged the prevalent ethos in U.S. culture of nuclear fatalism by recasting its military tropes into the more manageable and malleable terms of gaming and play.

Adaptive choice—as an enhanced sense of individual-based determination over such details as the fabrication of narrative premises, means of conflict resolution, and the range of projected ends—challenged standard genre conventions of narrative literature and gameplay by instilling in their readers and players the conviction that they could change the rules of even the most unwinnable situations. It is no accident that adaptive choice arose in a recreational form at this time to satisfy a strong national need to recast contingency, not as a fatalistic determinant, but as liberating advantage. Specifically, these games align with the preparations offered by governmental documents (e.g., participation in civic defense initiatives and construction of fallout shelters) as a way of investing citizens with the power to influence their own fates and join their fates to that of the nation. Born during the first decades of the Cold War, the majority of the first tabletop RPG players in the U.S. were raised to take an active role in this joint investment. The evolution of wargaming culture into RPG culture is both historically and logically linked to the evolution of conventional warfare into nuclear contingency planning. Fueled by nuclear escalation between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., social investment in this more distant model of warfare increased exponentially during this era. The overriding trend in fantasy RPGs to make conflict more intimate was a supplemental countermove to support the new paradigm of nuclear citizenship, but also to recapture a passing cultural paradigm of personal participation. In other words, RPGs expressed a countercultural desire to find a new balance among individual choice, national identity, and conflict resolution in the nuclear age. Likewise, the consequent evolution of the *CYOA* format, as both interactive literature and narrative gaming, reflected a shift in the cultural imaginary toward the principle of adaptive choice that preserves the individual citizen as reader/player in a meaningful process of civic participation and playful decision-making in spite of, as well as because of, its place within contingent culture.

These imaginative engagements with contingency were preceded by over two decades worth of government documents published during the Cold War to give citizens a sense of choice in how to relate to the contingencies of the nuclear age. Innumerable instructional pamphlets, film reels, and film strips published by the U.S. government attempted to allay the citizenry's fearful anxieties about nuclear arms and the naturally concomitant desires to imagine ways of constraining their destructive potential. Chief among these documents was the widely-circulated pamphlet *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (1951), published jointly by the Executive Office of the President, National Security Resources Board, and Civil Defense Office to provide citizens with instructions on how to cope with various potential hazards associated with nuclear war and its aftermath. The pamphlet reads like a *CYOA* book, addressing readers in second-person imperatives and chunking information in one-page long sections, to invest them with tensely-joined senses of both overwhelming urgency and attainable agency. Opposite a brief letter, on the verso page, urging citizens to read the pamphlet, the main text reads, "You can SURVIVE[.] You can live through an atom bomb raid and you won't have to have a Geiger counter[,] protective clothing, or special training in order to do it. The secrets of survival are: KNOW THE BOMB'S TRUE DANGERS. KNOW THE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO ESCAPE THEM."[2] Starting with "What Are Your Chances?," the initial sections, each approximately one page long, attempt to defuse fears by minimizing the potential threats of Super Bombs, "the Blast," Burns, and Radioactivity.[3] Subsequent sections offer proactive instructions (e.g., "Don't rush outside right after a bombing" and "Don't start rumors") for improving chances of survival and maintaining civil order. The 32-page pamphlet concludes with a list of local organizations (fire departments, Red Cross, and Civil Defense Services) to enroll as auxiliary service providers and an image of "The National Civil Defense Pattern" depicting a series of concentric circles containing locations of civil defense readiness, with the American family in the epicenter and the Federal Government along the outer perimeter.[4]

Published ten years later, the pamphlet *Fallout Protection: What To Know And Do About Nuclear Attack* (1961) encouraged citizens' home-based preparations for nuclear assault by, chiefly, building fallout shelters and stocking them with imperishable goods, potable water, gas masks, and other necessities for long-term survival underground. Similar in form and address to the prior decade's pamphlet, *Fallout Protection* assures the individual citizen, starting with a letter from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and then a section earnestly entitled "What You Should Know and What You Should Do," that nuclear attack is "highly unlikely," but also warns that, just in case, the "need for preparation—for civil defense—is likely to be with us for a long time."[5] After a few pages of key terms and scientific facts minimizing the supposed effects of nuclear attack and radiation, the majority of the 48-page pamphlet is devoted to information and diagrams of fallout shelter designs, ending with a few pages on how citizens may seek more information about and become more involved in civil defense initiatives. Given the fearsome contingencies surrounding the prospect of nuclear war, it is no surprise that these preparation documents offer very specific, very comforting steps by which citizens might feel empowered to identify with their government and play an active part in its designs. Civil defense films like *Duck and Cover* (1952), which depicts the anthropomorphic turtle Bert saving himself from a dynamite-wielding monkey in the tree above him by withdrawing into his shell, offered similar assurances to adult and youth audiences about their vital role in making concrete preparations and, moreover, adopting appropriately credulous attitudes toward the federal government's survival tips amid the many contingencies of nuclear warfare.

Concurrent developments in academic studies further contributed to the emphasis on contingency. Game studies as an intellectual discipline evolved, first, from the early work of thinkers such as ethnographer Stewart Culin, sociologist Roger Caillois, and cultural historian Johan Huizinga, later to be reformulated and refined by university departments of mathematics, economics, and political science as projective systems capable of forecasting trends in their respective domains. In *Homo Ludens* [*Playing Man*] (1938), Huizinga argues for the fundamental role of play in human existence, even asserting that play categorically precedes culture as the fundamental context of human experience and meaning-making. Huizinga cites examples of play-like elements in all locations of culture, from observations of animal social behavior, correlated to human practices, to interpretation of the religious performance of sacred rituals as forms of play. Of Huizinga's theoretical apparatus, two of the terms that have survived in the literature of ludic culture are the "magic circle" and the "spoil-sport."[6] These terms offer some insight into the transference from the broader framework of contingency culture into the articulation of its concerns within gaming culture, as well as the equally important, responding transference of gaming cultural influences upon the broader culture.

On the one hand, there is the magic circle as the "play-ground" set apart by a group of players, joining together to imagine a mundane space as a place where the rules of play dictate interaction for a set time. Huizinga writes:

> Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[7]

On the other hand is the "spoil-sport," who "threatens the existence of the play community" by robbing it of its illusion, of the viability of its rule over imagination within the magic circle. Huizinga differentiates between this game-breaking spoil-sport and the cheat, who merely wishes to break or bend rules in order to succeed, while still acknowledging the validity of the imaginary agreement to play by the rules.

Huizinga's notion of the "magic circle" is useful for understanding the pervasive groupthink underwriting Cold War efforts to contain and relate to the unimaginable power of nuclear technologies to transform and potentially annihilate U.S. culture itself. Governmental publications and theoretical systems of probability worked together, on the one hand, to speak to the public as a body invested with the power of choice and, on the other hand, to invest in expert thinkers the supposed power to calculate what choices would fare best, given multiple contingencies projected and imagined. Given the seriousness of what was at stake, the notion of opting out, much less criticizing the overall venture, as a willful spoil-sport would in this situation give the appearance of choosing treason. These public efforts to cast public entities and private citizens in meaningful roles created a vast imaginary circle, hardly considered playful, but nevertheless putting into play a series of logics that embraced the entire nation, one centered on an event that must never come to pass if the culture and its cultural logics of contingency were to survive. It is within these cultural dynamics that early RPGs first formulated adaptive choice as a playful means of grappling with these contradictory impulses and, ultimately, of redefining the cultural relations so prescribed.

Premises

One of the dangers of personally adopting an effectively playful attitude toward the socio-political dynamics of Cold War citizenship was the ever-looming threat of being called out as insufficiently patriotic or, worse, a traitor. Originally formed in 1938 to uproot Nazi sympathizers, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) became a standing committee in 1945 and devoted its efforts in the subsequent years to investigations of supposed Communist subversives in Hollywood and the prosecution of Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy. Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations of Communist subversion during the 1950s, later called the second "Red Scare," became representative of the pervasive fear of Communism surrounding an entire generation, thus encouraged to demonstrate, by word and deed, its explicit investment in the inescapable narrative of U.S. patriotism. The climate of suspicion thus engendered would hardly seem the right environment in which to assume a playful attitude toward one's social role.

Role-playing games intervened in this climate of fear by relocating individual negotiations of social allegiance and purpose to the secure distance of fantastical realms. The first tabletop RPGs—including Tactical Studies Rules' *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) (1974), Flying Buffalo Incorporated's *Tunnels & Trolls* (*T&T*) (1975), and Game Designers' Workshop's *Traveller* (1977)—adapted several decision-making tropes of Cold War preparedness into fantastically-themed, character-based adventures. Narrative outcomes were negotiable through pre-designed character abilities, random rolls of dice, and ad-hoc arguments with supposedly neutral game "referees," also called Dungeon Masters, Game Masters, and similar names. The "role" in role-playing game signifies the departure of RPGs from wargaming in the individual player's focus, not on controlling an entire nation's military forces on a tabletop battlefield, but on filling the role of a single imaginary Player Character (PC), whose attributes may be based on literary precedents or completely fabricated by the player's imagination. Despite the seemingly limitless freedom such individualized self-creation might hold, tabletop RPGs continue to this day to show signs of their wargaming roots by frequently emphasizing combat and conflict in the common attributes emphasized for PCs and gameplay. Not a complete departure, then, from wargaming, tabletop RPGs represent a unique blend of strategic gameplay and world simulation, comparable to features of wargames, as well as an added emphasis on narrative storytelling based on characters, plots, and even whole worlds generated and enacted together by players and referees within the constraints of the game system. The first tabletop RPGs of the 1970s varied by genre and theme in how they executed these dynamics, but they shared many common attributes in negotiating between the arbitrary chance of contingent realities and investment in player agency and choice.

The PC is the primary point at which this negotiation between agency and contingency occurs. The PC originates in time during the process of character generation and in space on one or more loose pages commonly referred to as the character sheet, which records the particular details of a character from the point of generation, through its ongoing adventures, to its ultimate fate. Such details might include primary physical and mental abilities, unique skills, possessions, supernatural abilities like magic and psychic powers, and the like. Players' interactions with the imaginary world and its denizens are defined partially by the details on their character sheet, subject from the start to both player choice, which may tend toward self-empowerment, and constraints upon that choice via the "Rules As Written" (RAW), which tend toward some constructed sense of realistic, however imaginary, economy in order to give play significance through the limits of a "magic circle."

D&D, *T&T*, and *Traveller* vary somewhat in their processes of character generation and the contents of their character sheets, but nevertheless demonstrate many commonalities in how early RPGs negotiated choice and contingency. *D&D* was the first tabletop RPG and the precedents it set for character generation still persist. PCs are created via a multi-step process that often begins by rolling dice to generate ability scores for the character, such as Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, etc. Next, a player chooses a character class (fighter, magic-user, etc.) suitable to rolled scores, and a race (human, dwarf, elf, etc.). Other qualitative traits, like age and sex, and quantitative traits, like combat ratings, are generated based on these past rolls and choices. As a result, RPG players' choices are constrained by random chance, from which subsequent choices follow. Arbitrary factors are primary influences on the likelihood of PC survival. Thus, players are conditioned by RPG rules to prepare for imminent, arbitrary threats by managing arbitrary abilities, much like citizens equipped by civil defense literature to prepare for the contingencies of imminent nuclear assault.

T&T and *Traveller* vary slightly in kind, but retain many of the same processes and contents of TSR's game. Embracing the arbitrary nature of play more explicitly, *T&T* replaces the Wisdom ability of *D&D* with Luck. PCs of *Traveller*, in a futuristic science-fiction setting, possess more mundane abilities, such as Education and Social Standing, and acquire combat-oriented skills through a series of rolls meant to simulate their experience serving in various branches of the military. Where these fantasy-themed RPGs inspire adventures underground, thus transforming anxious desires for safety in nuclear fallout shelters, the science fiction RPG promises adventures in outer space through mastery of futuristic technology and strong identification with military sensibilities.

In contrast to the numerical specificity of PCs' abilities, the worlds of these early RPGs are intentionally open and loosely defined. *D&D*'s original setting of Greyhawk, *T&T*'s gradually developed Troll World, and *Traveller*'s Imperium each accumulated a world history, signal events and personae, and generic motifs—but overall the details of RPG worlds, in their original versions, remained purposefully contingent on the desires and actions of the PCs. Subsequent writers may have developed more constraining narratives, adding onto the original narratives, but RPG worlds remain intentionally open to and dependent on player choice. Where the arbitrary starting point of rolling dice during character generation may seem to deprive players of agency, choices during play remain open in order to engage players. The same is true across the line of the magic circle, as players reenter the normative, non-play space of civilian life, wherein they might seek similar opportunities to exercise abilities to plan and choose how they will participate in their worlds. On both sides of the magic circle, from within and from without, the sense of verisimilitude, of drama, or of another desirable effect, is contingent on players identifying their own narrative progress as the progress of other, wider social narratives.

Game books adhere to similar dynamics between player choice and the narrated world, and encourage similar traits of personal agency and deliberate action. Written in second-person and asking readers to decide the course of the narrative by flipping to appropriately numbered paragraphs, Bantam's original *CYOA* series (1979–1998) permitted readers to plot their own courses and, in individual reading experiences, to return surreptitiously to previous decision points and select other, more favorable courses of action. Enjoying incredible popularity, the series sold over 250 million copies of 185 titles during its twenty-year run, contemporaneous with the rise of tabletop RPGs in the U.S. Furthermore, RPGs provided the fundamental premise of this new literary format: personal engagement through adaptive choice under conditions of overriding contingency. Although superficially resembling novel-reading more than role-playing, game books would increasingly demonstrate their debt to RPGs by taking on even more of their gaming tropes related to combat resolution and character development.

Edward Packard's *The Cave of Time* (1979) was the first book in Bantam's original *CYOA* series.[8] As the title suggests, the book's premise invites the reader-as-character to enter a time-travel portal inside of a cave to adventure through different time periods and locations, ranging from encounters with prehistoric dinosaurs and medieval warriors to escape from the sinking Titanic and abduction by futuristic aliens. While the book allows some either/or choices along a fairly linear pathway, many of the reader's decisions result in suboptimal conclusions, even when apparently sensible choices are made. Packard explained his wishes for the series: "My intent was to try to make it like life as much as possible.… I didn't want it to be a random lottery but I didn't want it to be didactic so that if you always did the smart thing you always succeeded. I tried to balance it."[9] Packard so wished to plot *CYOA* causality, and the morality it would imply, between unrestrained power fantasies and absolutist moralizing, by balancing arbitrary contingencies with sustainable reader agency. In Packard's vision, narrative progress remains contingent on reader engagement, but that engagement does not necessarily dissipate contingency in overly facile "happy" endings—it only prolongs it until the final moment when a conclusion, any one of many possible conclusions, is reached. The pragmatism of such an approach is culturally appropriate in the context of possible "happy endings" to nuclear war. That is, Packard's deep investment in reader choice and simultaneous limitation of choice's impact reflects the Cold War mentality of dutiful action without surety of success.

Once "The End" of a *CYOA* book is reached at a terminating paragraph, the reader has the option to backtrack and retry another choice path. What Huizinga might call being a "spoil-sport" the writers of the *CYOA* line write into the text as part of its intended effect. Game books test the bounds of the magic circle by reducing the number in that circle, usually, to one lone reader. The social agreement not to cheat or not to dismiss the game outright is, in this peculiar fusion of novel-reading and solo-gaming, entirely up to the isolated reader. In these books, taking the role of the spoil-sport only ruins the game for oneself by paging through the book for beneficial outcomes, bookmarking one's progress at every step in order to backtrack at the first sign of failure, or even abandoning the game entirely by putting down the book. There is no social agreement beyond the self, so this role is almost impossible to envision in the context of game books. The cheater, however, is the role these books push all readers to play because of their combination of formal rules of decision-making and structural feature or replayability. The majority of these books contain a limited number of positive outcomes, often fairly outnumbered by a variety of bizarre and unfair negative conclusions. But the contingency of choice is implicit in the ability to read the book all the way through via pathways or any means at hand. Readers are so encouraged to reframe the rules, whatever those might be understood to be, in order to negotiate, to remain actively in negotiation with, an assumedly unwinnable situation like a book with no truly "happy" ending, or a war with no clear beginning or imaginable end. Where governmental publications exhorted a primarily adult audience to assume such a duty-bound sense of civic responsibility, *CYOA* books more subtly conditioned young readers for the contingencies of Cold War culture.

Conflict Resolution

The material ways in which such contingencies could impact approaches to conflict resolution are evidenced by U.S. decision-making during the Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. As a means of "containing" the spread of Communism in the western hemisphere, the failed U.S. invasion, defeated within three days by Cuban forces, was originally intended to prevent future conflict in such close proximity to U.S. shores. That unresolved attempt at containment led to the subsequent crisis in which President Kennedy contemplated a preemptive nuclear strike against the U.S.S.R. in retaliation for Khrushchev's and Castro's amassing of nuclear missiles in Cuba. This chain of causation illustrates the strategic approach to conflict resolution that RPGs would adopt from Cold War culture and adapt in more diverse ways. Emanating from the narrative premise of an ever-threating and encroaching enemy, means of conflict resolution would favor counter-intelligence, superior force, and preemptive strikes.

Some early RPGs and game books assumed explicit Cold War themes of espionage and spy-craft. In *CYOA* #6 *Your Code Name is Jonah* (1980) the reader assumes the role of secret agent "Jonah" assigned by the Special Intelligence Group to discover, before the KGB does, the reason whales are migrating near the coast of Deception Island. While the mission evokes ecologically friendly messages about protecting marine life, readers may ultimately discover that the underlying cause of the whales' unnatural migration is the presence of a top-secret nuclear submarine. This literally submerged subplot related to nuclear escalation during the Cold War is symptomatic of conflict, overall, in most of the era's game books and RPGs, which tended to further transpose those narratives to fantastical worlds and transform their politics into more imaginary projections of conflict. The effect of this projective distancing of Cold War realities was to allay anxieties about them and, subsequently, encourage firmer acceptance of their principles, now comfortably abstracted.

The earliest Cold War–themed RPG was *James Bond 007: Role-Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1983), published by Victory Games, a subsidiary of Avalon Hill, whose many wargames enjoyed continuing popularity long after Roberts' company was subsumed into Hasbro in 1998. Adventure scenarios for the *James Bond* RPG abound in explicit Cold War motifs derived from Ian Fleming's books and their film adaptations. Despite the majority tendency of games and game books not to reenact Cold War themes as explicitly as *Jonah* and *James Bond*, it is clear that the entire RPG field articulates the influence of this cultural moment. Without the Cold War and the all-encompassing cultural imaginary that transferred the state of war to a civilian state of imaginary engagement with imagined threats, it is doubtful that the modern RPG would have taken its particular form: a set of rules situating players in imaginary relations, frequently in the context of implied threats of violence, to face a great unknown that is central in defining its culture and the terms of power to overcome that great unknown. To put it another way, RPGs marked the cultural shift from traditional to nuclear warfare and responded to the social anxieties accompanying that shift by championing individual agency through adaptive choice in the face of the overwhelming logics of contingency.

While many RPGs and game books did not assume Cold War themes, their methods of resolving conflicts, often based on immediate threat to the individual PC, were still firmly grounded in the terms of adaptive choice and contingency. The success or failure of specific actions is determined by the roll of dice, modified in various ways by the attributes of PCs and NPCs (Non-Player Characters), as well as other situational factors, such as environment, to be determined by the referee. Not straying too far afield from their wargame roots, most early RPGs imagined conflict primarily as melee or ranged combat. To resolve such armed conflicts, the referee and players take turns declaring what actions their respective PCs and NPCs will take, roll dice to determine the results of the actions, and apply damage until one side wins by overcoming their opponents, causing them to flee, or similar all-or-nothing points at which conflict ends. Narrative complications like taking prisoners for questioning may occur, but the consequences of such actions develop in a looser narrative space outside of the framework of turn-taking and rolling for success according to specific protocols.

The general process of conflict resolution in *D&D* has remained essentially the same across numerous editions: roll a d20 to hit an opponent, apply damage if successful, and wait for your next turn while the other PCs and NPCs exchange blows. The simple goal is to reduce each enemy combatant's Hit Points to zero. *T&T* and *Traveller* offer similar rules for resolving combat and other threats. In both of these games, opposing sides roll six-sided dice to calculate attacks and damage, taking turns as in *D&D* until enemies are defeated in some fashion. Retreat is an option in most RPGs, but *T&T* codified the practice with the Speed ability, used for rolls when fleeing combat. This rule was especially appealing given *T&T*'s emphasis on solo play, wherein the survival of a lone PC may decide whether or not play continues. *Traveller* exchanges swordplay and wizardry for close-quarter brawls, laser-firefights, and starship battles. Furthermore, the game's space-faring PCs do not have the escalating Hit Points possessed by their fantasy counterparts. Combat is, consequently, quicker and deadlier. The game's futuristic themes and grittier combats may appeal to players wishing to more closely approximate the nuclear age's union of technological positivism and ruthless espionage.

All of these options empower player agency by giving meaningful choice in the face of the ever-present contingency of meeting an overwhelming force while seeking adventure in unknown terrain, the shared premise of dungeoneering and spacefaring adventures. Where that landscape is directly understood to be spatial, the *terra incognita* of these fabricated worlds, it could also be rightly taken as temporal, the unknown future reached via Cold War presumptions and attitudes. In this context, RPGs reenact and implicitly critique the range of choices available to the player cum citizen.

The preponderance of hostile environments uniquely defines early versions of *D&D* and *T&T*. The source of this environmental hostility is best summed up in one word: traps. Dungeons and tunnels abound in traps in early fantasy RPG modules. One of the most famous early *D&D* adventure modules, *Tomb of Horrors*, typically eliminated entire adventure parties with its traps, not its monsters. The creators of *T&T* went on to release a series of gaming supplements, *Grimtooth's Traps*, devoted exclusively to such devices that could wipe out PCs without a single combat. Linking PC agency to the contingency of traps, both games feature rules for rolling to detect, resist, or otherwise survive such environmental threats. In *T&T*, Saving Throws are directly based on characters' primary attributes, with Luck the most often used for avoiding hidden traps. In *D&D*, there are five categories of Saving Throws against Death Magic, Poison, and Paralysis; Magic Rods, Staffs, and Wands; Polymorphing and Petrification; Dragon Breath; and Magic Spells. Michael Tresca notes how Saving Throws were one of three game mechanics (along with magical resurrection and replacement by a "close relative") intended by Gygax to maintain player interest and the relevance of play after a PC's demise.[10] Such narrative possibilities permit RPGs to wed consequential threat to adaptive choice that may persist beyond the fictional death of one's character.

The presence of traps in these games translates the fantasy world into a wholly contingent environment, to be negotiated with unwavering vigilance by PC adventurers, especially those designated by character class to locate and disarm traps (e.g., thieves and rogues). It is an oddly pleasurable form of paranoia evocative of Cold War patriotism, gone underground like American families in their fallout shelters. RPGs gather a group of like-minded players to imagine themselves to be diversely-talented adventurers in search of enemies to defeat and rewards to gain as they traverse a hostile, fantastical world governed by the laws of might and magic, evolution and technology, or some other set of measures symbolizing human agency, as well as the frameworks of contingency due to ever emerging hostilities. Again, to go underground is both to seek a place of shelter from sky-borne assault and to project one's survival into a time of that threat's end. RPGs' preponderance of underground adventuring permits players to imagine spatial and temporal escapes, without failing to acknowledge the persistence of contingency in the form of a potential trap around any corner.

In this sense, the disposition of the game referee may present the greatest contingency of all. The referee is a single player who does not enact the actions of a PC, but instead moderates the game for the other players. The referee may deliver pre-scripted scenarios containing individual encounters with NPCs, or may fabricate encounters from whole cloth during play. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* of the first edition of the game contains advice on how best to manage conflicts both by the books and among players. It is up to the referee, however, to decide the level of forgiveness or grittiness to pursue in the game. A strict, by-the-book interpretation of dice rolls may result in frequent death of PCs (a.k.a. the Total Party Kill, or TPK). A loose, free-form ethos may, on the other hand, diminish player interest in minimizing too far the imagined threats the world and its monsters present to the PCs. In refereed tabletop RPGs, the dynamic authority of the Dungeon Master, by any name, to interpret and alter the terms of play permits a fluid negotiation of world contingency and player agency unique to its form. Local versions of play may be subject to a DM's house rules, developed over years of play, even in contradiction to official rules of play as written or as practiced in wider arenas of play like national gaming conventions. The terms of the magic circle, how play is enacted, may thus differ within one game across multiple contexts of play.

More combat-oriented than game books, tabletop RPGs enhanced the possibilities for their players to anticipate, manage, and overcome a wide range of contingencies in their fantastical worlds via direct action. In fact, one of the frustrations of the *CYOA* series was the over-determined plotline that offered very little reason for hope in its conclusions. *CYOA #2 Journey Under the Sea* contains only one positive conclusion, wherein "you" as the protagonist escape Atlantis and survive to tell the tale, but over twenty other conclusions involving failure, often in the form of character death or incarceration. This narrow chance of unmitigated success in the second book in the series seems to beg the frustrated reader to read around fatal options, to, in fact, read through every path of possibility until the entire book is read. These entertaining texts thus encourage comprehensive reading that requires effort, blurring the lines between work and play, the multiple ends of the narrative and the end of the reading, and the feelings of satisfaction over reaching a supposedly happy ending and the feelings of accomplishment for having mastered the text by reading each and every part. Beyond their occasional Cold War themes, *CYOA* books encouraged young readers to approach reading as a process of textual investigation and system mastery.

Conflict became more instrumental in game books when they accrued simplified versions of the combat-oriented rules central to RPGs. The integration of rules for combat and similar challenges into the game book genre demonstrates the point at which the co-evolution of the two forms transitioned into RPGs' more direct influence on the *CYOA* format. In the U.S., TSR led publication of fantasy-themed books of the *CYOA* format with several series based on the worlds of *D&D* during the 1980s: *Endless Quest* (1982–1987, 1994–1996), *Fantasy Forest* (1982–1983), *HeartQuest* (1983–1984), *Super Endless Quest,* later renamed *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Adventure* (1985–1988), *One-on-One Adventure* (1985–1987), and *Catacombs Solo Quest* (1987–1989). However, earlier series put out by TSR adapted only the fantasy storylines and settings common to *D&D*, lacking any semblance of rules for conflict resolution as found in RPGs. With the exception of the *One-on-One Adventure* series, which introduced paired play, game books were primarily a solo experience. As Jennifer Grouling Cover notes, the experience in these books is one of individual decision-making as navigation through the text, rather than engagement in and resolution of conflict.[11] In other words, these game books proliferated Cold War notions of engagement without resolution, or imagined participation in war without end.

Starting with *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982), Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson's U.K.–based *Fighting Fantasy* series led the way in full-scale integration of RPG-like rules for combat and characterization. Livingstone's non-fiction introduction to RPGs, *Dicing With Dragons* (1982), featured a sample transcript of actual play and a miniature *CYOA* style adventure as two means of demonstrating the dynamics of the RPG experience. Derivative game book lines soon included Mark Smith and Jamie Thomson's short-lived *Way of the Tiger* (1985–1987) and Joe Dever's long-running *Lone Wolf*

(1984–1998).[12] Indicative of the fantasy game book's narrative range, the majority of these titles offered a wide array of fantasy monsters, lethal traps, and misleading choices, but only one, best conclusion to the hapless reader. The "final end" of any *Fighting Fantasy* game book was thus attainable, but by no means as open to the contingencies of tabletop RPG dynamics, by which DMs and players could redefine the terms of the narrative in play.

T&T's almost exclusive focus on solo play distinguishes it from most other RPGs. Since the game's inception, Flying Buffalo has hosted play-by-mail, later play-by-email, games in which individual players paid to play games at a distance. The game's main line of solo adventures read like game books in which lone players determine successes and failures on their own without an outside referee (or Troll Master). While *T&T*'s success as a platform for solo play is an interesting anomaly among RPGs, which generally rely upon a table of players working together to imagine their adventures in a fantastical realm, the line's success was not without precedent or parallel in other publications of the time. Where RPGs attempted to cover all manner of contingency, the narrative ability to choose, and re-choose, one's own path was clearly developed by the *CYOA* series and the many other series it inspired. Like *T&T*, these books permitted individual readers the experience of adventure that did not depend upon the presence of an adventuring party. As in novel reading, the experience was one's own. But, unlike novels, these books permitted the reader to choose what direction the story would take.[13] Solo RPGs and game books held the promise that isolation, instead of cutting one off from play, could be the very means of engaging in world-shaping adventure. *T&T*, *Fighting Fantasy*, and the combat-oriented game books that followed their example allowed readers to hone a comprehensive Cold War mastery by managing both sides of a never-ending struggle.

Projected Ends

Despite the many apocalyptic ends to the Cold War projected by U.S. government think tanks and American popular culture, the real ends came less spectacularly in 1991 with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., bankrupted by the nuclear arms race. The projected ends of the Cold War, nuclear apocalypse, appeared, fortunately, only in imagination. The literal economy underwriting the imaginary and political economies faltered before image could become reality. The accumulation of cultural ideas about an all-threatening enemy and a never-ending war by which to contain such a foe ended when one side's material economy could no longer support such imaginary relations. This failure of the U.S.S.R.'s economy to sustain its side of the Cold War political imaginary corresponds to the dynamics of RPGs, whose quantitative mechanics for character generation and conflict resolution serve as vehicles for imaginary adventures ending in rewards without limit. Where the political and gaming economies diverge, however, is in RPGs' sustainability as projections of desirable ends well beyond mechanical or numerical considerations. Fabricated of the imaginary, RPGs' economies far outstrip real-world economies and, so, RPGs have been able to evolve well past their Cold War origins.

Fame, fortune, and victory over one's foes are the general ends adventurers seek in RPGs and game books. In the game world, quests may be fulfilled, villains overcome, and kingdoms saved. Within the bounds of play, such rewards are potentially endless, limited only by players' imagination and the referee's munificence. Outside of the game world, players may enjoy their imaginary adventures for years to come via collective storytelling and memory. While the success of play may be measured simply in the enjoyment players experience, a part of that enjoyment is signified by the accumulation of material markers, however imaginary, that represent progress forward for individual PCs. The continued narration of adventure is generically accompanied by PC advancement in ability, wealth, and mastery over his or her imaginary world. The "leveling up" of the PC to apotheosis, however prescribed by the rules, becomes the ultimate achievement. As in the Cold War quest for assurances of survival through practical preparation and positive thinking, these games project end points in characters' lives in terms of supreme mastery over the limitations of mortality as constrained by the rules of play.

Along similar genre lines, some games imagine their entire worlds more starkly defined by bare survival in the face of humanity's diminished place in the world. The games rehearse for the player a less threatening narrative of best- and worst-case scenarios after nuclear assault. In some post-apocalyptic RPGs, contingency plans have all failed and nuclear war has all but wiped out human civilization. TimeLine Ltd.'s *The Morrow Project* (1980) and Fantasy Games Unlimited's *Aftermath* (1981) are two of the earliest post-apocalyptic tabletop RPGs. As in *Traveller*, these games tend toward characters with military backgrounds and combat technologies aimed at grittier realism and science-fiction premises than the romance of fantasy-based magic. GDW adapted the rules of *Traveller* to their own post-apocalyptic RPG, *Twilight: 2000* (1984), in which the PCs are U.S. soldiers stranded in Poland, attempting to return to a devastated United States after a full nuclear exchange between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S signals the onset of World War III. Where other RPGs extrapolate principles of contingent survival to more abstract settings, these games returned such dynamics to the settings and motifs of the Cold War itself. What started in the 1970s as fantasy, the industry began to imagine in more real-world terms, inspiring players to recognize the explicit linkage between RPGs, wargames, and the culture of war itself.

Pushing the contingency of utter apocalypse and social collapse to a ridiculous extreme, West End Games' award-winning *Paranoia* (1984) mimics the skills-centered approach of these earlier science-fiction-themed games, but parodies their Cold War paranoia, as indicated by its title and its genre-parodying rules. In the game world human beings survive in a domed community called Alpha Complex that is run by The Computer, a sentient machine in control of the complex's human residents, but which has gone sadistically insane. The consequence is that human life is cheap and PCs are easily replaceable clones mass-produced in biochemical vats. The paranoia of the game's title is enforced in play by two facts of character generation: (1) all PCs possess mutant abilities; and (2) all PCs belong to secret societies. Both of these facts are punishable by death in the game world, which is intended to inspire PCs to betray each other in order to project suspicion elsewhere and avoid punishment for themselves. Of all aspects of Cold War patriotism evoked by early RPGs, *Paranoia* is singular in its darkly humorous send-up of the Red Scare. In these later stages of the Cold War, player enjoyment of contingency derives not only in imagining worst possible outcomes, but also in intentionally inflicting such on one's fellow player.

This parody of Cold War paranoia recalls the case of "The Prisoner's Dilemma," a situational exercise in probability from Game Theory. In the situation, two prisoners are given the opportunity to implicate each other in order to receive reduced punishment. According to probability results, it is generally in the best interest of both prisoners to refuse betrayal and remain silent. It may seem that implication of the other guarantees, on the individual level, less punishment and greater freedom. Yet, if both prisoners implicate each other, both are punished more severely. The contingency of the world, in this famous case study, is directly shaped by the choices of two individual agents and whether or not they perceive their decisions in relation to each other, and not merely in relation to individually projected welfare.[14] The choice to play together confirms the validity of the magic circle, which encompasses the general worldviews and attitudes, as well as individual hopes and fears, defining the terms of play. The lesson of "The Prisoner's Dilemma" for 1980s America may have been to acknowledge more fully the other player in the game and what both sides stood to lose, despite political fantasies to the contrary.

Perhaps to play is sufficient unto itself when the terms of agency and contingency are, by design, affective fabrications intended to supply the pleasures of play and nothing more. RPGs and game books may play most interestingly when they highlight the very interrelated nature of contingency and agency. The infamous *CYOA* #12 *Inside UFO 54-40* starts *in medias res* with the second-person protagonist a captive aboard an alien space ship. Recalling the extreme unconventionality of the ending, even for a *CYOA* title, one nostalgic blogger writes:

> The book makes you feel unsettled fairly quickly, because your goal is never clear. Some storylines lead you to try to escape the ship and return to Earth. Some of them have you seeking Ultima. Some of them have you doomed to "SOMA," an exile where you sleep for a billion years. Most of them result in bizarre space deaths that even now don't make a lot of sense. It's the Ultima stuff that makes this book so truly weird. There are a few endings where you successfully return to Earth and are reunited with your family. But when you do this, it feels unsatisfying. I distinctly remember feeling like I'd failed, because Ultima was out there if only I could find it. So you'd do the book over again, making different choices, always getting closer to Ultima, but never reaching it. Never. Because there was no way to reach Ultima. It's there in the book. It's on page 101. But no choices will get you there. You can only reach it by thumbing through the book and finding it. It even acknowledges that you had to cheat to get there. Which means that even if you do find it, it's still frustrating. That's a whole lot of ambivalence and ambiguity to lay on an 8-year-old. I can only win by cheating? There are no correct answers in life? Or is it some kind of Zen koan about achieving happiness? I spent a couple sleepless nights staring at the ceiling trying to understand what *UFO 54-40* was telling me.[15]

This brazenly rules-breaking *CYOA* title highlights the role of cheating as a preservation of the ethos of play within what may not be formally permitted, but structurally promoted in narrative play via repetition, backtracking, and even random turning of pages when all rational systems fail. To be the cheat is not, in this instance, to spoil play, but instead to enforce the magic circle of narrative play. That is an adaptive choice especially supportive of sequential, but re-playable and multi-vectored narrative.[16] *CYOA* books, and RPGs with their more open options, held the possibility of questioning the terms of narrative and, ultimately, of stepping out of narrative conventions whose sides were too constraining for the possibilities inherent in their forms. When such texts took up the fates of individuals as fates of entire worlds, their violations of conventional narrative forms posed an implicit challenge to the conventional, teleological thinking of Cold War patriotism.

Conclusion

Although the Cold War ended spectacularly with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and functionally with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. two years later, American popular culture still exhibits strong, residual signs of contingent culture and adaptive choice, as RPGs were the first to distill and put into play in various forms. In literary culture, interactive text adventures, considered as narrative play steeped in adaptive choice, continue to proliferate in print and electronic forms. Michael Joyce's groundbreaking *afternoon, a story* (1987), the first interactive text adventure delivered electronically, has evolved from its origin as a Hypercard stack to a web site and an interactive CDROM.

Game books like Livingstone and Jackson's *Fighting Fantasy* series, as well as classic literature such as Mary Shelly's novel *Frankenstein*, have recently been developed as interactive, electronic literature, via mobile app, by Tin Man Games, inkle, Choice of Games, and similar e-publishers. A wave of variously nostalgic, ironic, and even parodic *CYOA* style game books have entered the adult literary marketplace: Jason Shiga's graphic novel *Meanwhile: Pick Any Path. 3,856 Story Possibilities* (2010); Ryan North's Kickstarter-funded Shakespeare parody *To Be or Not to Be* (2013); and Neil Patrick Harris' genre-satirizing *Choose Your Own Autobiography* (2014). The principles of adaptive choice conveyed by the *CYOA* game book remain popular in the various media forms and formations that wed narrative to play, although they may now lack the specific political subtext that informed their predecessors.

With the proliferation of gaming in digitized media, RPGs and game books are available to readers and players in increasing numbers, varieties, and contexts. Given the apparently un-contingent popularity of these media, not to engage with it may cast oneself in the role of spoil-sport, now even more than before. The open-ended power of decision-making that these media offer, to bend and break the rules, or even create one's own rules, makes the choice not to play, increasingly, the less popular one. Within the magic circle established by the form, to play is to re-play, and to re-play is, in more and more cases, to cheat and to enjoy doing so. The malleability of the fundamental grounds of play, assumed into those very grounds, is clearly visible in the increasing abilities of individual players to customize digital play experiences, exhibiting the kind of freedom to choose not only one's imaginary character traits, but the range and meaning of those traits, which tabletop RPGs always possessed, at least in potential. The rise of individuated choice is widely visible in many contexts, such as the popularity of mobile devices and apps, the substantial displacement of conventional movie theaters by cinematic viewing options in the home, and the proliferation of independent authorship via blogs and self-published e-books. The widespread popularity of such platforms demonstrates the appeal of individually adaptable choice long championed by RPGs and game books.

Personal computers, platform consoles, and web-based technologies exploit the potential of RPGs and game books to promote adaptive choice within contingent play. The automated nature of these digital technologies curtailed, to some degree, players' abilities from adapting choices away from negative outcomes after the fact, and from informing their choices with knowledge gained via out-of-character, exegetic discussions in advance. Today, walkthroughs, cheat codes, and other compensations for the rigidity of electronic gaming systems abound to restore some adaptive choice to play, even the choice to cheat. Evolving in both analog and digital forms, ludic literature has influenced cultural definitions of choice, contingency, and commitment.

D&D supported and benefited from the popularity of the game book genre by including a *CYOA* style narrative in its 1983 version as an introduction of how to play the game. Mike Mearls, head of the R&D team responsible for *D&D*, explains the recent decision to discontinue the long-standing practice of using interactive fiction to introduce the fundamentals of play in the latest edition of Wizards of the Coast's bestselling RPG:

> And if you think back to the Red Box in '83, when we had that *CYOA* text … that heavy reading, right, so like a person that wants to play a role-playing game, they probably read a choose-your-own-adventure book. And that's why when we thought about the 5th [Edition] Starter Set, should have a choose your own kinda adventure thing? Where for 90% of the people this like the first time they encounter a choose-you-own-adventure style play, they've never seen this before. But they've probably played a role-playing game … they've played *Skyrim* or [*World of*] *Warcraft* or any of those games, so they probably actually know what a role-playing game is.[17]

For Mearls, the current transfer between digital and analog forms of RPG has replaced the previous historical transfer between analog interactive narrative and analog role-play. There is nothing to say that all of these transformations may not continue to coexist and thrive, as they do, but this separation of the *CYOA* narrative from tabletop RPG suggests Mearls' own interest in diversifying the tabletop game into other media and exploiting its currency as intellectual property through a variety of platforms, not necessarily beholden to the strain of influence from interactive fiction. The fusion of *CYOA* and RPG during TSR's publishing frenzy of the 1980s has been redirected toward game-to-game adaptations and other trans-media contexts. As one of the most popular platforms of digital play, online MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) generate over $2 billion annually. Despite major advancements in game delivery, graphics, and other technical features, 85 percent of these games still adhere to the tropes of tabletop fantasy RPGs set in motion by *D&D*.[18] While there may never have been an exclusively analog version of RPG play, the models of play articulated on paper remain the persistent frameworks of this expanding field.

RPGs and *CYOA* books introduced to a culture of contingency the premise of adaptive choice, that is, the assurance that one's decisions are revisable even after outcome, as a value in itself and a principle of individuated, customizable immersion in contingent play. This heightened sense of agency has inspired deeper commitment in players and readers to their worlds—both virtual and actual. With many of the immediate contingencies of the Cold War dissipated or, at least, submerged within more pressing issues of the contemporary moment—global, stateless terrorism in particular—the question arises: what drives this desire to negotiate contingencies in this playful way via games that play like stories and stories that read like games? Perhaps the answer lies in the appeals of escapism. Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan rightly observes that escapism is not rightly understood as the transcendent ability to negate one's place in culture, but that, on the contrary, the desire for escape is an intrinsic part of culture itself. Those who wished to imagine their ways within, around, and even beyond the cultural logics of the Cold War were, in this light, creating culture by playing with the terms of imminently felt, but ultimately abstracted contingencies. Different cultural challenges shall arise in the U.S. War on Terror and, no doubt, other conflicts yet to emerge. RPGs and *CYOA* books have amply demonstrated that culture is always a matter of playing with unknowns that surround us, define us, and inspire us to make choices despite, and because of, the inescapable pressure of such contingencies.

Notes

1. See Corey Mead, *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) for analysis of the U.S. military's influence on digital, rather than analog, gaming cultures.

2. United States Executive Office of the President, National Security Resources Board, and Civil Defense Office, *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, NSRB Doc 130 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 4–8.

4. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

5. United States Department of Defense and Office of Civil Defense, *Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do About Nuclear Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), 3–5.

6. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 10–11.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

8. Packard's first *CYOA*-style book *Sugarcane Island*, published originally in 1969 by Vermont Crossroad Press, was later republished in 1986 as *CYOA* #62 in the Bantam series. After the *CYOA* line lapsed and Packard started his own publishing imprint, Montgomery's *The Abominable Snowman* replaced *The Cave of Time* as title #1 in the *CYOA* series revived by Montgomery's publishing company Chooseco.

9. Grady Hendrix, "*Choose Your Own Adventure*: How *The Cave of Time* Taught Us to Love Interactive Entertainment," *Slate* (February 18, 2011), accessed June 26, 2015, www.slate.com/articles/ arts/culturebox/2011/02/choose_your_own_adventure.html.

10. Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 72.

11. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 27.

12. Jonathan Green, *YOU Are the Hero: A History of Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks* (London: Snowbooks, 2014), 16.

13. Flying Buffalo capitalized on the Cold War ethos with their darkly humorous *Nuclear Escalation* (1983), *Nuclear Proliferation* (1993), and *Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2004), a series of two-player card games inspired by Douglas Malewicki's award-winning game *Nuclear War* (1965). True to the source material, these games tend to end with both sides' utter annihilation.

14. Morton D. Davis, *Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1983), 108–109.

15. Ed Grabianowski, "Remember *Inside UFO 54-40*, the Unwinnable 'CYOA'?," *io9* (March 26, 2014), io9.com/remember-inside-ufo-54-40-the-unwinnable-choose-your-o-1552187271.

16. In this vein of ambiguous closure, one of the primary endings in the murder-mystery CYOA #9 *Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?* first prompts readers if they are ready to deliver the final solution; answering in the affirmative directs readers to the final paragraph, in which the actual details regarding *whodunit?* are not given on the page, but left to the reader's imagination.

17. Mike Mearls, interviewed by Michael Evans, "30 Minutes with *D&D* 5E's Mike Mearls: Playtests, OSR, Piracy, PDFs, & Settings," *EN World*, August 26, 2014, accessed June 26, 2015, www.enworld.org/forum/content.php?1866–30-Minute-With-D-D-5E-s-Mike-Mearls-Playtests-OSR-Piracy-PDFS-Settings.

18. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 126–127.

Bibliography

Costikyan, Greg, Dan Gelber, and Eric Goldberg. *Paranoia*. 1st ed. New York: West End Games, 1984.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Davis, Morton D. *Game Theory: A Nontechnical Introduction*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1983.

Dockery, Kevin, Robert Sadler, and Richard Tucholka. *The Morrow Project*. 1st ed. Magnolia, DE: TimeLine Ltd., 1980.

Duck and Cover. Dir. Anthony Rizzo. Archer Productions, 1952.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Grabianowski, Ed. "Remember *Inside UFO 54-40*, the Unwinnable 'CYOA'?" *io9*. March 26, 2014. io9.com/remember-inside-ufo-54-40-the-unwinnable-choose-your-o-1552187271.

Green, Jonathan. *YOU Are the Hero: A History of Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks*. London: Snowbooks, 2014.

Gygax, E. Gary, and Dave Arneson. *Dungeons & Dragons*. 1st ed. Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Strategy Rules, 1974.

Gygax, E. Gary, and Jeff Perren. *Chainmail*. Evansville, IN: Guidon Games, 1971.

Hendrix, Grady. "*Choose Your Own Adventure*: How *The Cave of Time* Taught Us to Love Interactive Entertainment." *Slate*. February 18, 2011. www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/02/choose_your_own_adventure.html.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955.

Hume, Paul, and Robert Charette. *Aftermath*. 1st ed. Gilbert, AZ: Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1981.

Jackson, Steve. *The Shamutanti Hills*. Sorcery! Series 1. New York: Penguin, 1983.

Jackson, Steve, and Ian Livingstone. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*. Fighting Fantasy Series 1. New York: Penguin, 1982.

Jason Shiga. *Meanwhile: Pick Any Path. 3,856 Story Possibilities*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2010.

Joyce, Michael. *afternoon, a story*. Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1987.

Klug, Gerard Christopher. *James Bond 007: Role-Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service*. 1st ed. Renton, WA: Victory Games, 1983.

Livingstone, Ian. *Dicing with Dragons: An Introduction to Role-Playing Games*. New York: Plume, 1982.

Mead, Corey. *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

Mearls, Mike. Interviewed by Michael Evans. "30 Minutes With *D&D* 5E's Mike Mearls: Playtests, OSR, Piracy, PDFs, & Settings." *EN World*. August 26, 2014. www.enworld.org/forum/content.php?1866–30-Minute-With-D-D-5E-s-Mike-Mearls-Playtests-OSR-Piracy-PDFS-Settings.

Miller, Marc. *Traveller*. 1st ed. Normal, IL: Game Designers' Workshop, 1977.

Montgomery, R.A. *The Abominable Snowman.* CYOA #1. New York: Bantam, 2006.

Neil Patrick Harris. *Choose Your Own Autobiography*. New York: Crown Archetype, 2014.

Packard, Edward. *The Cave of Time.* CYOA #1. New York: Bantam, 1979.

_____. *Inside UFO 54-40*. CYOA #12. New York: Bantam, 1982.

_____. *Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?* CYOA #9. New York: Bantam, 1982.

_____. *Your Code Name Is Jonah*. CYOA #6. New York: Bantam, 1980.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

Proceedings (1994): 625–48. *Interactive Dramas*. Accessed December 9, 2014. Crane Publishing, Ltd., May 1994.

Richards, Jack C., and Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Ryan North. *To Be or Not to Be.* New York: Breadpig, 2013.

St. Andre, Ken. *Tunnels & Trolls*. 1st ed. Scottsdale, AZ: Flying Buffalo Incorporated, 1975.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*. Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2006.

Shaffer, David Wiliamson. "Models of Situated Action: Computer Games and the Problem of Transfer." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Solis, Daniel. "Daniel Solis." *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple*. Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010. Accessed December 3, 2014.

_____. "Happy Birthday, Robot!" *Evil Hat Productions*. Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010. Accessed December 3, 2014.

Sorcery! The Shamutanti Hills. Cambridge, UK: inkle, 2013.

Steinkuehler, Constance, Kurt Squire, and Sasha A. Barab. *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Swink, David F., and Dale Richard Buchanan. "The Effects of Sociodramatic Goal-Oriented Role Play and Non-Goal-Oriented Role Play on Locus of Control." *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 40, no. 5 (September 1984): 1178–1183.

Toles-Patkin, Terri. "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (1986): 1–14.

Tresca, Michael J. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Escapism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
United States Department of Defense and Office of Civil Defense. *Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do About Nuclear Attack*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961.
United States Executive Office of the President, National Security Resources Board, and Civil Defense Office. *Survival Under Atomic Attack*. NSRB Doc 130. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951.
Van Ments, M. *The Effective Use of Role Play: A Handbook for Teachers and Trainers—Revised Edition*. London: Kogan Page, 1989.
W3Techs. "W3Techs—World Wide Web Technology Surveys." *W3Techs*. Web Technology Surveys, November 1, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2014.
Whitton, Nicola. *Game Theory for Learning & Teaching: Research and Theory*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2014.

This page intentionally left blank

PART II

The Tome of Knowledge: Playing to Learn in and across the Disciplines

Raiding the Last Frontier

Overcoming the Language Barrier in the ESL Classroom

Timm Woods

Not long after I began teaching English courses at a secondary school in Chile, I stumbled into a local group of Spanish-speaking gamers. Despite my almost nonexistent grasp of Spanish, they invited me to join a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) later that week. I knew from first-hand experience how much passion and what a complex range of emotions any role-playing game (RPG) can elicit from their participants, and so I was understandably nervous about intruding upon their fun with my meager language skills. Being an outsider in a TRPG or a foreign-language conversation can feel like a very similar experience, marked by feelings of alienation, confusion, and a lack of confidence.

I was joining the game as a player, and so had to design a character that was appropriate to the storyteller-established setting (a science-fiction universe of some repute). Our storyteller, or "game master," spoke both English and Spanish fluently; beyond that, he had no formal experience in language instruction or running bilingual games. I established immediately upon arriving that my character was a quiet individual who only spoke when necessary, as a way of preparing the group for my relative silence.

A round of shrugged pantomimes and apologetic smiles started the game off in a friendly but awkward manner; the game master translated when he could, but already had the imposing task of narrating the story. I settled back to listen to the portions of the story that were relayed to me in English, but the majority of what was said escaped me. My frustration at myself mounted; I found myself focusing more on my language deficiencies than on the game itself.

Until we got trapped on an alien spaceship.

While the other two players frantically exchanged ideas and possible solutions in rapid Spanish, I sank further into despair, knowing that my inability to understand prior explanations had probably helped land us in this difficult situation in the first place. Surely there was something my character, a sci-fi computer hacker, could do? Then the idea finally struck—hack the ship's computers, jettison the enemy crew while using our own spacesuits to survive the vacuum of space—and the shift in my attitude was immediate. I stopped feeling frustrated, self-pitying, and embarrassed. All of my negativity was suddenly replaced by the urgent desire to present this idea, the idea that might save us all. A string of disconnected Spanish words emerged, a fumbling but fervent attempt to explain my scheme. My reward that day was in the faces of the other two players as my message suddenly bridged the linguistic gap; they lit up with hysterical glee. Only later did I realize that my level of effort, enthusiasm, and effectiveness at communicating a relatively complex idea in Spanish had never been higher.

TRPGs, such as the classic example *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), are about good communication. We, as a newly digitized society, are in awe of the emergent possibilities of our own communication. Yet our technological advances are built around the same limitations that have haunted us since the earliest days of civilization—the limitations of language. While technology has made huge leaps in creating larger and larger points of contact between different geographic communities, giving us readily available access to the thoughts and ideas of people across the world, language barriers largely thwart this vast potential. Where once the walls of language were only distant reminders of our separateness, now they are one of the last barriers circling us—a linguistic barrier instead of a political, national, or ideological one—keeping us from effective communication.

TRPGs can and have been used as pedagogical language tools, specifically in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. At a time when we need multilingual communities more than ever, these games can become methods for promoting meaningful and provocative communication among language learners.

Rosetta Stone and Learning Games

Technological advances have already led to attempts to make language learning easier; some of these attempts have been more effective than others. Programs like Rosetta Stone have been successful in enabling individuals to learn quickly and efficiently, and are built around tried and true methods for memory retention and meaningful learning. Rosetta Stone requires students to interact with the language through the four skillsets of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The Rosetta Stone company refers to this method as dynamic immersion, a way of grounding the student in a mental learning context. By constantly varying and altering the pattern in which certain words and concepts are encountered, learners are forced to adapt their cognitive methods and think more flexibly about the language. However, this power to create a meaningful learning context requires a degree of responsibility for what exactly the context teaches the student; many scholarly reviews criticized the authenticity of the cultural contexts being portrayed by these learning tools, arguing that the program oversimplifies and conflates them for efficiency's sake.[1]

Like a video game, Rosetta Stone's dynamic immersion techniques maintain engagement and rate of information absorption through motivational mechanics. Players are awarded a score and earn points for each completed activity and exercise. The program constantly rearranges the way questions are asked, forcing the player into new and more flexible cognitive models, in the same way a video game or TRPG might present variations on a challenge to test how far the player's problem-solving skills have developed. Rosetta Stone's primary weakness is a lack of a social element. Its reactivity, while impressive for a program, is nonetheless limited, and so the language becomes a stagnant artifact rather than a living, changing, participatory activity. By placing students in a live context with each other as opposed to a digital one, TRPGs allow for stronger social relationships than their digital counterparts.

Gamification

In fact, many of the strides in modern language learning technology have not been on the technological front, but rather in the fields of psychology and pedagogy. In her recent demonstration of a new method for learning Chinese, ShaoLan Hsueh explains how the inclusion of a narrative context into the learning process can enhance retention of the meaning behind Chinese ideograms. As with Rosetta Stone, efficiency is the appeal of Hsueh's method; efficiency which relies upon exploring the context of each ideogram. Hsueh argues that the context of the symbols—their history, evolution, and the narrative they tell—helps the learner make connections and recognize patterns.[2] This sort of comprehensive understanding is what games promote. The effectiveness of this method relies not on new technology, but on a better understanding of how information can be presented in a way that makes it easier to retain.

Websites like Khan Academy utilize game-like features of reward and reinforcement to make lectures more engaging. Players get to monitor their progress across various subjects in much the same way they might watch a character in a game gain skill and experience. Additionally, they can compare their progress with that of other players, and participate in learning communities built around each course and each tier of progress. Educators have for some time noticed that their students' attention lies in the fantasy realms of massively multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*, in the screen-tapping frenzy of a Facebook or mobile game, or in the more familiar camaraderie of sports.[3] Learning programs bind players into communities of fun, which promote both the game itself and the learning that takes place. TRPGs take this same idea of a "community of fun" and make it immediate and personal.

The central idea of gamification is that the same elements that keep players playing are not unique to games but rather can be adopted as motivational features into other formats, such as employee training programs, crowdsourced research, and the classroom. Good gamification requires an understanding that learning is something that is always happening within *any* activity, "rather than a discrete activity that happens when other activities do not."[4] Raph Koster, in attempting to pin down the concept of "fun," finds that the cognitive process of learning may very well be the most fun activity of which humans are capable.[5]

Gamification in the classroom is quickly finding traction among educators who struggle to engage students. In his text on the use of role-playing in higher education, *Minds on Fire*, Mark Carnes paints a picture of a generation of students who are easily discouraged, distracted, or otherwise unmotivated by the currently reigning modes of pedagogy. Gamification, if properly used, could change the way we think about learning in a fundamental way.[6] TRPGs come with none of the interpersonal alienation or cognitive disconnection that can be symptomatic of digital games. Thus, they give us the best of both the digital and real-world learning environments, and may be our best resource for harnessing this engagement power in a productive way.

Beyond Gamification

Many authors, researchers, and game designers are tackling the major questions of gamification: namely, how effective is it as a pedagogical method, how practical is it as an academic assessor, and what the pitfalls are. A heavy reliance on technology can make gamification techniques expensive and unwieldy, and often lead to a tendency to simply tack on a "score" to any digital exercise and call it a game. Karl Kapp, an expert on educational gamification, points out that games are more complex and nuanced than a system of awarding points.[7] In *Reality Is Broken*, Jane McGonigal defines a game by four universal traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation.[8] In *Rules of Play*, Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen define games as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantified outcome."[9] According to these definitions, technology is hardly the prerequisite for creating an effective, engaging game. TRPGs are a perfect example of an inexpensive, technology-light game that can be implemented at almost any place or time.

In addition to bringing the same advantages to the classroom as digital or otherwise high-maintenance games, TRPGs bring their own unique features as well. Role-playing, as the foremost of these features, presents several beneficial traits. Van Ments describes role-playing as follows:

> one particular type of simulation that focuses attention on the interaction of people with one another. It emphasises the functions performed by different people under various circumstances. The idea of role-play, in its simplest form, is that of asking someone to imagine that they are either themselves or another person in a particular situation. They are then asked to behave exactly as they feel that person would. As a result of doing this they, or the rest of the class, or both, will learn something about the person and/or situation. In essence, each player acts as part of the social environment of the others and provides a framework in which they can test out their repertoire of behaviours or study the interacting behaviour of the group.[10]

These elements of role-play—focusing attention on interaction, putting students into unexpected situations, and providing a framework for testing—are ideally suited for the language classroom. They encourage students to look at the contexts in which language is used, and to feel comfortable experimenting with these contexts in order to watch how the language governing the scene changes. When a player's character wants to know whether a monster "*was* in the room ahead" or "*is* in the room ahead," an understanding of tense becomes immediately relevant and valuable. As good role-playing and decision-making is continually rewarded in-game by the mechanics of play, the skills and means to communicate and understand these decisions becomes increasingly valuable to the student.

Role-playing exercises have appeared in one form or another as a consistent feature of language-learning classes. As a method, it follows from the interactional theory of language, which Jack Richard and Theodore Rodgers describe as the view of "language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals.... Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of learners as interactors."[11] Role-playing gives participants the ability to interact with a situation in a way that they see fit, to find their own voice in the language they are learning. However, the simulated context of the interaction applies constraints that the players must operate within and respect. These constraints create the challenges of the role-playing exercise. Jones explains that "in order for a simulation to occur the participants must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions, and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves."[12] The participant cannot complete the role-playing simulation without creatively engaging their role in the game.

History of Role-Playing Games in Education

The concept of games as a learning tool is nothing revolutionary. As early as 1811, military games (called *Kriegsspiel*) were used by the Prussian and German militaries to instruct officers in battlefield tactics and strategy. These games were originally published under the title *Instructions for the Representation of Tactical Maneuvers under the Guise of a Wargame*, a descriptor that clearly argues for the seriousness of the game and its emphasis on pedagogy. The success of Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War led to widespread adoption of wargaming as a training tool by the French, British, Italian, Austrian, Russian, Japanese, and eventually American militaries. Today, military simulations are still utilized by modern-day armed forces, notably in the U.S. Navy's use of the wargame *Harpoon*.[13]

Not only do these military wargames provide early evidence of learning through game simulation, they also are the progenitors of the TRPG. As various *Kriegsspielen* gave rise to more and increasingly complex wargames, they gradually made their way into the world of mainstream recreation. In the 1970s, these games were modified by hobbyists like Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson to accommodate gameplay centered on the actions of individual characters rather than entire armies and battalions. As additional elements began to find their way into the game—the concept of a continuous story, driven by interactions between characters (both player- and non-player–controlled) with personalities, hopes, flaws, and ideals, within a consistent setting—the simulation began to leave the exclusive domain of war and became capable of creating a wide variety of alternative situations and challenges. Soon TRPGs became less like simulations of combat and more like simulations of life.

This transition marks the point where TRPGs moved beyond their roots in strategic and mechanical game elements, and began to take on aspects of social simulation. In a TRPG, players are tasked with entering into the role of their character, typically with a set of rules governing the character's strengths, skillsets, powers, and possessions. Immersing themselves in the game, the players must act and make decisions based on their characters' beliefs and observations. This immersion, or "role-playing," is now considered such a fundamental part of these games that it has become *the* defining feature of the genre.

As already noted, gamification (in the myriad forms this term may cover) is finding its way into education in new and unexpected ways. Nicola Whitton says that "a games-based approach to learning is being used across diverse curricular areas … and in a variety of educational settings in pre-school, all stages of formal education, and workplace and informal learning, but studies with school-age children and college students dominate…. The majority of games are either educational games developed in-house for the study, or non-educational off-the-shelf games."[14] Several examples of these educationally-oriented TRPGs can be found later in this essay.

Paul Cardwell's "Role-Playing Games and the Gifted Student" lists the learning skills that are directly developed when students become involved with TRPGs. This extensive list includes (but is not limited to) the following skill categories: Following Directions, Vocabulary, Research, Independent/Self-Directed Study, Planning, Choice/Decision Making, Mental Exercise, Evaluation, Cooperation/Interaction, Creativity/Imagination, Leadership, Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Predicting Consequences, Figural/Spatial Reasoning, Taking Other Points of View, Asking Questions, Ethics, Prioritizing, Interrelated Learning, and Continuity of Learning.[15] There is also evidence to suggest that role-playing methods facilitate attitude change, increase self-concept, and produce behavioral change.[16] I will be looking at four broad categories that apply to the synthesis of language learning and TRPGs: Learning Context, Learning Environment, Creating Agency, and Emotional Engagement.

Creating Learning Context

John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid established the idea of situated cognition, or learning through the context in which information is provided. Situated cognition argues that the best learning occurs within the context of a larger, interrelated system, and is a crucial model to understanding how games can teach. Nicola Whitton states that

> the theory of situated cognition supports the argument that learning needs to be placed in a meaningful context, making the case that knowledge cannot be something that stands apart from context, but that it is a product of the environment and culture in which it was created and applied … learning, rather than being about the memorization of facts, is about enculturation into a domain, taking part in what Brown and his colleagues call "authentic activities."[17]

One can find an example of such "authentic activities" in the game *Foldit*, which invites players to participate in the advancement of the biological sciences by altering and redesigning proteins.[18] Players get the authentic experience of scientific problem-solving, as well as the knowledge that their work is contributing to the scientific community. In effect, they have immersed themselves in a culture that normally would require years of research to begin making meaningful contributions. Situated cognition suggests that this sort of "learning by doing" is a better route to comprehensive understanding than the "learn, then do" attitude that requires expertise prior to participation. Games like *Foldit* are not only advancing research by harnessing the power of hundreds of amateur scientists, but may be training the next generation of experts as well.

This sort of active participatory learning is key to a TRPG. From the moment a player sits down to play—even before they completely understand the rules—they are invited to participate and act upon the contextual space of the game. This participation then teaches them more about the contextual space, the rules and limitations of play, and the group's particular culture of participation. Thus, the immersion required by a TRPG is uniquely suited to create moments of "enculturation" like those described by Whitton.[19]

Games in general can be designed to generate a variety of learning contexts, defined by the game's rules and presented as a combination of restrictions, effects, and consequences. With mechanics like these, even advanced topics like morality and philosophy can be taught by a game. The *Modern Prometheus* educational design project, a computer program that attempted to teach ethics and decision making, used intentionality, legitimacy, and consequentiality as the key criteria for designing a context for students to learn the gravity of complex moral decision-making.[20] The designers argued that if a game could realistically convey its fictional context, then the same learning could take place within the player that would occur as a result of real-world decision-making.

The consequences within the structure of a TRPG establish a context that gives value to the skills necessary to complete the game. Players are placed into the role of an individual whose success depends on their ability to master these skills, often in quite dramatic ways. In a mystery-themed TRPG, a player must learn how to obtain clues; in a dungeon-exploring game, players might be asked to manage resources and find locations for safe camping and recovery. By adopting these contexts, "the learner appreciates both the immediate situation and the underlying content as having value in both the fictional and real worlds."[21] The game becomes a laboratory in which the efficacy of the very skills that the instructor is attempting to teach are questioned and tested, and their value (or lack thereof) made apparent. "Learning in such dynamic environments becomes a way of seeing the world or of being in the world," rather than a list of rote, context-less factoids.[22] Best of all, this level of active participation often encourages negotiation between the player and the game master, as the player seeks to justify the effectiveness of their methodology. While the game master typically has the final word in these negotiations—a responsibility not to be taken lightly—the result is often a productive discussion, with the player being personally invested in learning the information that led to a particular outcome.

The designers of *Modern Prometheus* believe that "contextualization should involve more than seeing a concept or even a context of use; it requires a projective stance that involves *being in* the context and recognizing the value of the tools in terms of the context."[23] TRPGs accomplish this "being in the context" by posing scenarios that must be solved using a dynamic approach. Cycles of prediction, observation, and refinement are a core mechanic of the gameplay processes, cycles that are the building blocks of situated cognition learning. In TRPGs, "prediction and (self) explanation exist throughout game play, framed as internal responses to moments of choice"—the sort of "peripheral learning" upon which gamification theory is founded.

TRPGs have the additional advantage over a videogame in that the game master, like an instructor, is present and attentive to the immediate needs of the student. The game master not only fills in the gaps and explains difficult concepts, but provides constant input to maintain the game's progression. In order to understand and react to the scenario, a player's choices must be preceded by information-gathering—that is, right action first requires asking the right questions. Thus, TRPGs create contexts that "can be structured or queued in a manner that the students are more likely to view their goals in an epistemological manner, encouraging pursuit of explanatory coherence."[24] Players in TRPGs come to recognize that there is no one single solution to any situation; their creativity may exceed the expectations of the game master or even the game designer. Players learn that they have free reign to approach a problem from their own direction, so long as they remain consistent with the rules and the context of the game.

Context is a primary method of language-acquisition. Languages, like games, must be understood as a holistic totality: just as rules must be learned via their relationships to each other, so must every word and punctuation mark be explained by its relationship with other words and symbols. In *Rules of Play,* the parallels between languages and games are clearly laid out:

> In language … we refer to structure as *grammar*. The grammatical rules of a sentence create a structure that describes how words can and cannot be sequenced. We might refer to these rules as *invisible structure*, as we are not always aware that they are there. In games, this concept of grammar takes the form of game rules, which create a structure for the game, describing how all of the elements of the game interact with one another. Structure (in language or games) operates much like context, and participates in the meaning-making process. By ordering the elements of a system in very particular ways, structure works to create meaning.[25]

This reliance on interconnected structure, a feature of both games and languages alike, makes language-learning through context an effective method. Games introduce and reinforce a cognitive practice that will enable the student to continue the learning process both in and out of the classroom.

When students are allowed to run free in a creative learning context like a TRPG, it can be difficult to predict exactly what learning takes place. Salen and Zimmerman explain that games account for the element of emergence, or unexpected learning that emerges organically from interaction between the learning and the learning process: "*Emergence* is a crucial facet of understanding how the system of a game becomes meaningful for other players.... In the case of language, for example, we cannot describe every statement that might be uttered in a language even though we might know all the words in that language along with the rules of grammar that organize them."[26] A TRPG would allow for recognition of the multiplicity of possibilities that can arise in language. This development of a cognitive practice of generating constant emergence, a practice that is shared by the game's other participants, in turn creates a unique and productive learning space.

Nicola Whitton's research also emphasizes the importance of varied contexts to facilitate this transfer of in-game learning into out-of-game contexts. Transfer is, of course, a primary concern when discussing gamification; is the connection to real-world application being made? Finding that "as players experience more contexts within games they are increasingly able to generalize what they have learned from them," Whitton concluded that a learning game should offer a variety of learning contexts, not just a single one.[27] The advantage of tabletop games is the ability to provide limitless contexts for in-game problem-solving, without the difficulty of creating an entirely new game. Furthermore, the context of the learning in a TRPG—sitting around a table, face to face with peers—is a context that transfers easily to daily and comfortable use of a language.

Creating Learning Environment

TRPGs are language-based communications games, and as such can impact the development of socialization skills. This can assist in creating a cohesive and effective learning space for language, where students can "workshop" their verbal and written interactions. The structure of the game itself means that "much of the game depends on a common perception of the information presented to the players by the [Game Master],"[28] information that is presented in both a narrative and question-and-answer format. Interpersonal negotiation, collaboration, and teamwork have become fundamental elements of social TRPGs. One of the Chinese-speaking ESL students in a TRPG-based class run by Brian Phillips reported that "the games we love have a certain amount of diplomatic negotiation going on. A player tries to influence the outcome of the game by interacting with other players."[29] Phillip's class showed that TRPGs, in addition to an understanding of their content, also encourage development of skills such as leadership, interpersonal problem-solving, and group survival and success.

James Gee and Elisabeth Hayes refer to the "communities of practice" that these games engender as *affinity spaces*. Affinity spaces, they argue, create ways and patterns of learning within themselves. Effective affinity spaces require "a common endeavor" for which students "have a passion," in which participants may produce content, which is transformed by interaction with the community. Like a classroom, these affinity spaces are fluid and living entities, and each is unique. Different and complementary routes of participation and status may be achieved, and even the leader of the group is a resource rather than an almighty "boss" in much the same way an instructor might be used as a resource. Affinity spaces that promote individual proactivity in the learning process without excluding the possibility for help show greater success in becoming thriving communities. Everyone is both player and audience.[30] These guidelines also describe almost verbatim the features that make TRPGs engaging cooperative activities.

TRPGs strike a balance between granting players almost infinite freedom of action, while simultaneously presenting a finite obstacle for them to overcome. This shared goal immediately unifies the play-community, which is advantageous toward their combined learning. David Shaffer points out that "theories of learning as participation by individuals in larger practices suggest that individuals learn by becoming members of a community, being mentored to do more tasks in different contexts within which the community operates."[31] One can see new players in a TRPG following the guidance of veterans, specifically noting what questions the experienced players ask, and how they engage the challenge. Language, like the rules of a game, is learned through interactions within a community. For example, Debra Nestel shows how role-playing exercises have been used to help biomedical students develop better communication skills. Students who underwent these exercises appreciated that role-playing gave them "opportunities for observation, rehearsal and discussion, realistic roles and alignment of roles with other aspects of the curriculum."[32] The role-playing simulation allowed the students to experience the same model of social community that they would face in their careers. Shaffer notes that a game system similarly "consists of arenas in which particular kinds of discourse are likely to recur."[33] Biomedical students were given the opportunity to practice this discourse in a smaller arena, and claimed to have gained benefits that could be carried on to their careers.

Nestel's results showed that realism was a crucial aspect of effective learning through role-playing for the biomedical students. It may seem that the fantastic and/or unrealistic settings of most TRPGs (as opposed to Nestel's exercises, which were "set" in the real world) would disrupt the creation of realism. However, the realism of TRPG settings relies primarily on the consistency of its own internal logic, rather than on its relation to the daily life of the player. Daniel Dayan's work with the sociology behind TRPGs reveals that "the fictional background or universe must be relatively convincing and may call for some amount of historical validity, but it is defined less in terms of historical realism than by the consistency of its imagined features."[34] Committing to the game's internal logic allows players to commit to the environment and gain the benefits of interacting within it.

Creating Agency

The narrativity, interactivity, and novelty of a TRPG serves to augment the sense of wonder and curiosity that the game elicits—most are, after all, designed primarily with entertainment in mind. However, Patricia Mugglestone argues that this type of curiosity is the "primary motive relevant to every teaching-learning situation, whatever the status of the target language, whatever type of course is being followed, whatever the learner's nationality, age, and level of language proficiency, whether he is a volunteer or conscript learner."[35] She found that "projects appeal to the curiosity motive if their content is interesting to the learner and if the learner is allowed to develop the project in his own way."[36] A TRPG allows an instructor to adapt a system of learning mechanics into almost any story, generating content tailored to the interests of the students, while simultaneously providing them with the means and inclination to pursue their own method of interaction with this content.

Student interaction in the classroom has long been touted as a desirable goal, yet educators have disagreed on implementation. Few of these methods can reliably tap into the enthusiasm of the students in the way a TRPG can, and thus only draw a surface-level of participation without deeper learning taking place. Two examples of exercises that come close include scripted dialogues and their more free-form counterparts, role-playing exercises. Research shows that the latter, being most similar to the TRPG model, is the more effective method and hints at the benefits of utilizing more detailed game systems in the classroom.

While the scripted dialogue is an exercise in memorization, preparation, and careful enunciation, the role-playing exercise relies on spontaneous activity, active engagement, and a willingness to make mistakes. Olle Linge, publisher of the language-learning website "Hacking Chinese," attests to the superiority of role-playing over scripted dialogue, arguing that this creativity encourages players to prepare for situations and utilize language in ways that go beyond the day-to-day norm, increasing both the range of their language skills and the scope of their confidence.[37] Robert J. Di Pietro presents a variation of this exercise in which the role-playing scenario is not necessarily a linear story. These open-ended scenarios do not immediately present the students with all available data. Instead, as with a true TRPG, the participants must interact with the scenario further in order to learn how to solve it.[38]

Placing the direction of the language lesson into the hands of the student builds a sense of agency. This agency serves as an effective means of pacing the presentation of information and assessing performance. A player can only progress on to the next stage of the game if they truly understand the previous sections they have completed; Gee and Hayes note, "Wittgenstein said that we know whether someone knows something if they know 'how to go on' in a course of action."[39] Learning scientist Dan Schwartz reveals that individual choices are an effective assessor of one's understanding of a topic. "When this focus on discovering and making good choices lessens, affinity spaces deteriorate. They may become sites devoted more to socialization or popularity, and fights arise over status, belonging, and how to behave."[40] TRPGs are driven primarily by the decisions of the players; as such, every decision is already being scrutinized and assessed by not only the game master, but the other players, for its validity as a means of progression through the game's challenge.

For Gillian Ladousse, TRPGs fall into the "category of language learning techniques sometimes referred to as low input—high output … the teacher-centered presentation phase of the lesson is very short."[41] Di Pietro emphasizes that, despite the evidence that this sort of exercise may put a greater burden upon the instructor's workload, much of the creative work—designing the scenarios and the consequences for player actions—can be handled by the students, who may actually be best served by doing so.[42]

Perhaps the best argument for including agency in language lessons is to prepare students to speak with their own voice. Gee and Hayes say that "all games treat players as designers" in the way they are given permission to manipulate and work around new possibilities within the rules.[43] In that sense, all languages treat their users as linguists as well—the rules of grammar dictate how, but not *what*, to speak and write. A language-learner has a responsibility for the manner in which they use their new language, and games give an opportunity to practice that responsibility.

Emotional Engagement

Watching a TRPG in action, it is clear that this agency opens the door for emotional investment on the part of the players. After using TRPG elements to construct survival adventure discussion games in his French Conversation class, William H. Bryant said, "One thing for certain, however, is that, used properly, these kinds of activities are usually very effective in engendering a lot of animated conversation and communication on the part of the students. The main reason for this is that the hypothetical situation presented … is … 'emotionally charged.'"[44] Engagement on this level can be a powerful motivational force for learning.

The diversity and customizability of TRPGs makes them excellent generators of engagement for a wide audience of students. Brian Phillips discusses how TRPGs can cover a vast range of story genres and game types, citing examples from genres such as fantasy, space adventure, spies, detectives, horror, superhero, time travel, and westerns.[45] Creators of TRPGs have proven again and again that there is almost no genre or narrative that these games cannot recreate. Their modularity and ability to adapt to player tastes is no small part of their appeal. It also makes them more effective as teaching tools: Scott Orr's work with Czech students who were interested in American culture inspired him to forgo the typical fantasy setting he had intended to utilize and instead adapted his exercise to take place in modern day America. Phillips argues that Orr's project "was very successful not only because it was a tool for learning English, or just a game, but because the students were able to role-play being members of a culture they were interested in."[46] Ken Rolston had a similar experience using the very simple *Ghostbusters* RPG by West End Games, which he used to great effect with his students in Taiwan, who proved to be avid fans of the films around which the game had been designed.

Of course, the perceived subversiveness of these games as educational tools when compared to traditional pedagogical methods is surely no small part of their appeal. Educational game designers note that "at some level, the power of these play spaces is that participation is interest-driven and not a mandatory activity imposed on the player … in fact, play itself is a transgressive behavior, where players take on roles that are unavailable or inappropriate in their real lives."[47] Care must be taken that this transgressive element is not lost in the transition into the classroom.

Educational TRPGs: Do, Happy Birthday Robot, Magicians *and Reacting Classes*

Despite their educational origins and abundant pedagogical advantages, the novelty and unconventionality of TRPGs has prevented them from being applied or studied in widespread educational contexts. However, the work of several innovators illustrates what a truly educational TRPG might look like, as well as how TRPGs might be included into the ESL classroom.

Do: *A Writing and Vocabulary TRPG*

Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple was recently published as an independent TRPG by game designer Daniel Solis. What sets *Do* apart from other TRPGs is its use of language as its core mechanic. While many TRPGs use dice-rolling as a means of advancing the story and progressing through the game, *Do* disregards chance entirely and instead makes the effective use of words and writing the primary driving mechanic.

In *Do,* players (the game is recommended for 3–5 children aged 12 and up) take on the role of well-meaning, troubleshooting monks who must read prepared "letters" written and mailed by the many individuals in need of their help. These letters (the game includes several examples of varying difficulty, and fans of the game have begun posting their own creations online) each include a list of keywords at the bottom, chosen from the content of the letter. These keywords must not only be understood properly in the context of the letter, but must be utilized correctly by the players over the course of their own writing. On their turn, players have the opportunity to write short sentences describing what happens to their character in the course of attempting to complete his or her mission. Meanwhile, the other players take on the role of "troublemakers," writing sentences that creatively throw new problems and circumstances into the active player's path. Essentially, these troublemakers serve as mischievous plot devices to enhance the game's dramatic tension. However, the conditions to win the game and achieve the best possible ending for your monk requires that these descriptive sentences—both those of the players and those of the troublemakers—must make use of the available keywords.

A feature of TRPGs that *Do* usefully demonstrates is how the game naturally scales in difficulty; as the story progresses and grows more intricate and engaging, the number of available keywords gradually dwindles, forcing the players to think creatively and use words with which they are less comfortable. This enables a state of play that game designers call "flow," a crucial element in harnessing the educational power of games. Flow is achieved when every activity the player engages in is at the very edge of their capabilities. The engaging elements of a TRPG like *Do*—the ability to guide and interact with the developing story—are made further engaging by the rising difficulty of the keyword list, which challenges players with limitations while still giving them full creative agency as to how the words are used.[48]

Happy Birthday Robot: *A Sentence-Building Game*

This same sense of flow is created in a second of Daniel Solis' games, *Happy Birthday Robot*. Aimed at slightly younger audiences (3–5 players aged

10 and up), *Happy Birthday Robot* asks players to narrate the adventures of a friendly robot while adhering to strict rules regarding how many words can be used on their turn. This provides players with the challenge of constructing meaningful, complete sentences, sometimes cooperatively, often in novel and unexpected ways. The rules of the game are structured in such a way that the sentences inevitably must grow longer and more complex; however, this degree of increasing complexity advances in direct proportion to the success the player has already achieved. This built-in balance ensures that the player is always kept at a perfect level of flow, where learning can most efficiently occur.

Happy Birthday Robot shows how a goal as simple as "write a sentence" can be turned into an experimental workshop for a student to creatively learn. TRPGs are uniquely suited for creating these contexts, placing players in imaginary circumstances, such as that of a problem-solving monk or an attendee at a birthday party. At the same time, by remaining a game, players do not feel the same pressure that they might in a real-world situation where their language skills are under scrutiny. Rather, the pressure is manifested within the context of the role the player adopts. Players experience the pressure second-hand through their character, thus preparing themselves through practice for the pressures of communicating in their secondary language.[49]

Magicians: *The Language Learning TRPG*

Magicians by Kyle Simons is a TRPG built for the express purpose of teaching young learners (the game is designed for all ages) the Korean language. Taking on the role of young wizards in a *Harry-Potter*–like fantasy setting steeped in Korean mythology, players must defeat foes and overcome challenges using their fledgling magical skills. As in the case of *Do* and *Happy Birthday Robot*, the educational method is built into the mechanics of the game. Players must properly pronounce and arrange the words of the "language of magic" in order to successfully cast their repertoire of magic spells. The language is, of course, Korean, and the "magic words" amount to descriptions of the effect that the player wishes to create—keywords and short sentences that the player will then learn to associate with particular spells and actions within the game. In order to assess the player's level of expertise, the game utilizes convenient smartphone apps that use microphone and voice analysis software to assign a score to the player's mastery of pronunciation, grammar, and syntax of a given word or phrase. This score is then reflected by the efficacy (or lack thereof) of the spell within the game world.[50]

Magicians represents a great example of how a TRPG can create a fun and safe learning environment for students. By assigning the speaking of a secondary language as the primary game mechanic, students cannot progress beyond their skill level except by choice. Their ability to advance the story and manipulate the game world is directly proportional to their mastery of speaking skills. Yet, as a game, *Magicians* keeps players engaged and interested in mastering the skills necessary to progress, without feeling that they are being judged or criticized. The game's setting is familiar enough as a premise, yet also draws heavily from Korean culture, allowing students to learn about the context of the language even as they learn it. In terms of establishing effective educational context, *Magicians* represents one of the best examples in the TRPG industry.

Magicians also highlights how materially inexpensive these games can be. By requiring an app or other voice-analysis device, *Magicians* actually represents a relatively resource-heavy TRPG—most require little more than pencils, paper, and a handful of dice. This allows TRPGs to be less costly, easier to implement, and vastly more flexible than other digital or electronic tools presented by the gamification community. The modularity of these games is perhaps their best feature for use in the classroom: with some work by the game master, the rules from different systems can be cherry-picked, updated, modified, and omitted to suit the educator's needs. Most of the examples being presented here underwent several rounds of beta testing and continue to be tweaked as necessary. Even now, game developers and educators who have found *Magicians* to be a useful tool already have projects underway to reverse-engineer and adapt the game system to accommodate other languages, such as Japanese, Chinese, and English. And, because these games are so simple and resource-light, these projects require very little in the way of development. Most of the work required is no more complex than what a teacher would put into an ordinary lesson plan.

Reacting Classes, Role-Playing History

In *Minds on Fire*, Mark C. Carnes details the numerous successes that he and his colleagues have experienced running role-playing scenarios in the higher-education classroom. Carnes is a professor, pioneer, and advocate of "Reacting to the Past," a program of classes that places students into the roles of individuals who lived during moments of historical importance. For the duration of the game, which typically lasts a third of the semester, students role-play as these historical figures, covering events as diverse as the fall of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens in 403 B.C., to the 1945 conflicts of independent India, to the trial of Galileo.

Carnes reports unforeseen success in engaging students' hearts and minds with his Reacting methodology. “Reacting faculty report unprecedented levels of student attendance, engagement, and participation,” he claims, explaining how the classes demand a level of commitment from students that many classes simply don’t require. This commitment can make or break the success of the class as a whole. “Role-immersion pedagogy has by no means solved all of its challenges,” he tells us, “but while traditional pedagogies have evolved in ways that accommodate student disengagement, Reacting classes cannot.” He argues that this is a refreshing change from college courses that allow students to coast by with minimal engagement, minimal effort, and minimal learning.[51]

Carnes cites that Queens College CUNY and its faculty “have struggled for years to promote discussion in classes with so many non–English speakers.” He notes the results found by professors Ann Davison and Susan Lantz Goldhaber, suggesting great potential for Reacting classes to generate linguistic confidence. “As students focused on persuading peers, their inhibitions evaporated.… Davison and Goldhaber had tried many approaches to teaching English skills but with this arrangement (and Reacting) the results were ‘fabulous.’”[52] Students who participate in these role-playing exercises come away with a new idea of what they can accomplish as learners in life. Carnes reports that “after taking Reacting, statistically significant numbers of students at three colleges were more likely to agree that you *can* improve your intelligence and that an old dog *can* learn new tricks.”[53] This suggests that the classes changed how many students viewed themselves and their language capabilities. This has a demonstrable impact on language learning:

> Barbara Gombach of the Carnegie Corporation found positive examples of the Reacting program’s success while observing a Korean student participating in the *New York and the American Revolution* scenario. Carnes reports that while others plunged into a debate on whether New York should join the radicals in Philadelphia or remain loyal to the Crown, the Korean student was animated but edgy. He stepped forward, obviously intent on speaking, but the words failed to come and he stepped back. The debate swirled elsewhere. After a few minutes, he again stepped forward … but again he faltered. On his third try, his agitation was visible. Then, as the hubbub mounted, he opened his mouth and nearly shouted. The English words tumbled out with such fluency that he seemed startled by them … then the student smiled. “He was no longer a frustrated spectator: he was in the game,” Gombach recalled.[54]

The success of Reacting classes is attributed to their ability to exemplify Lev Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development.” Carnes describes the zone as “an educational ideal that helps students lose their shyness and ‘linguistic self-consciousness.’” Gombach, who herself struggled with a second language, recognized in that relieved Korean student the “mysterious moment when the brain shifts from translating conscious thoughts from one language to another and instead expresses itself in the new language.”[55]

Conclusion

As TRPGs struggle to gain a foothold in the classroom, many educators have begun implementing them in the form of after-school programs. My own experiences using TRPG-based after-school programs in St. Gabriel's College in Bangkok and Colegio San Marcos in Chile were refreshing and exciting for the majority of students. Today, a similar environment of collaboration and passionate learning is present in after-school programs like those run by the Brooklyn Strategist, a "community-based, interactive board- and card-game center, café and social club."[56] The Strategist operates several game-based after-school programs, including programs oriented toward ancient strategy games, word games, and TRPGs. Game experts like Lance Paio and Arlin Mae ensure that a curriculum of learning and engagement supplements the fun that draws larger and larger crowds from local schools to establishments like the Strategist.

Game-based learning is gaining traction as an effective tool within many contexts. TRPGs present clear advantages as a pedagogical method, and the language-learning classroom is an ideal context for testing effective uses of this method. Acceptance of TRPGs in the language-learning classroom will require a more widespread acknowledgement of both TRPGs and games in general as educationally effective tools. Primarily, however, it will require an evolution in our thinking of education and engagement as a whole, and recognition that "learning, even when occurring within a video game, is simultaneously a deeply individual and thoroughly cultural affair."[57] Only then can we create effective learning contexts and environments for our students, both within and outside of the classroom.

NOTES

1. Cyrus Farivar, "Foreign-Language Software Provides a Comprehensive Approach Learning," *MacWorld*, January 19, 2006, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.macworld.com/article/1048966/rosettastone3.html.

2. Isabel Berwick, "Learn Mandarin the Chineasy Way," *FT Magazine*, August 9, 2013, accessed December 6, 2014, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/71f0838a-ffba-11e2-b990–00144feab7de.html.

3. Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 144.

4. Erica Rosenfeld Halverson, "Participatory Media Spaces: A Design Perspective on Learning with Media and Technology in the Twenty-First Century," in *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 248.

5. Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Scottsdale, AZ: Paraglyph, 2005), 33.

6. Carnes, 19.

7. Karl Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-Based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2012), 33–35.

8. Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 20.

9. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2006), 80.

10. M. VanMents, *The Effective Use of Role Play: A Handbook for Teachers and Trainers—Revised Edition* (London: Kogan Page, 1989).

11. Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17.

12. Ken Jones, *Simulations in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 113.

13. Ian A. MacNab, Kriegsspiel *and the Sandtable: Using Tabletop Wargames to Teach Tactics and Exercise Decision Making in the Classroo*m (West Point: U.S. Military Academy, 2012), 1.

14. Nicola Whitton, *Game Theory for Learning & Teaching: Research and Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 19.

15. Paul Cardwell, "Role Playing Games and the Gifted Student," *Gifted Educational International* 11, no. 1 (1995): 39–46.

16. David F. Swink and Dale Richard Buchanan, "The Effects of Sociodramatic Goal-Oriented Role Play and Non-Goal-Oriented Role Play on Locus of Control," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 40, no. 5 (September 1984): 1179.

17. John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Dugid, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning," *Educational Researcher* 18, no. 1 (1989): 33.

18. McGonigal, 240.

19. Whitton, 45.

20. Sasha Barab, Patrick Pettyjohn, Melissa Gresalfi, and Maria Solomou, "Game-Based Curricula, Personal Engagement, and the *Modern Prometheus* Design Project," in *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 307.

21. *Ibid.*, 308.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 323.

24. Douglas B. Clark and Mario Martinez-Garza, "Prediction and Explanation as Design Mechanics in Conceptually Integrated Digital Games to Help Players Articulate the Tacit Understandings They Build Through Game Play," in *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 284.

25. Salen and Zimmerman, 45.

26. *Ibid.*, 158.

27. Whitton, 45.

28. Terri Toles-Patkin, "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (1986): 3.

29. Brian Phillips, "Roleplaying Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom," *Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China, Proceedings* (1994): 12.

30. James Paul Gee and Elisabeth Hayes, "Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-

Based Learning," in *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133.

31. David Williamson Shaffer, "Models of Situated Action: Computer Games and the Problem of Transfer," in *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 404.

32. Debra Nestel and Tanya Tierney, "Role-play for Medical Students Learning About Communication: Guidelines for Maximising Benefits," *BMC Medical Education* 7.1 (2007): 3, 1.

33. Shaffer, 425.

34. Phillips, 10.

35. Patricia Mugglestone, "The Primary Curiosity Motive," *English Language Teaching Journal* 31, 2 (1977): 112.

36. *Ibid.*, 112.

37. Olle Linge, "Role-Playing as a Way to Expand Your Chinese," Hacking Chinese, July 3, 2013.

38. Robert J. Di Pietro, "The Open-Ended Scenario: A New Approach to Conversation." *TESOL Quarterly* 16, 1 (1982): 15.

39. Gee and Hayes, 147.

40. *Ibid.*, 148.

41. Gillian Porter Ladousse, *Role Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

42. Di Pietro, 15.

43. Gee and Hayes, 131.

44. William H Bryant, "Realistic Activities for the Conversation Class," *The French Review* 59, 3 (1986): 347.

45. Phillips, 4–6.

46. *Ibid.*, 9.

47. Barab, et al., 308.

48. Daniel Solis, "Daniel Solis," *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple*, Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010.

49. Daniel Solis, *Happy Birthday Robot!* Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010.

50. "Magicians' RPG Makes Language Study Magical," *Pop Mythology*, May 27, 2013.

51. Carnes, 144.

52. *Ibid.*, 140.

53. *Ibid.*, 173.

54. *Ibid.*, 141.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Brooklyn Strategist, "About the Brooklyn Strategist," Brooklyn Strategist Webpage, August 20, 2013, accessed April 19, 2015, https://www.thebrooklynstrategist.com/about.

57. Shaffer, 425.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barab, Sasha, Patrick Pettyjohn, Melissa Gresalfi, and Maria Solomou. "Game-Based Curricula, Personal Engagement, and the *Modern Prometheus* Design Project." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Barton, David, and K. Tusting, eds. *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power, and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Berwick, Isabel. "Learn Mandarin the Chineasy Way." FT Magazine. August 9, 2013. Accessed December 6, 2014. http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/71f0838a-ffba-11e2-b990-00144feab7de.html.

Black, Rebecca W., and Stephanie M. Reich. "Culture and Community in a Virtual World for Young Children." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Brooklyn Strategist. "About the Brooklyn Strategist." Brooklyn Strategist Webpage. August 20, 2013. Accessed April 19, 2015. https://www.thebrooklynstrategist.com/about.

Brown, A. L., A. Collins, and P. Dugid. "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning." *Educational Researcher* 18, no. 1 (1989): 32–42.

Bryant, William H. "Realistic Activities for the Conversation Class." *The French Review*, 59, 3 (February 1986): 347–354.

Cardwell, Paul. "Role Playing Games and the Gifted Student." *Gifted Educational International* 11 (1995): 30–46.

Carnes, Mark C. *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Clark, Douglas B., and Mario Martinez-Garza. "Prediction and Explanation as Design Mechanics in Conceptually Integrated Digital Games to Help Players Articulate the Tacit Understandings They Build Through Game Play." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Davis, Randall S. "Simulations: A Tool for Testing 'Virtual Reality' in the Language Classroom." *Curriculum and Evaluation* 95 (1996): 313–17.

DiPietro, Robert J. "The Open-Ended Scenario: A New Approach to Conversation." *TESOL Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1982): 15–20.

diSessa, Andrea A. *Changing Minds Computers, Learning, and Literacy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

Elbes, Yousef. "The Importance of Multilingualism." Elbes Multilingual Communication. May 1, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2014.

Farivar, Cyrus. "Foreign-Language Software Provides a Comprehensive Approach to Learning." *MacWorld*. January 19, 2006. Accessed December 3, 2014. http://www.macworld.com/article/1048966/rosettastone3.html.

Games, I. A. "Three Dialogues: A Framework for the Analysis and Assessment of Twenty-First Century Literacy Practices, and Its Use in the Context of Game Design within Gamestar Mechanic." *E-Learning* 5, no. 4 (2008): 396–417.

Garfield, Richard. "Metagames." In *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying*, edited by Jim Dietz. Charleston: Jolly Roger Games, 2000.

Gee, J. P. *Sociolinguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourse*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1990.

Gee, James Paul, and Elisabeth Hayes. "Nurturing Affinity Spaces and Game-Based Learning." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Halverson, Erica Rosenfeld. "Participatory Media Spaces: A Design Perspective on Learning with Media and Technology in the Twenty-First Century." In *Games,* *Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Jones, Ken. *Simulations in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Kapp, Karl. *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2012.

Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Scottsdale: Paraglyph, 2005.

Ladousse, Gillian Porter. *Role Play*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Linge, Olle. "Role-Playing as a Way to Expand Your Chinese." Hacking Chinese. July 3, 2013. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://www.hackingchinese.com/role-playing-as-a-way-to-expand-your-language-competence/.

Macklin, Colleen, and John Sharp. "'Freakin' Hard': Game Design and Issue Literacy." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

MacNab, Ian A. "Kriegsspiel and the Sandtable: Using Tabletop Wargames to Teach Tactics and Exercise Decision Making in the Classroom." West Point: U.S. Military Academy, 2012.

"Magicians' RPG Makes Language Study Magical." *Pop Mythology*. May 27, 2013. Accessed January 1, 2015. http://www.popmythology.com/magicians-rpg-makes-language-study-magical/.

Matsen, Frederick A. "Simulation as a Language-Learning Tactic." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 101.52 (2004): 18053–8057. *Best Practice—Best Language Teaching Methods*. Sabhal Mor Ostaig. Accessed December 9, 2014.

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

Mugglestone, Patricia. "The Primary Curiosity Motive," *English Language Teaching Journal* 31, no. 2 (1977): 111–116.

Nestel, Debra, and Tanya Tierney. "Role-Play for Medical Students Learning About Communication: Guidelines for Maximising Benefits." *BMC Medical Education* 7.1 (2007): 3. Accessed December 9, 2014.

Phillips, Brian. "Roleplaying Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom." *Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China, Proceedings* (1994): 625–48. *Interactive Dramas*. Crane Publishing, Ltd., May 1994. Accessed December 9, 2014.

Richards, Jack C., and Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Shaffer, David Wiliamson. "Models of Situated Action: Computer Games and the Problem of Transfer." In *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, edited by Constance Steinkuehler, Kurt Squire, and Sasha Barab. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Solis, Daniel. "Daniel Solis." *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple*. Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010.

Solis, Daniel. *Happy Birthday, Robot*! Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2010.

Steinkuehler, Constance, Kurt Squire, and Sasha A. Barab. *Games, Learning, and Soci-*

ety: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Swink, David F., and Dale Richard Buchanan. "The Effects of Sociodramatic Goal-Oriented Role Play and Non-Goal-Oriented Role Play on Locus of Control." *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 40, no. 5 (September 1984): 1178–1183.

Toles-Patkin, Terri. "Rational Coordination in the Dungeon." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (1986): 1–14.

Van Ments, M. The Effective Use of Role Play: A Handbook for Teachers and Trainers—Revised Edition. London: Kogan Page, 1989.

W3Techs. "W3Techs—World Wide Web Technology Surveys." *W3Techs*. Web Technology Surveys, November 1, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2014.

Whitton, Nicola. *Game Theory for Learning & Teaching: Research and Theory*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2014.

“Do you want to be Dr. Frankenstein or Edna Pontellier?”

How Getting into Character Enhances Literary Studies

JONATHAN M. BRADLEY

Introduction

“I thought he was interesting.” Instructors of survey literature courses mostly aimed at non-majors will recognize this response all too well. It often comes up when students are questioned about their impressions of a given character from a work of literature. At times getting more than this bland nothing-statement from students concerning some of the most complex characters ever imagined can be harder than getting them to read the text in the first place. Among the multitude of elements teachers want students to analyze, such as setting, symbolism, language use, etc., none is, in this author’s opinion, more important than characterization. Studying characterization builds empathy and gives students a broader sense of the human experience that can be difficult to obtain through other means, and both of these lessons are tied closely with two typically desired learning outcomes: that students gain a greater understanding of the people and culture that produced a text and that students develop a sense of themselves as readers and active participants in the texts. However, many students often have trouble stepping into the mind of another or viewing the experiences of fictional characters as having any impact on themselves. This poses a particularly stark problem for literature courses, where the ability to empathize with others allows for deeper understanding of their circumstances and leads to more well-rounded and astute analysis of those characters. In my experience, one of the biggest barriers to students when it comes to writing about literature is why they should care; students often see the characters in stories as unreal, and even when students do try to analyze a character, they often view their lives with "what would I do in their situation" or "what do my values have to say about this situation" as their guiding questions. Getting students to set themselves aside is at the heart of writing good analysis, and pushing students to this point is a task that role-playing can prove vital to accomplishing. So when I recently prepared to teach a sophomore-level literature survey, I decided early on that finding new ways of getting students to engage with characters would be a priority. I wanted students to have what Jason Cox refers to as an "interpersonal and intrapersonal experience,"[1] a chance to learn something not only about their fellow students, but also about themselves, or at least, a version of themselves they perhaps did not know existed yet. So I turned to *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*).

I started playing *D&D* a bit later in life than most who love the game—I did not start until graduate school—but it immediately grabbed my attention, both for the personal enjoyment I gained by playing and for what I saw as its possible pedagogical benefits. However, despite the fact that I knew the game had a lot of potential in the classroom, I set it aside. Nothing puts students off more than a teacher shoe-horning an assignment into a class to accommodate one of his or her own pet pleasures even though it does not work as an assignment or is not appropriate for the course. I also agree with Jason Cox who, in "Role-playing Games in Arts, Research and Education," argues that "Gaming in education is not meant as a tonic to make education palatable. With established cognitive, social and emotional benefits, games often provide an environment in which students may be willing to take the risks that foster their ethical, moral and social development."[2] I did not want to use a role-playing game (RPG) *just* because it would be fun; it needed to have a strong pedagogical purpose. But I knew that if the game did indeed have such potential, its use in the classroom would become obvious eventually. And when I started brainstorming ways to get students more engaged with character analysis, the framework established by *D&D* proved to be as useful as I had hoped.

D&D requires that players each embody an alternate persona. As a player, it is often tempting to simply have one's character do whatever one might do in that situation, but such characters become predictable and ultimately boring to play. As a form of escapism, the game works best when one can enter a new frame of mind and leave one's own behind. This type of thinking, which requires the ability to process someone else's motivations, context, and experiences; synthesize an appropriate response based on these factors (even though they may differ widely from one's own); and attempt to see the response reach some kind of successful conclusion is at the heart of empathy. This link between RPGs and empathy is detailed by Cox, who states that RPGs "facilitate exploring and evoking unfamiliar ideas and emotions, including an understanding that identity is a shifting and intertextual construct. […] RPGs have the potential to fulfill that promise as few other art forms do."[3] Likewise, Jennifer Grouling Cover describes this same phenomenon in *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, telling the story of gamers sneaking off to the bathroom to cry over the circumstances facing their characters.[4] Furthermore, in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, James Gee goes beyond just connecting games like RPGs and empathy, instead defining three "selfs" that are created by such games—virtual self, real-world self, and projective self. He argues that these identities all lead to a fuller sense of empathy, and in the case of the projective self, "the learner comes to know that he or she has the capacity, at some level to take on the virtual identity as a real world identity."[5] Zach Waggoner builds on Gee's work, using the three selfs to do a phenomenological study of video game players, primarily playing RPGs. He found that the connection between a player and their character, even among players who wished to "dominate" the game rather than "experience" it, made the participant "more willing to consciously take ownership of the connections between their diegetic and extra-diegetic actions, decisions, and morals."[6] In addition to this increased ownership in the actions of another, Waggoner also found that even among non-gamers, connections were still created. Despite their claims to the contrary, Waggoner found evidence of association and personal stake in moral decisions between the players and their avatars, suggesting that even resistant students who might go into a game with no expectation of learning, empathy and association will still likely take place.[7] This outcome is particularly relevant for literature classrooms, where resistant students often take away very little; in these cases, *D&D* may just provide some of the most poignant experiences they walk away with.

Despite the evidence that seems to suggest that games in higher education are a clear boon to learning, Nicola Whitton's research in *Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education* suggests that the answer is not so clear cut. In her survey of the literature, she found ample examples of instructors struggling to get students to engage with games in the classroom, and in her own research, she learned that fewer students played games or were interested in playing games than predicted.[8] She also learned that fewer students were interested in using gaming for learning purposes, even among those who were gamers in their free time. Only 63 percent of students in this group said they expected games to be motivational for learning, although she does provide reasoning for this outcome, suggesting that "prior negative experiences with educational games" and other factors may have contributed to this response.[9] However, despite this finding, Whitton's research still led her to take a positive stance on games in the classroom, so long as they are "thoughtfully designed, with sound pedagogic principles at their heart, have very specific and clearly communicated learning outcomes, and obvious benefits over other methods of learning."[10] These guidelines are valuable for anyone planning to bring RPGs into the classroom, and the assignment outlined here attempts to fulfill each of Whitton's principles.

So it became clear that RPGs, particularly the tabletop variety, could be used as a pedagogical tool to drastically enhance students' understanding of characterization in works of classic and modern fiction, and, through experiment in the classroom, other potential approaches using digital tabletop environments presented themselves.

Using RPGs in the classroom is not a new idea, though. In *The Multiplayer Classroom*, Lee Sheldon details his alternate reality game that he played in a college classroom, in which he turns percentage points and grades into experience points and levels, having the game design course be a game in itself.[11] Many other fields—such as Ecology,[12] Astronomy,[13] Education,[14] Software Engineering,[15] and International Studies[16]—have already incorporated RPG elements into their curricula. Among these fields, the use of RPGs is often for a very different purpose. Most often, the goal of the game is to give students job experience without requiring an internship or similar on-the-job training; however, many researchers are finding that students pick up skills from the game they were not expecting. In the field of English, specifically the teaching of literature, the published scholarship is thinner, yet the related field of composition does provide a more prolific body of scholarship. One of the earliest studies in the field is Lynn Troyka and Jerold Nudelman's *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening through Simulation Games*, in which they argue that "Simulation-games give you the opportunity to experience the excitement and challenge of taking action in a complex world," and as a result, "you'll find that communication skills such as speaking, listening, writing, and reading are a natural part of taking action."[17] These latter two skills, writing and reading, are just as important for literature courses as they are for composition. In "Developing and Extending Gaming Pedagogy: Designing a Course as Game," Justin Hodgson also uses RPGs in a digital writing course, though his stance differs some from the approach taken here; Hodgson argues that a course should be modeled "explicitly on an actual game [...] rather than simply borrowing gaming principles ad hoc."[18] While the assignment presented here borrows heavily from *D&D*, it does not so closely adhere as Hodgson's class does to *World of Warcraft* (his chosen game).

In addition to composition instructors, numerous literature teachers have written blogs concerning their successes and failures trying to incorporate *D&D* into the classroom, mostly focusing on a single story, such as *Beowulf*, that they turned into a game for students. Armann Halldorsson's article "Teaching English through Role Playing Games" focuses on using the game to teach English, though Halldorsson does emphasize story conflict as a theme in his course.[19] Other authors, such as Gee, mention literature and its connections to RPGs, though they do not delve into the pedagogy of RPGs and literature. Finally, some authors have written up their experience with RPGs in the literature classroom as it applies to a single text, such as Brian Phillips in his article, "Interactive Pynchon: Teaching Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* with Roleplaying Games."[20] While numerous approaches to RPGs in the classroom have been documented, a structure for literature-based, generally applicable pedagogy is fairly untouched ground, which is the gap this research hopes to fill.

The Exam

Using my experience with *D&D*, I designed a midterm exam for my survey course that asked students to choose a character from a work we had read for class and come prepared to "be" that character for a day. My students were nervous at first, so I had to explain a few conditions. One, students did not have to dress up, attempt to create accents, or in any other way attempt to physically mimic their characters. They were free to do so if they wished, but it was not required and would not affect their grade for better or worse. Second, students would not be graded on their performance. Their grade would be based on their response to the exercise in a paper they wrote after the class period. My goal for asking them to take on these characters was for them to embody the experience of someone else, particularly someone from our readings. I encouraged students to reread the works containing their chosen character, and in this second read-through, pay particular attention to how the character reacts to both events and other characters. From this evidence, they would need to develop a sense of how their character would likely react to other scenarios not found in the original story.

Once students chose their characters, each wrote it down for me and turned it in so that I would have an idea of what to expect. They were aware that when they came in on the day of the exam, I would present them a scenario that they would have to play out along with their fellow students, all of whom would also be in character. They were all also told that each person would have to speak at least once, and in this way I assured that all students would have an experience to work with for the paper that followed. In essence, I had recreated a game of *D&D* for my students, who, after being given predesigned characters, would follow the adventure that I the Dungeon Master (DM) created for them.

Despite the fact that the assignment was both inspired and molded by my experience playing *D&D*, I purposely chose to avoid referring to the assignment with references to *D&D* or even as an RPG. I did this to avoid the negative connotations that some students have with the game or genre, which includes not only the popular media interpretation of *D&D* as a game for "nerds" or "outcasts," a stereotype that seems to be waning, but also with problems highlighted by Jonathan Mozier et al. in "Simulation and Games: Overcoming the Barriers to Their Use in Higher Education," who find that "some students learning with simulations and games associated them with 'childish' activities."[21] While an instructor cannot completely avoid this latter concern in any course using games as a learning tool, avoiding giving the students the chance to associate the exercise with any of their preconceived notions about *D&D* or RPGs in general seemed likely to help avoid the concern addressed by Mozier et al. Depending on the class that other instructors are working with, such a decision might not be required in all instances. While overall I had an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the assignment from students, even students who were normally reluctant to take part in class because they did not want to be in a required literature course, I still had some students who did not like or want to do the assignment. Any instructor attempting such pedagogy should be ready to receive this pushback, though for me it was mild and only from a couple of students. In general, I had far more requests to do more similar activities in the future than I had complaints.

On the day of the exam, I brought a voice recorder that was placed in the center of the room (I later posted the recording to our class learning management system page so students could consult it while writing the paper). The scenario I provided was as follows:

> In this scenario, a large meteorite is heading toward Earth. It will destroy all life on the surface of the planet, but luckily, the government has created underground bunkers that should allow human life to continue on this planet. The problem, however, is that there is only room in the bunkers for a small percentage of people. Therefore, a representative has been sent to your community to find people who can contribute something useful to humanity's survival. At the town meeting, you will each be given a chance to justify your inclusion in the underground bunkers. After each person has had a chance to speak, the floor will be opened for debate, at which point you may bring up, in turn, any concerns or suggestions for the operation that you may have. After the allotted time, a decision will be made and the chosen group will be allowed into the bunker. (See Appendix 1 for the complete assignment sheet).

From this prompt, I experienced one of the most rewarding days I have had as a teacher, and as my feedback from students revealed, many of them took "the most enjoyable exam ever."

For the class, students had read a number of works in different forms (novels, short-stories, poetry, and plays) and from a multitude of different time periods and locations. So we ended up with an array of characters whose interaction with one another ended up being entertaining for both the students and me. One student playing Stanley from *A Streetcar Named Desire* came on aggressively at first, attempting to shut down the value of the other characters, particularly women, before coming back and apologizing for flying off the handle. His demeanor followed the character in the book, and the cycle of abuse and remorse was better articulated by this student's behavior than our previous class discussion really ever touched on. Many other students played their characters well; however, character overlap was a concern that I would likely address in the future.

In choosing characters, I had some overlap from students. In some cases, multiple students choosing the same character worked out very well, and one pair of students who had chosen the same character, Guy from Edwidge Danticat's "A Wall of Fire Rising," decided to each play a separate side of the character's personality, as they agreed the character seemed to exhibit drastic personality swings. This maneuver alone seemed to help students better comprehend just how complex the character was, as two students could play him very differently yet still seem accurate to the original. But while some students took advantage of the overlap to create more complex representations, others used the overlap as an out. I had some students simply echo the sentiments of other students playing the same character, resulting in less participation and insight. Moving forward with the assignment, I would require that students provide me with their character choices farther in advance and institute a first-come-first-served approach to each character to prevent overlap. In addition to the overlap, some students simply did not always act in accordance with their character, swinging into a perspective that was drastically antithetical to anything present in the story. Much of this was the product of the immediacy of debate, and anyone who has played *D&D* will understand the frustration of making a choice in the heat of the moment that was not perhaps the most representative of the character one is trying to play. I had built in safeguards for such behavior, allowing students to address their mistakes in the follow-up essay, but these mistakes had a tendency to trip up other students who were not expecting such a response. At other times, the chaos produced brilliant responses, and while I think the mistakes are something an instructor attempting a similar assignment should be aware of and look for, in the end I do not believe one would want try to prevent them, as the inability to predict other characters is part of the fun of any RPG.

With ten minutes left in class, I ended the debate and provided students some time to prepare notes. The students had a few days to write the essay, and I gave them the final minutes of the course to take notes on the events that had just taken place. This step was vital to the success of the assignment, as students explained later that they had desperately needed both their notes and the recording of the debate to remember all of the evidence they needed to construct their argument.

Because students were required to critique their own performance, whether good or bad, using evidence from the text, students still wrote the kind of essay most English departments expect, and I received no complaints from students about this particular essay. Some students had stated later in feedback that they actually enjoyed writing the paper, as it incorporated an experience of characters in addition to traditional analysis, which helped solidify to me that such an approach was more beneficial than traditional means for getting students engaged with the text. And compared to the papers I had received in the class and others previously, the papers for this assignment overall showed both better engagement with the text and a better understanding of the complexity of any individual character. I also noticed a great deal more creativity in how they wrote; students seemed more willing to take risks and write essays outside the traditional structure. At first I was not sure what to attribute this change to, but the research of Tsui-shan Chung provided the answer. Chung found that participants in RPGs, particularly traditional RPGs (versus computer games), exhibited more creativity on aptitude tests.[22] Given this information, it seemed likely that the marked change in style probably stemmed from students' experience with the exam and the atmosphere of play that resulted from it.

Another benefit of the assignment was that even students who had trouble representing their characters in the classroom did a much better job in the paper. I worried that students who misrepresented characters might not be able to recognize that they had done so, but all of the students who did something drastically out of character acknowledged this fact in their papers. This kind of self-awareness and their accompanying ability to provide evidence for what a character is *not* both impressed and surprised me, and these students received similar marks for analysis as the students who were more accurate in their role-playing.

In addition to analyzing themselves, students were asked to analyze some of their fellow students, which meant better engagement with multiple texts. My biggest concern with asking students to do this was that all the students would choose another person who did a poorer job representing their character accurately and focus on this fact without providing much evidence. I was surprised to find students chose a wide range of characters in the classroom, and most focused on how well other students did rather than how poorly someone may have role-played the character.

When it comes to assessment for the assignment, I encourage instructors attempting this type of coursework to let the papers stand on their own. The character analysis was the goal of this assignment, and although it is hard, it is important to let the performance in the classroom not affect the grading. I found more often than expected that a student's performance in the RPG and their understanding of the character and their motivation as evidenced in the essay did not match up. If one lets the performance affect the students' grades, one may end up doing a disservice to them. The other benefit of relying on the essay for assessment and not the performance is accountability, both to the student and to one's department. If a student were to challenge the grade, there is the essay to point to, whereas claiming they did not do well during a class role-playing session would inevitably be more difficult to demonstrate. And if one works in a department that is not always supportive of experimental pedagogy, one always has student essays with character analysis in them to present when someone asks why a student in the class says they got to play Oedipus.

Making the Characters

From this initial assignment, it became clear that RPGs like *D&D* can indeed be adapted to the literature classroom for powerful effect. And judging by the overwhelmingly positive response from students who generally resent having to take the course as part of general education requirements, role-playing games could be used to revitalize student interest in a subject that struggles to keep their attention anymore.

One area that may provide ample ideas for students studying literature is the idea of character sheets. I had considered having students create character sheets for their chosen character when taking on my role-playing midterm; however, I had to abandon the idea because of time constraints. In the future, I would likely make this part of the course, as a way to allow for more explicit, in-depth analysis, solidify students' choices for characters early on, and to help them prepare for the role-playing experience. Having students take a character like Dr. Frankenstein and decide on an alignment could bring up rather serious discussions about his views on morality and law, and furthermore, letting such discussions take part in the classroom as part of our study of the text could help students access other perspectives that might broaden a narrow view of a character's motivations. Cox echoes this assertion, claiming that the intersection of game and class and of different student perspectives creates a "web of contexts [that] simultaneously makes characters feel like more than two-dimensional constructs, rounding them out and making them seem more 'human.' These games are notable as tools for education and the development of empathy because of how they rely on the collaboration of the players to create personal and societal contexts interact, overlap and impact one another."[23] This "web of contexts" and that collaboration required by it are essential to RPGs' success as a pedagogical tool, which is why it is imperative that all students participate in some form. A character's physical and mental statistics, when discussed by the class, may grant students clarity when it comes to a story's outcome. For example, a character's poor decision may make more sense if students realize that his or her mental abilities are lacking compared to the others they have been reading about, which is often a distinction that students fail to make. Even deciding what starting items a character would insist on could reveal something about their personality that was unclear before.

In a more traditional tabletop set-up with predesigned characters, though, students could be handed pre-made character sheets for the characters in the course texts and be expected to play them. This approach would be more beneficial for the teacher who wants to take on a RPG-style assignment in the classroom but who is still very focused (either by his or her own design or by pressure from the department) to prove student understanding of characters. One issue I noticed in my exercise was that students had a tendency to choose the characters with which they were most comfortable. They picked characters from stories they particularly enjoyed or understood, or in some cases, just characters from texts they had actually bothered to read. An instructor wishing to challenge students and require more demonstrated knowledge could approach the same exercise outlined by assigning characters and character sheets instead of letting students choose their own. This way, poor understanding or failure to read would become clear rather quickly as students fumbled to make sense of what this character wanted or desired. In order for this approach to have an impact on assessment, however, the instructor would likely have to start grading based on performance. While there is precedence for this in traditional RPGs, as DMs regularly punish players who stray from their alignment or act on player-knowledge, I found this to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. In a discipline that already suffers from accusations of subjective grading from both students and outside the humanities, telling student they did not act in accordance with a character as a justification for a grade seemed more than I would want to take on. In addition, the fear of public speaking may be enough to shut down some students (as it was in my course), so students who did read and have a good understanding of the character may give the impression of being underprepared. In my experience, the written reflection essay was enough evidence to reveal who had and had not prepared for the exam, and using the essay for assessment would be my recommendation to any instructor attempting a similar assignment. However, assigned character sheets is an alternative that other instructors may be more comfortable with and be willing to take on. Sheldon outlines what this might look like in his book; he provides digital character sheets for his students, allowing them to see a visualization of their characters' progression, and provides examples for instructors to use for inspiration.[24] While Sheldon's examples are of custom characters that students created as opposed to an already existing character in a piece of fiction, his examples are detailed and provide the kind of learning-centered design that should be employed instead of simply grabbing the closest character sheet from a player's guide.

Taking Them to Court

Both of the previously discussed assignments would be more formal (an exam and exam preparation), but role-playing has the potential for more intricate informal work as well. Under the right circumstances, one could even structure most, if not all, of class discussion around role-playing in the classroom, something that many instructors are beginning to do according to Cox: "Some teachers, however, have not only explained techniques for character and story-building but have also transformed their entire class into an approximation of a RPG."[25] Mark Carnes details some of these experiences in *Minds on Fire*, which explores role-immersion techniques for teaching history at the college level developed for Barnard College's Reacting to the Past history curriculum. For instance, Crane recounts Paul Fessler's successful attempt to turn a Western Civilization course into a simulation of political factioning that utilizes court-style debate and famous political/philosophical texts.[26] Furthermore, in "Simulating Utopia: Critical Simulation and the Teaching of Utopia" Francesco Crocco surveys the literature on role-playing and simulation in English courses for the past four decades and discusses his own experiment with these methods in a utopian literature course for which he developed a "competitive game in which five teams of students designed intentional communities—actually existing social experiments in utopian living" in an attempt to create what he coins a "critical simulation."[27]

While there are success stories of turning an entire course into an RPG, the benefit of doing so is debatable, as concern for student burnout would be very real, but the potential for experimentation and impressive gains in learning are there. For example, I designed a theme-based literature course that I hope to teach in the future entitled "Criminal Minds." The course would focus on works told specifically from the perspective of someone who has broken the law or at the very least social codes that result in some kind of reaction from society. Since one of the main concerns of this course will be how laws are made, justified, enforced, and why people choose to break those laws, class discussion will often ask students to defend or condemn these criminals or even the very laws they broke. Considering this, I remembered one of my fondest adventures playing *D&D* in graduate school, in which our characters were asked to take part in the trial of a non-player character (NPC) we believed to be innocent. This connection made me realize that this type of scenario would work perfectly well as a form of class discussion.

Mock trials have been a part of education for a long time, though, so the question becomes, how is this assignment unique to RPGs? Part of it is in concept and the other part is in desired outcomes. In traditional mock trial assignments, usually conducted in law, criminal justice, or international relation classes, the desired outcome of the exercise is to give students the impression of what such a courtroom will be like, how they will be expected to act, and give them experience reacting to possible scenarios while remaining in a safe environment. Second is structure. Mock courtrooms are meant to mimic, which is not as much of a concern for a literature-based course. The desired outcome of the proposed assignment is communal analysis of given characters through a fun and interactive experience. Authenticity to a courtroom structure is of little value, and in fact, could hinder both learning and fun. During our *D&D* session in the courtroom, we had wizards casting spells on witnesses, fistfights breaking out among the jury, and assassins roaming the judge's quarters. It was far from normal, and while students prosecuting Meursault from Camus' *The Stranger* are not likely to end up in such outlandish circumstances, the flexibility to allow students to write their own story is of vital importance.

For this type of work, students would come into class as though it were a courtroom, with the instructor acting as the judge. Students would volunteer to defend or prosecute certain characters while others would volunteer to play the defendant and eye witnesses. Overall, I would allow students more choice in their roles, but I would expect everyone to participate in a major role at least twice over the course of the semester. Any student not taking on a major role for that day would fall back to the position of jury member. One of the goals of setting up class this way would be to give students a safe space to disagree with each other and work out the complexities of a piece of literature without fear of offense. One of my biggest struggles with class discussion is getting students to actually argue with each other. Most students, even if they vehemently disagree with someone else's interpretation of a character or event, seem hesitant to disagree vocally. Instead, I often get these stances articulated in writing assignments after the fact, which is disappointing. Many of these contentious views are exactly what is needed to flesh out a character or scenario, but they are often held from the class out of anxiety.

Students carry a lot of fear with them into the classroom, and how the rest of the class views them is often a big portion of that. Being viewed as annoying or contentious may keep many students from speaking their mind, even when doing so could benefit everyone's learning. But one of the most promising traits exhibited during the role-playing midterm I gave students was their increased willingness to be in direct conflict with each other, yet the air of the classroom atmosphere never grew hostile. This outcome is something I would hope to transfer to the courtroom role-play, and I believe it works for a number of reasons. First, students are having fun and laughing, both of which produce a more relaxed atmosphere despite the direct conflict. Second, and perhaps more importantly, students are able to present their opinions as though they are not themselves, giving them an out to feel less anxious about how they will be viewed by the rest of the class. One of the initial agreements to any role-playing assignment is that we are all playing someone other than ourselves, and many students use this to their advantage. They know that as role-players, they could perhaps voice an unpopular opinion as long as it was in keeping with their character, yet not be held accountable for it by their peers, who would assume that they were just playing their character accurately. With this kind of understanding in place, students then have the freedom to be more open with their analysis, voice dissent, and create a more complete perception of how someone else lives, thereby increasing empathy.

Assessment of such an assignment would be very similar to the assessment of any in-class participation. Points can be given based on participation in the discussion and willingness to take on all of the required roles. In my classes, I generally judge the quality of student participation as well, making sure that students understand that receiving full points does not simply depend on saying something, anything, just to be able to claim they have participated. They need to be engaged and volunteer their participation, and such strictures would apply equally well under this courtroom RPG. Although not strictly how a court operates, even students participating in the jury should be allowed and encouraged to ask questions of not only the witnesses and defendant, but also the lawyers. This break in decorum is another element that likens this assignment more so to RPGs than to traditional mock trials, as keeping things as "realistic" as possible is far from the goal, and the DM (i.e., instructor) should feel free to let the story go where the most enjoyment and learning will take place.

The Digital Realm

Moving beyond pen-and-paper, though, the realm of digital tools allows for innovation in the classroom, and the same holds true for RPGs. While digital tabletop simulators are not new, cloud-based services like Roll20 offer options that could benefit instructors incorporating RPGs into the classroom. The role-playing midterm discussed earlier provided a space for character analysis to take on a deeper, more enjoyable place in the classroom, but RPGs can offer more to the study of literature. In "Telling Stories Together: The Role-Playing Game As Folklore," Benjamin Aldred effectively argues that narrative is the defining feature of RPGs, and he states that it is a particularly strong tool for communal understanding of narrative, something important for the literature classroom: "The system of dispute and adjudication as narrative tool is one of the aspects of the Role-Playing game that sets it clearly apart from other forms of storytelling. Understanding it allows better understanding of how groups interact with narrative."[28] The unique experience provided by RPGs is applicable to more than just narrative, though, and story development and even symbolism could be better engaged through such play, particularly with the help of cloud-based role-playing systems. While the online system is not a requirement for such an assignment—it could effectively be accomplished in a face-to-face setting—it does provide three primary benefits. One, it allows instructors who teach distance learning or online courses to incorporate this type of gameplay into their courses. Two, it allows students to progress through the storyline at their own pace, instead of feeling pressured by the pace set by other students in a face-to-face setting, which could do much to engage with shy students who might want to participate but feel overwhelmed by more extrovert students. And three, it allows the instructor to mediate the chaos that would inevitably erupt in a class of 20+ students all attempting to role-play at the same time. This last benefit will seem particularly relevant to anyone who has served as DM for a particularly large group.

Under such a system, instructors, with knowledge of what texts would be read in the course, could set up a "campaign" with story-lines reminiscent of the works of literature to be read. Each week, students could play through a section of the campaign, in order to gain a different understanding of what they are studying in the classroom. For example, students who are reading William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" might find their characters turning up in a town suffering from a serial arsonist. If crafted well, the students' struggle to find the culprit could allow instructors to guide them toward the deeper motivations in the original story, such as frustration with class divisions, treatment of workers common during the time period, and devotion to family. In *Quests: Design, Theory and History in Games and Narratives*, Jeff Howard details a similar assignment, though his example is mostly for face-to-face interactions. Yet, my literature exam and Howard's overlap pedagogically in a number of ways. Howard agrees that the interaction with the literary text should not be a "strictly linear fashion" and instead create "spaces in which players can bring about some of these [plot] events and their meanings." He also emphasizes the importance of having students create accompanying reflective essays and a "multimedia prototype" that will solidify the exercise as more than just a game, but a learning opportunity.[29]

This type of assignment goes beyond traditional class discussion because it taps into one of the strengths of RPGs, as outlined by Christopher Moser in "Narrative Structure and Player Experience in Role Playing Games": "experienced richness promotes engagement due to the excitement experienced when perceiving a game's potential for developing human faculties."[30] By getting students to invest in a narrative that goes deeper than their initial experience with the text, in essence building "richness," Moser suggests that learning potential increases. Such interaction could also be considered a replacement for traditional literature course assignments like weekly reading responses, which have a tendency to be repetitive and surface-level at best. Additionally, most students are far more amenable to being asked to play a game than produce 300 words on a story's theme, and as a consequence, students are likely to engage more with both the class and the text.

In addition to using this campaign to further elucidate the motivations of characters in the story and give students a better understanding of the socio-economic circumstances of the work being studied, the game could also allow for a new take on the study of symbols, which are often one of the most struggled-with elements of literary studies for students. Students often complain that sometimes an object is just what it is, failing to understand that often characters (and human beings) associate meaning with objects that do not intrinsically have said value. A mission that put student characters in a party with characters from their course texts could see them all seeking the same mystical object. During discussions with the NPC literary characters, students would find that each character searches for the object for different reasons, that the object means something to each of them. The NPCs' sacrifices to obtain the object could also accomplish a great deal toward student understanding of the powerful impact symbols can have on human life, and these lessons could be extrapolated to discussions of concerns such as patriotism, religion, and the American dream. Suddenly, students who struggle to understand why the green light on Daisy's dock in *The Great Gatsby* is anything more than just a green light have a rogue named Jay Gatsby demonstrating the power of the symbol by sacrificing his life to protect something that has no tangible value.

These kinds of hands-on, story-driven experiences paired with well-planned class discussion about literary elements could prove more capable at getting students over that wall erected between them and self-driven character analysis (and by extension, self-analysis) by lecture-driven, symbol-hunting literature instruction. The assignment detailed here attempts to reframe literature not as a puzzle that one must "figure out" through cryptic clues hidden in the text but instead as an experience that leads one to greater understanding of themselves and their relationship to others around them.

Conclusion

Resistance and difficulties are almost assured, but when it comes to incorporating the ethos and even mechanics of traditional RPGs in the classroom, such as role-playing, character sheets, and DM-generated scenarios, the possible benefits—increased student engagement, greater potential for empathy, and deeper understanding of characterization as an analytical tool—win out. By no means should instructors insert RPG elements into the class just for the sake of playing a game with the students, nor should they try to force it into scenarios in which it is not appropriate, which is a current issue in educational games. For instance, as Huei-Tse Hou argues in "Exploring the Behavioral Patterns of Learners In an Educational Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)," "[E]xisting studies indicate that most of the available educational games only focus on combining learning content with gaming and rarely incorporate instructional strategies."[31] The games we play in class must not just be games, but games with "instructional strategies," or else we run the risk of not using our tools to the fullest extent. And doing so will only lead to resentment on behalf of students and give the practice a bad reputation among teachers who hear the horror stories students have of their previous courses. Like any pedagogical implement, it should only be utilized when it will improve learning outcomes, but such a scenario can be hard to predict. I have provided here some assignments that are tested, some that have strong potential for future use, and some ideas intended to enable brainstorming sessions that could lead to more innovation for instructors interested in the idea of pedagogical RPGs. Nor is the information presented by any means exhaustive. I have endeavored to use RPG elements to solve problems I experience regularly while teaching literature surveys, such as getting better student engagement in course texts and finding better ways to teach character analysis. However, instructors could easily use the ideas presented here to teach elements of literary studies not focused on in this work, such as setting or theme. My focus was on the elements—e.g., characterization and story-building—that I view as most important for students, which could be different for someone else.

Other instructors could also utilize the information gathered here in different types of classes. As stated before, many other fields of study have instructors incorporating traditional RPG elements in their classes to benefit learning, so the use here does not have to stop at literature surveys. More specialized literature courses, such as a class focused solely on the author Edgar Allan Poe, could provide a consistent narrative across the author's canon that might be more difficult with traditional instruction. At the same time, as evidenced by Mark Mullen's sample composition assignment provided in "On

Second Thought…" collected in Richard Colby's *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games*, freshman composition courses have found that the immediacy of the dialectical debate present in many RPG scenarios can drive home lessons concerning the importance of rhetoric and audience awareness.[32] I have incorporated informal assignments that do this in my composition courses as well, and students have grasped rather complex topics easily when practicing in a fictional scenario. By adopting exercises like these, the practice will hopefully spread to various areas of the English department, giving students a new perspective on how to "properly" interact with literature. With many English departments struggling with falling enrollment numbers for majors and growing resistance from university administrators, legislators, and students themselves concerning the value of English courses (literature courses most of all), instructors in these departments who do not wish to see students miss out on the analytical and communication skills being delivered predominantly by these courses should consider other avenues to improve student engagement. Letting your students play RPG campaigns in the classroom may seem like a distraction from the task at hand, but, if used correctly, it may just be what helps make students once again like, if not love, the texts we value so highly.

APPENDIX 1
Assignment Sheet for RPG Exam
Midterm Exam

Prompt

In this scenario, a large meteorite is heading toward Earth. It will destroy all life on the surface of the planet, but luckily, the government has created underground bunkers that should allow human life to continue on this planet. The problem, however, is that there is only room in the bunkers for a small percentage of people. Therefore, a representative has been sent to your community to find people who can contribute something useful to humanity's survival. At the town meeting, you will each be given a chance to justify your inclusion in the underground bunkers. After each person has had a chance to speak, the floor will be opened for debate, at which point you may bring up, in turn, any concerns or suggestions for the operation that you may have. After the allotted time, a decision will be made and the chosen group will be allowed into the bunker.

The Details

You will need to come to class ready to role-play as your chosen character from one of the works we have read. As you will recall, I mentioned that it could be any character, whether minor or major, and be ready to act how he or she would act given their characterization from the original work. **Everyone must take part in the debate and speak at least once** so that you have something to write about for the follow-up essay. You will not be graded on how well you perform or whether or not you mess up. I don't expect you to be perfect, and if you do mess up and act out of character, just be ready to discuss it in your essay. After our discussion, you will be given time to take notes on the day's events to help you write the paper. I will also record the debate and post the recording online tomorrow morning.

After the class period, you will have a week to write an essay concerning the event. Your goal for this essay will be two-fold. **One, you will want to critique your own performance**. If you feel like you accurately portrayed your character, you will need to *provide evidence both from the class* (what you said during the debate) and *evidence from the text* (what the character said in the original story). Both of these are required to have a good response. **Second, in addition to critiquing yourself, you will also need to critique the performance of two of your fellow classmates**, following the same guidelines (providing evidence from what they said in class and what the original character said or did to decide whether or not it was an accurate portrayal). As always, feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Requirements

Final draft due ______________________________

At least 2 pages, no more than 5, MLA Formatting

Tips

- You must include a citation for each work you discuss.
- Use the time given to your advantage, not only to proofread your work but to rework passages and improve your content.
- Consider taking your paper in to the Writing Center.
- Don't wait until the last minute.

NOTES

1. Jason Matthew Cox, "Role-Playing Games in Arts, Research and Education," *International Journal of Education Through Art* 10 (2014): 385.
2. *Ibid.*, 390.

3. *Ibid.*, 383.

4. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 177.

5. James Gee, *What Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 66.

6. Zach Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 157.

8. Nicola Whitton, *Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 38.

9. *Ibid.*, 40.

10. *Ibid.*, 41.

11. Lee Sheldon, *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (Boston: Cengage, 2011).

12. Richard C. Byers, "Using a Role-Playing Game to Teach Ecology," *The American Biology Teacher* 41 (1979): 540–543.

13. Paul Francis, "Using Role-Playing Games to Teach Astronomy: An Evaluation," *The Astronomy Education Review* 4 (2006): 1–9.

14. Marcus Childress and Ray Braswell, "Using Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games for Online Learning," *Distance Education* 27 (2007): 187–196.

15. Fabiane Barreto and Vavassori Benitti, "Role-Playing Game: An Interactive Game for Software Engineering Education," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Computer Science* 2 (2011): 6–11.

16. Sarah M. Wheeler, "Role-Playing Games and Simulations for International Issues Courses," *Journal of Political Science Education* 2 (2006): 331–347.

17. Lynn Troyka and Jerold Nudelman, *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening through Simulation Games* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 1.

18. Justin Hodgson, "Developing and Extending Gaming Pedagogy: Designing a Course as Game," in *Rhetoric/Composition/Play through Video Games*, ed. Richard Colby, Matthew Johnson, and Rebekah Colby (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 46.

19. Armann Halldorsson, "Teaching English Through Role Playing Games: Beginning an Exploration," *Malfriedur* 28, no. 2 (2011): 20–23.

20. Brian Phillips, "Interactive Pynchon: Teaching Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 with Roleplaying Games," *Journal of Interactive Drama* 4, no. 1 (2011): 37–50.

21. Jonathan Moizer, Jonathan Lean, Michael Towler, and Caroline Abbey, "Simulation and Games: Overcoming the Barriers to Their Use in Higher Education," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (2009): 216.

22. Tsui-shan Chung, "Table-Top Role Playing Game and Creativity," *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 8 (2013): 67.

23. Cox, 391.

24. Sheldon, 84–85.

25. *Ibid.*, 390.

26. Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1–4.

27. Francesco Crocco, "Simulating Utopia: Critical Simulation and the Teaching of Utopia," *Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy* 7 (2015), accessed June 26, 2015, http://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/simulating-utopia-critical-simulation-and-the-teaching-of-utopia/.

28. Benjamin G. Aldred, *Telling Stories Together: The Role-Playing Game as Folklore* (Hathi Trust Digital Library, 2004), 16–17.

29. Jeff Howard, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008), 139.

30. Christopher Moser and Xiaowen Fang, "Narrative Structure and Player Experience in Role Playing Games," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* (2014): 1–49.

31. Huei-Tse Hou, "Exploring the Behavioral Patterns of Learners in an Educational Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)," *Computers & Education* 58 (2012): 1225–1233.

32. Mark Mullen, "On Second Thought…," in *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games*, ed. Richard Colby, Matthew Johnson, and Rebekah Colby (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 67.

Bibliography

Aldred, Benjamin G. *Telling Stories Together: The Role-Playing Game as Folklore*. Hathi Trust Digital Library, 2004.

Barreto, Fabiane, and Vavassori Benitti. "Role-Playing Game: An Interactive Game for Software Engineering Education." *International Journal of Advanced Research in Computer Science* 2 (2011): 6–11.

Byers, Richard C. "Using a Role-Playing Game to Teach Ecology." *The American Biology Teacher* 41 (1979): 540–543.

Carnes, Mark. *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Childress, Marcus, and Ray Braswell. "Using Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games for Online Learning." *Distance Education* 27 (2007): 187–196.

Chung, Tsui-shan. "Table-Top Role Playing Game and Creativity." *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 8 (2013): 56–71.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Cox, Jason Matthew. "Role-Playing Games in Arts, Research and Education." *International Journal of Education Through Art* 10 (2014): 381–395.

Crocco, Francesco. "Simulating Utopia: Critical Simulation and the Teaching of Utopia." *Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy* 7 (2015). Accessed June 26, 2015. http://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/simulating-utopia-critical-simulation-and-the-teaching-of-utopia/.

Francis, Paul. "Using Role-Playing Games to Teach Astronomy: An Evaluation." *The Astronomy Education Review* 4 (2006): 1–9.

Gee, James. *What Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

Halldorsson, Armann. "Teaching English Through Role Playing Games: Beginning an Exploration." *Malfridur* 28, no. 2 (2011): 20–23.

Hodgson, Justin. "Developing and Extending Gaming Pedagogy: Designing a Course as Game." In *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games*, edited by Richard Colby, Matthew Johnson, and Rebekah Colby. New York: Palgrave, 2013: 46–60.

Hou, Huei-Tse. "Exploring the Behavioral Patterns of Learners in an Educational Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)." *Computers & Education* 58 (2012): 1225–1233.

Howard, Jeff. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*. Wellesley: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Moizer, Jonathan, Jonathan Lean, Michael Towler, and Caroline Abbey, "Simulation and Games: Overcoming the Barriers to Their Use in Higher Education." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 10, no. 3 (2009): 207–224.

Moser, Christopher, and Xiaowen Fang. "Narrative Structure and Player Experience in Role Playing Games." *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* (2014): 1–49.

Mullen, Mark. "On Second Thought…" In *Rhetoric/Composition/Play Through Video Games*, edited by Richard Colby, Matthew Johnson, and Rebekah Colby. New York: Palgrave, 2013: 67–82.

Phillips, Brian. "Interactive Pynchon: Teaching Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 with Roleplaying Games." *Journal of Interactive Drama* 4, no. 1 (2011): 37–50.

Sheldon, Lee. *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game*. Boston: Cengage, 2011.

Troyka, Lynn, and Jerold Nudelman. *Taking Action: Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening Through Simulation Games*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Waggoner, Zach. *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009.

Wheeler, Sarah M. "Role-Playing Games and Simulations for International Issues Courses." *Journal of Political Science Education* 2 (2006): 331–347.

Whitton, Nicola. *Learning with Digital Games: A Practical Guide to Engaging Students in Higher Education*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2014.

Playing Between the Lines

Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies with Virtual Worlds

RENETA D. LANSIQUOT, CANDIDO CABO
and TAMRAH D. CUNNINGHAM

Creative people often find their most potent expression through objects and tools that offer the most possibilities: imaginative children enjoy role-play and are far more interested in a box than the toy inside. However, even the most appropriate technologies require a foundation in effective theory to foster creative learning and student success. Bloom's taxonomy is a conceptualization of learning objectives that helps educators assess student progress through different cognitive levels in a given discipline.[1] Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's taxonomy emphasizes remembering (can the learner recall or remember the information?), understanding (can the learner explain ideas or concepts?), applying (can the learner use the information in a new way?), analyzing (can the learner distinguish among the different parts?), evaluating (can the learner justify a stand or decision?), and, finally, creating (can the learner plan and generate a novel product or point of view?).[2] Learning is enhanced if it (a) is situated in real-world and simulated contexts, fitting new information with what is already known; (b) is collaborative; and (c) integrates evaluation into the process. Unifying these aspects, interdisciplinary studies challenge learners to think critically, communicate effectively, and work collaboratively with others. Consequently, learners are able to distinguish the perspectives of different disciplines; purposefully connect and integrate knowledge and skills from across disciplines to solve problems; synthesize and transfer knowledge across disciplinary boundaries; and apply their capacity as integrative thinkers to solve problems in ethically and socially responsible ways.[3] In answer to the remaining challenge for educators regarding how to develop a means by which to achieve these outcomes, this essay examines the impact of role-playing games (RPGs) on virtual technologies and the pedagogies used to promote interdisciplinary studies.

Role-playing exercises and games have been used for educational purposes in a variety of disciplines and have been shown to improve learning outcomes when compared to more traditional pedagogical approaches.[4] It could be argued that the two key elements of RPGs are interactivity and collaboration.[5] In this essay, we present our experience of the impact of RPGs on environments such as *Alice*, *OpenSimulator*, and *Second Life*, and we highlight pedagogies to promote interdisciplinary studies using these virtual technologies. The creation of collaborative RPG prototypes with *Alice* promotes interdisciplinary connections and problem-solving skills by linking writing stories and computer programing.[6] Moreover, applications implementing avatars and virtual worlds such as *OpenSimulator* and *Second Life* are also impacted by and provide a venue for RPGs, as these technologies allow for virtual communities in which students collaboratively simulate natural systems and technological processes (e.g., how the human heart works or how a home hot water boiler works), write procedures, and perform usability tests.[7] We also use, as a case study, the development of the narrative-driven RPG *Meina of Alnel*, which was created with RPG Maker VX Ace, to examine how digital RPGs have shaped and transformed the creation of this narrative-driven game, as well as its formative and summative impact on learner-generated designs, creative production, and playful learning. Playtesting and technical documentation are critical components of this process, as are creative writing, computer programming, and collaboration in a community of practice wherein situated learning occurs in the virtual context in which it is applied.[8] The design process of *Meina* illustrates how undergraduate students could use iterative RPG development to reinforce the interdisciplinary connections between computer programming and writing throughout their years in college. Overall, these three examples exemplify the ways that RPGs can successfully promote interdisciplinary studies.

The creation of RPG prototypes with *Alice* and the *Meina of Alnel* case study illustrate the interdisciplinary connections between computer programming and creative writing. The primary pedagogical goal for the creation of game prototypes with *Alice* is to expose first-year college students to the connections between general education courses and courses in their majors as a first step to develop their interdisciplinary thinking. The *Meina of Alnel* case study illustrates how students could use iterative game development to further reinforce the interdisciplinary connections between computer programming and creative writing during their undergraduate studies. Implementation of virtual worlds in *OpenSimulator* and *Second Life* help students (gamers) establish interdisciplinary connections between natural and social sciences, technology, and engineering; different aspects of what it means to be human are integrated in the mind of students. Moreover, implementation of these virtual worlds has been shown to engage students in writing and to promote technical communication skills.

Collaborating in Virtual Worlds

Traditional school curricula tend to fragment knowledge into little pieces, sometimes depriving it of meaning and making it boring.[9] Partly because virtual worlds create entire environments, they can help students establish connections among disciplines and are ideal for interdisciplinary studies. Here, we present our experiences using RPGs in two interdisciplinary courses: Technical Writing, which is inherently interdisciplinary, and Weird Science, a general education course geared towards second-semester students that encourages critical thinking about what it means to be human.

Although students view virtual worlds, such as *Second Life* and *OpenSimulator*, as games because they offer the ability to interact with three-dimensional digital avatars, online gaming environments can also motivate gamers to become technical communicators.[10] Virtual words present a means to scaffold collaborations among disciplines, which is especially appropriate for an inherently interdisciplinary course such as technical writing. Moreover, virtual worlds provide ways to simulate the future in Weird Science, an interdisciplinary course based on the enduring question of what it means to be human. The exercise of simulating the future to address the question of what it means to be human elucidates students' understanding of the present state of humanity. In the hybrid version (i.e., taught partially in an actual classroom and partially online) of the Technical Writing course, which naturally fosters more online communication, students are assigned a recommendation report on a scientific topic/process that requires completion of the following tasks:

1. Both with your group mates and on your own, explore *Second Life* and teleport to locations related to your scientific topic. Discuss simulating your natural system or technological process with *Second Life* residents. What kind of audience are you catering to—technical or non-technical?
2. Create a three-dimensional model of your scientific process in *Second Life* and at least one other comparable application such as OSgrid (a free open-source metaverse, a collective virtual shared space, powered by *OpenSimulator*). Develop a manual to recreate your model and a guided simulation. In *Second Life*, for example, use Linden Scripting Language to incorporate interactivity. While you are developing your models with your group, compare aspects of the chosen applications.
3. Write a recommendation report, including the five body elements

> discussed in class (i.e., introduction, methods, results, conclusions, and recommendations) and front and back matter. Your methods section should highlight your simulation of the scientific process. Also, include appropriate graphics, such as screen captures taken during the three-dimensional modeling and simulating process.

Incorporating three-dimensional virtual worlds in previous iterations of this course, which only required students to write manuals that include step-by-step instructions that would allow readers to recreate their models and guide simulation in *Second Life* (i.e., steps 1 and 2 above only in *Second Life*, not a recommendation report), significantly lowered student writing apprehension.[11] The use of virtual worlds to promote technical communication also allows students to move beyond the first few levels of Bloom's taxonomy (i.e., remembering, understanding, applying). As they create a guided simulation of their scientific process description—for example, how a home hot water boiler works—the simulation process enables students to use their research information in a new way. In order to model this scientific process, they must distinguish among the different parts (e.g., stock, expansion tank, pipes for hot water to radiators and cold water return, combination gauge, aquastat, circulating pump, blow-off valve, pressure release valve, and water supply shutoff valve). Throughout the development phase, students must take notes on their methods (e.g., how to install, build, and script, or other tips). In so doing, they write procedural steps for building and scripting in *Second Life* and *OpenSimulator*, and they then evaluate the results (analysis and evaluation in Bloom's taxonomy). This approach enables them to compare and contrast the affordances of different virtual worlds and justify their decision as they collaboratively write a recommendation report. By the time they complete this task, students have planned and created an original three-dimensional model and accompanying technical documentation that includes their points of view (the higher level in Bloom's taxonomy). That is, to complete this collaborative technical communication assignment successfully, students must become educational designers. They must remember the information from previous lessons—for example, how to write procedures or the details of the scientific process that they researched for a previous assignment. They must also explain their concept before they can apply this understanding in the form of a guided simulation of the scientific process. Since they are required to model this process, they must be able to distinguish between the different parts of the process. Using both *Second Life* and *OpenSimulator* to make the necessary distinctions, students can evaluate these virtual worlds, recommend one over the other, and justify their decision. Finally, throughout this assignment, they are creating, planning how to model their scientific process, and producing a guided simulation.

Weird Science is a writing-intensive team-taught general education course in liberal arts and sciences that explores the creative nonfiction literature on the shifting and expanding definitions of humanity and posthumanity from the perspectives of the natural and social sciences, technology, and engineering, incorporating digital media throughout. As their final group project in this interdisciplinary course, students must imagine the future of nature and/or humanity (molecule, animal, human, or beyond, as well as future interactions that explore the relationship between the individual and society) and, with their group, create a representation (an avatar) of what it means to be human in a virtual world. Students are instructed to animate, simulate, and annotate their avatars as appropriate using *Second Life*. They then must engineer the virtual space to meet the needs of their prediction (i.e., the virtual human and its required interactions). During the final group presentation, they are required to explain the process, demonstrate an important aspect of their avatars, and provide the rationale for its appearance, movements, interactions, and surroundings. In doing so, students develop and articulate their ideas of what it means to be human in a virtual future world that they have created, thereby interpreting and redefining humanity.

In response to this challenging assignment, students have created several novel ideas to support their points of view about the future of humanity. For example, one student in a group that focused on new habitats specifically for a water-based civilization offered this explanation of the group's project:

> Using *Second Life*, our group was able to create a future where life moved to the water. The idea that I first created was that life would move out to the sea, under the sea, and underground as well. However, as a group we used the virtual world to show life on the water. We created a floating platform on the sea. We divided the platform into four areas and placed homes on each one. Using aspects of each of our original ideas, we created the futuristic world.

Another student in this group touted the benefits of using virtual worlds, describing how this experience enabled him to synthesize what he learned in this course:

> I think *Second Life* has helped me because I would not have ever imagined myself having an avatar. The experience of creating things has everything to do with what I have read during the semester. For this project, I built stairs for the house. I also created a power generator and a few surfboards. I helped move the house and worked on the infrastructure of the village. We met online a couple of times and the experience was really fun while working on *Second Life*. I was never a video game person, but the difference with *Second Life* is that we can interact and create things.

As these student accounts show, collaborating in virtual worlds enables learners to reach the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy as they synthesize nonfiction literature to write a final research essay defining humanity and to create a final group project, planning and simulating their points of view about the future and redefining humanity. Collaborating in virtual worlds provides learners with a context for creating that is normally unavailable in the classroom.

Interdisciplinary Digital Game-Based Learning for Game Designers

Collaboration, interactivity, and the potential to elicit emotional responses in players/students (for example, considering what it means to be human) are key elements of game-based learning (GBL), which uses challenges related to games that often have a fantasy element in order to engage players in learning through the development and creation of a story.[12] In order to create a truly educational game, educators need to make interdisciplinary learning, in this case computational thinking, computer programming, and creative writing, essential for creating because the true twenty-first century literacy is programming.[13] Following national trends, the vast majority of our students play video games,[14] so using GBL pedagogies is natural to situate learning in contexts that are relevant to our students and to fit the new information into what students already know. For this reason, we used an innovative, interdisciplinary approach to teaching problem-solving, computational thinking, and writing to first-year students majoring in a Computer Systems degree at our institution. We developed a learning community[15] that links two courses in Computer Systems (one course is an introductory course to problem solving and computer programming, CS1, and the second course is an introduction to the field of computer systems, CS0) and English Composition.

In the English composition class, students write original video game narratives (a plot or schematic structuring of temporal actions) in groups. Students use the hero's journey plot structure—beginning with the Ordinary World then moving to a Call to Adventure; the Refusal of the Call; Meeting the Mentor; Crossing the Threshold; Tests, Allies, and Enemies; Approach the Inmost Cave; the Ordeal; Reward; the Road Back; Resurrection; Return with the Elixir; and Return to the Ordinary World—to write an original background story for a video game and then present their ideas to the class.[16] A few ideas were chosen to be developed further, and students collaboratively revised these chosen stories with their group, first using concept maps to represent the current story. Finally, students individually developed an engaging character side-quest and accompanying concept map, including the rationale for the importance of such a quest to the protagonist as well as to the target audience of the game.

In the CS1 computer programming class, students implement these stories as a video game using *Alice*, and, in the CS0 survey course, students explore architectural and hardware issues to describe a possible game delivery platform. The concepts and skills introduced in the computer courses are contextualized by a problem (game design) that is relevant to students and connected to concepts and skills developed in the writing course. Moreover, traditional English composition is taught to connect to the computing courses that first-year students take. The common assignment across the three courses in this learning community is a design document, which includes three sections: analysis (video game narrative, target audience, review of competing games, and delivery platforms); design (player characteristics, game mechanics, challenge, and description of the media platform); and project description (video game prototype, review of relevant literature, pseudo code, flowchart, concept map, and storyboards).[17]

Students in this course are aware of how RPGs influenced the creation of their narrative-driven video game prototype—its plot, characters, setting, and branching story paths. One student from the most recent cohort of our learning community explained this influence on his chosen game:

> The narrative of the videogame that I plan to develop, *Ominous*, is inspired by RPGs. This game's initial setup is loosely based on many games that I have played, such as *Final Fantasy*, *Fire Emblem*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *Muramasa Rebirth*. I can attribute my game's story to the concepts in these RPGs in one way or another. For instance, *Ominous* is an action RPG that revolves around the idea of revenge and absolution. *Final Fantasy* is a game for the masses that has many chronicles; in this case, the various new versions of this game all tell a tale of fantasy with different characters that either grow together or face many trials with one another. *Fire Emblem* inspired the interaction between characters in my game. Much as in the *Fire Emblem* game series itself, the relations with allies in *Ominous* help to create advantages in battles against foes. *Kingdom Hearts* contains an enjoyable fighting sensation that I will draw upon to help me construct the conduct of the battle mechanics of *Ominous*. Finally, *Muramasa Rebirth* is also an action RPG that specifically influenced the gameplay of *Ominous* in that it is a two-dimensional game that uses a weapon to eradicate enemies. The side quest of this game, "Blade of Ominous," is an original development designed to challenge the player to want more at the end of the tunnel. *Ominous* gives the player one goal: to defeat the final boss and unveil the truth behind the tragic past of the main character, Shikaro.

As this student account makes clear, developing game narratives requires playful learning as well as significant critical thinking skills. Learners must take on the role of game designers and draw on their prior knowledge of playing narrative-driven games to create, write, and program their own stories. Student progress in the development of problem-solving and computer programming skills using programming narratives can be mapped to Bloom's taxonomy. As game players, students have already internalized progress through the initial categories in Bloom's taxonomy. For example, remembering can be mapped to learn the mechanics of the game (commands, controls);

understanding to learning the effects of the mechanics on the world; applying to how to use the mechanics to achieve one's goals in the game.[18] It can be argued that playing most games will not take students over those initial three levels in Bloom's taxonomy,[19] even though some games will require students to analyze, evaluate, and create. For example, the game *Dragon Age: Origins* allows players to use existing tools to recreate mods or modifications of the game based on the player's own interpretation of what should be playable in the game. However, as suggested by Papert, one strategy to improve education is to transform students' enthusiasm for playing games into an enthusiasm for creating and designing games.[20] Game creation and design will take students through the remaining levels in Bloom's taxonomy. For example, when programming narratives, students need to analyze and evaluate possible implementations of their story as a computer program in an iterative way following the classical program development cycle (design-write-test-debug-back to design), which eventually will lead to the creation of their game prototype (see also "A Case Study: *Meina of Alnel*" below).

All in all, while students do not find the development of computer programming narratives easy (in part because *Alice* is an educational tool and not a professional game development tool, and it is difficult to create in *Alice* a game with the sophistication that students are used to in commercial games), this is "hard fun"[21] that motivates them to be more persistent in finding solutions to computer programming problems than they would be with more traditional approaches to teaching/learning problem-solving and computer programming.[22]

A Case Study: Meina of Alnel

Below is a summary of the narrative-driven RPG *Meina of Alnel*, which was created with RPG Maker VX Ace by Tamrah Cunningham, a current game design graduate student who completed the first cohort of the aforementioned learning community as a first-semester undergraduate. We will use this game developed during her time as an undergraduate student to examine how playing RPGs has shaped and transformed the creation of this narrative-driven game, as well as its formative and summative impact on learner-generated designs, creative production, and playful learning. Playtesting and technical documentation were important parts of this process, and collaborating with peers from the learning community influenced design decisions. Overall, the design of *Meina* was an interdisciplinary endeavor resulting from the integration of knowledge and skills from different disciplines, such as creative and technical writing and computer programming. The following summary illustrates the draw that narrative provides:

> *The world of Alnel was set on a cycle of destruction and salvation since its creation. In order to break free of the cycle and save people from the God of Chaos, humanity depended on one man who held the favor of the God of Creation—he shall forever be known as the Trusted. With his power and the holy weapon gifted to him, he was able to seal the Chaotic God. But the seal was not permanent, so it is up to his descendants to maintain the seal.*
>
> *It has been 450 years since the time of the Trusted, and the seal is once again weakening. The job once again falls on another. However, this descendant has no desire to save humanity and would rather watch the world burn instead of offering her aid.*
>
> *This is the story of Meina, the reluctant Descendant of the Trusted, as she learns to accept her role as the savior of Alnel.*

Plot

Meina of Alnel went through several major plot changes over a span of a few years. The creation of this RPG was an iterative process, as participating in the learning community provided information coupled with prior knowledge of RPGs, and the experience gained writing structured narratives resulted in formulating an original game narrative. The attention to narrative structure evolved naturally into a plot that can be separated into each aspect of the hero's journey. At first, the narrative was going to be the clichéd, a typical role-playing story about a young girl who is destined to save the world. She would start off as a happy woman who just wanted to spend time with her best friend, but the call to start her adventure begins with an unnatural earthquake that splits her from her best friend and lands her near the main antagonist. From there, her journey consists of chasing after this evil god and meeting friends along the way. After a while, it became clear that the plot was one-dimensional and, therefore, not particularly interesting. It followed the very typical formula that many such games are known to follow: a girl with mysterious origins is saved by a guy who then declares himself her protector. The player finds out that the mysterious girl has a very important power that is the key to saving the world, so the journey is a means to finding a way to strengthen this power and using it to seal the ancient evil threatening the world again. This was the same formula used by many games, even down to the fact that the mysterious girl is the player's point of view. As this game was being programmed, both the dullness of the story and the need for a complete overhaul of the game became apparent. The current plot of this game came about as a result of playing around with a new game developer program. While translating everything from the previous version of the game to the next program, the plot slowly changed. The major change that really affected the plot was the reforming of Meina, the heroine of the game, and her relation to various characters and events of the story.

RPGs such as *Final Fantasy I–VI*, *Tales of Symphonia*, and *Tales of Ves-*

peria inspired the creation of this game. Playing the *Final Fantasy* series sparked the idea of the elemental crystals: fire, water, earth, and wind. The old *Final Fantasy* games, before *Final Fantasy VI*, focused on the importance of four central crystals that basically protected the integrity and balance of the world, especially in *Final Fantasy III*. Playing *Tales of Symphonia* inspired the names of half of the spirits in the game (e.g., Undine and Sylph) and the idea of a Chosen One. The names of the spirits in *Tales of Symphonia* are as follows: Undine for water, Efreet for Fire, Gnome for Earth, and Sylph for Wind. Undine and Sylph were selected for the names of two of the Cardinal Spirits, while the names Din and Gaia were selected from literature. Although having the idea of the "Chosen One" is a cliché of the RPG genre, *Tales of Symphonia* handled it in a different way. Players have to decide how much they are willing to give up and how much they are willing to compromise in order to maintain their role as the chosen one—even though they know it is a lie. There were two chosen ones: one who was extremely selfless, and one who hid behind a trickster mask in order to hide how much he despised his role. Finally, playing *Tales of Vesperia* inspired the idea of the "Children of the Full Moon," or people with a special bloodline who are coveted by most but despised by another group. The character, Estellise or Estelle, is able to find those who did not covet her for her powers and live her life the way that she wanted.

Character

Character development has been an iterative process also influenced by RPGs. The current Meina was a complete change from her first two iterations. The first version of Meina, called Denise, was a very optimistic, young, cheerful girl, always willing to help and not reluctant to sacrifice herself to complete her destiny—and therein lay the problem. As the game progressed, the extent to which this character was stagnant became clear. She felt that she was fine in her current status and had no reason to change.

The purpose of the main character's journey is to change as a person and reach a self-actualization of being. This gives the players a reason to connect with the character and to grow alongside her. As such the second version of Meina that was developed still had the same persona, but it was a mask. She was a pariah for her powers and, for this reason, she developed a mask of cheerfulness and the unhealthy desire to please everyone so that she could feel wanted. This was slightly better than the previous version, but still not ideal because it seemed as though it had been done too often.

So then the conception of the third version of Meina, or the current version, came into being. After a name change, it was necessary to separate this Meina from the rest, and a complete personality overhaul became necessary.

So this Meina became the antithesis of the past versions. Instead of being optimistic and cheerful, she is cynical and hates her destiny as the savior of the world, which places her on a pedestal for everyone to either worship or shun. In some RPGs, this desire to refuse such a task is normally associated with the hero's journey step, the Refusal of the Call. When heroes deny the responsibility of taking on the task that is given to them, they are usually pushed into the journey by either the antagonist doing something unforgivable or by someone whom they respect, such as a mentor figure or maybe a friend, pushing them to accept their responsibility. The refusal of the call offered such an interesting outlook on the protagonist's inner thoughts that it was something worth expanding.

Customarily, the tension and conflict that ensues from the hero's reluctance to accept responsibility is quickly glossed over and treated as a small stepping-stone on the hero's path of self-actualization. For Meina, this was a major character development opportunity that could not be as easily solved by having a person of authority telling her to "do her job." Her inner tension and conflict was something that made up a major part of her personality and her personal history. It was not something that she could easily move past without embarking on a journey to confront herself and her attitude that the people around her were just betting chips in her plans for revenge. So, now not only was she on a journey to save the world, she was also on a journey of personal discovery and transformation to learn about the importance of relationships and the value of the people who actually care about her.

The RPGs *Tales of Abyss* and *Kingdom Hearts Series* influenced character development in *Meina of Alnel*. One influence was the character development of Luke Fon Fabre in *Tales of Abyss*. Luke was the main character. He was extremely spoiled and naïve about the way the world worked due to the fact that he had lived in isolation for seven years. The game focused on how his character changed from being a spoiled brat who did not care about anyone else, to a scared boy who became so selfless that he put little worth in his own life. His last change was finding the balance that he needed. The character development of Riku from the *Kingdom Hearts Series* (*Chain of Memories* and *Dream Drop Distance*) was also a major influence. Riku's character progression starts in *Kingdom Hearts* where he begins as being an anti-villain who was furious at being abandoned by his best friend and was easily convinced to do the bidding of the villains. Near the end, though, he realizes the errors of his ways and tries to change. In both *Chain of Memories* and *Dream Drop Distance*, players see the progression of the main character as he tries to come to terms with the darkness and guilt that he dealt with from the first game to become a hero and someone worthy of walking the path of light.

Setting

The setting of *Meina of Alnel* was barely changed over the iterative process. At one point, the fantasy world of Alnel had been small, limited to two major continents and a lost island. The names for the various locations that make up this world were chosen in a very peculiar manner that went against typical naming conventions but fulfilled the purpose adequately. At first, the world was going to be seamless, so there was no world map and the character was able to walk from one area to the next. This worked until the number of maps for the game became massive. In order to keep the game simple, it became necessary to add a world map. This map evoked a visual understanding of where everything was supposed to go instead of forcing the player to guess the orientation of the roads. The only other change in the setting, made later in the iterative process, was that the lost island in the game became a floating island and was given a less ambiguous history. The lost island was there only for the sake of the plot.

Branching Story Paths

Side quests are an important aspect of RPGs. They serve two purposes: they are a way to offer character development and a way to gain items that are normally unobtainable. The latter is an easier problem to tackle and offers players a rare item and either an optional boss battle, dungeon crawl, or both. Two side quests with significant narrative interest remained throughout the development process. Later on, however, a major side quest was added that divided the game's plot progression into two paths: one that focused on fighting and contained an extra dungeon, and another that focused on plot progression and character development. The side quest is contingent upon whether or not the player has decided to save an important character who is in need of help. The player can decide to help, gaining further insights on various characters, or decline to help and take up the path with more enemies. Popular RPGs commonly feature the death of an important character; in an attempt to avoid this clichéd path, the death of this character was left as a choice for the player to make during the side quest.

The RPG *Chrono Trigger*'s side quest, called *Bring Back Crono*, was a major influence on *Meina of Alnel*. The goal of this optional side quest is to bring Crono back to life using the titular Chrono Trigger. Although Crono's death cannot be avoided, whether he comes back to life is up to the player. The game has twelve possible endings that the players unlock by fighting the final boss at various key points of the game; not reviving Crono unlocks one ending, and saving him can lead to three other possible endings. As such, his importance if the player does get him back diminishes greatly for two reasons:

players do not have to keep him in the active party and he is a silent protagonist who does not even have any spoken lines.

This case study illustrates that developing the narratives and techniques of RPGs requires significant critical thinking and problem-solving skills. RPG Maker VX Ace was chosen because of the nostalgia that the artwork provides. The sprites are cute and small, and the tiles used to construct the world are vibrant and whimsical. When people play *Meina of Alnel*, they relive the time period when RPGs, especially JRPGs (Japanese RPGs) such as *Final Fantasy VI* and *Dragon Quest*, were designed in similar fashion. The nostalgia effect is powerful on many players who reminisce, "I remember this type of game…. I miss playing them!"

Game Design and Moving Up the Levels of Bloom's Taxonomy

RPGs take players through the levels of Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's taxonomy, emphasizing remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and, finally, creating.[23] The development of an RPG is an interdisciplinary endeavor as narrative-driven RPGs draw on, primarily, computer programming and creative and technical writing. Creating a RPG focused on storytelling alone would not make a strong game. Vital elements of computing such as flowcharting, for example, allow for a stronger experience as these visual representations of an algorithm help organize conditions of various game mechanics sometimes taken for granted. In addition, think of a locked treasure chest in a game. In order to open the chest, the player may need a password. What if the player enters an incorrect password? Sometimes this can be difficult to visualize in a story, so, as the game designer understands and becomes more comfortable using a flowchart that visually shows how this event can be set up, improved gameplay can result.

When *Meina of Alnel* was in the beginning phases of planning, several things needed to be taken into consideration. First, because this game would be an RPG, the creator had to know the necessary genre elements. As a genre, RPGs can be very difficult to define and differentiate from other genres. The most basic definition of an RPG is that it is a game that allows players to assume the role of the avatar character. While this is true, that definition can be applied to many other genres of games as well. For example, action games are classified as having players controlling an avatar. So what truly makes an RPG an RPG?

One of the key criteria that was a big factor in the creation of *Meina of Alnel* is the importance of a narrative-driven plot that focuses not only on the exploration of the world, but the exploration of the characters and their development throughout the story. Just as players were able to grow alongside iconic characters like Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII* or Commander Shepard of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, players will also grow alongside Meina as she goes through her own journey.

Given the many types of RPGs, especially JRPGs, certain facets are necessary in order to ease players both old and new into the game. One of the main things a game needs is a tutorial for the various game mechanics. To set up the tutorial for *Meina of Alnel,* the designer first had to decide what needed to be explained and then figure out the best way to explain this information to the player. After reviewing tutorials found in other games and even tutorials explaining how to use, for instance, Microsoft Windows 8 and other software manuals, the designer decided that one of the best methods to explain the mechanics of the game, without having too much text thrown at the player, is to make the tutorial an interactive experience where key information is highlighted and a simple, but concise definition is given so that players can easily remember the action and then immediately use it so that it is relevant and should, therefore, be easier to recall at any given point of time during gameplay.

In *Meina of Alnel*, for instance, there are tutorials to explain the battle mechanics, how to use the quest log, and how to go about solving various puzzles. Another necessary element is having in-game clues in order to help players know where to go. Since this game's plot progression is linear, players need to have some direction as to where to go next. Non-player characters are useful since players can to talk to and gather information from them. Also, highlighting certain words or phrases in another color in the textboxes makes players recognize significant information.

Before actually creating the game, the designer needed to plan a basic outline of the plot progression and a good flow of character development. Creating a chart of all the locations that players will visit with the key plot points and what type of enemies the players would encounter (if any) provided the game with a sense of slowly coming together. When it came to designing the actual characters, the focus was split into two portions. The first portion focused on explaining the characters, their motives, how they were in the past, and how they will be at the end of the game. This portion also explains any relationships characters form throughout the game, how they affect them, and how the relationships help them grow into their end selves. The second portion was the technical side, which included the character stats, their experience growth rate, what weapons they use, and what skills they learn at certain levels. This was certainly more difficult since, in order to see if these characters are balanced, they needed to be tested constantly in order to see if they felt right in the various battles and if players could use the uniqueness of each character to form strategies.

The protagonist, Meina, went through several iterations. At first, she was a generic female main character who had static character development. After several playthroughs, her character was changed in response to playtester remarks about her shallowness and lack of growth. Through a survey of other RPG characters, anti-hero characters seemed to hold the most appeal, so Meina took on the mantle of a pessimistic anti-hero, which offered a more interesting arc for character development.

After several more playthroughs with the new version of Meina, players' opinions were livelier and engaged. They wanted to see her change. She was a hateful person surrounded by supportive characters, and her flaws made her seem more human and opened up room for growth. She went from being static to dynamic, a character into which players felt more inclined to invest their time in order to watch her change and grow.

Improvements in programming skills also influenced and cross-fertilized the design of the game. Computer programming skills made it possible to implement the narratives as a RPG game. During the creation of *Meina of Alnel*, one problem that had to be resolved was the implementation of variables in the game. A variable is a named storage location in a computer's memory that can hold information such as text or numbers. Variables in RPGs can open up a variety of avenues that offer better gameplay experiences. They can be used to create password systems, simple monster-hunting side quests that require players to defeat a certain amount of enemies, and a particular scene requiring a certain item for progress. When the developer first started the design of this game, she did not know what variables even meant, so she had to learn through tutorials how to implement variables in order to create more interesting gameplay.

Moving up the levels of the taxonomy allowed for planning and creating a novel, narrative-driven RPG. Furthermore, the development of *Meina* provides a good study of how an interdisciplinary approach to games enriches a game's design. It illustrates how students could use iterative game development to reinforce interdisciplinary connections between computer programming and creative and technical writing throughout their college years.

Conclusion: Best Practices for Integrating RPGs in Interdisciplinary Studies

We explored the impact of RPGs on virtual technologies and pedagogies used to promote interdisciplinary studies. Our experience indicates that learning is enhanced if it is situated in real world and/or simulated contexts, fits new information with what is already known, is collaborative, and integrates assessment into the overall learning process. Collaborative learning provides a meaningful context for social negotiation as it creates conditions in which students can negotiate the boundaries between the knowledge communities to which they currently belong and those to which they would like to belong.

We used play as a way to develop a means by which to achieve these outcomes. In courses as varied as Technical Writing, a general education course on what it means to be human (Weird Science), English Composition, and Computer Programming, RPGs have helped our students develop writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills while developing an integrative view of their college education. The case study provides an example demonstrating how RPGs are able to provide an emotional and meaningful learning context that promotes learning and academic advancement.

We also identified and implemented a framework, Bloom's taxonomy, which could be used to integrate assessment in the learning process. Bloom's taxonomy can be used to conceptualize and measure learning outcomes in pedagogies that use RPGs and virtual learning environments. Playful learning and game design can take students from the most elementary (remembering) to the most sophisticated (creating) cognitive categories. Using creativity as a learning outcome—assembling, constructing, designing, developing, formulating, writing—is a best practice for integrating RPGs in interdisciplinary studies. While working on personally meaningful projects, students role-play and collaborate with peers, and, in doing so, they are engaged in meaningful learning as they create new products and points of view.

While the pedagogical approach using RPGs described here is effective for our student population, particularly underrepresented minorities, we should be cautious in extrapolating our results to other student populations and institutions. Further studies will be needed to determine how this approach might work for different student populations.

Notes

1. Benjamin S. Bloom, Max B. Englehart, Edward J. Furst, Walter H. Hill, and David R. Krathwohl, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, ed. Benjamin S. Bloom (New York: McKay, 1956).

2. David R. Krathwohl, "A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview," *Theory into Practice* 41, no. 4 (2002): 212–18. In this revision of Bloom's Taxonomy, creating is at the top, above evaluating.

3. See Susan Elrod and Mary J. S. Roth, *Leadership for Interdisciplinary Learning: A Practical Guide to Mobilizing, Implementing, and Sustaining Campus Efforts* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 2012); Project Kaleidoscope, *What Works in Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning in Science and Mathematics: Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2011); Lisa R. Lattuca, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Among College and University Faculty* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001); Lisa R. Lattuca,

Lois J. Voigt, and Kimberly Q. Faith, "Does Interdisciplinarity Promote Learning? Theoretical Support and Researchable Questions," *The Review of Higher Education* 28, no. 1 (2004): 23–48.

4. See Adam Blatner, "Role Paying in Education," October 18, 2009, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/rlplayedu.htm; Candido Cabo and Reneta D. Lansiquot, "Synergies Between Writing Stories and Writing Programs in Problem-Solving Courses," in *2014 IEEE Frontiers in Education (FIE) Conference*. (New York: IEEE, 2014), 888–896; Cynthia D'Angelo et al., *Simulations for STEM Learning: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis* (Executive Summary) (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2013); James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Merrilea J. Mayo, "Video Games: A Route to Large-Scale STEM Education?" *Science* 323, no. 5910 (2009): 79–82; Debra Nestel and Tanya Tierney, "Role-Play for Medical Students Learning About Communication: Guidelines for Maximizing Benefits," *BMC Medical Education* 7, no. 3 (2007): 1–9; Seymour Papert, "Does Easy Do It? Children, Games, and Learning," *Game Developer* (June 1998): 88; Brian David Phillips, "Role-Playing Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom," in *Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning, 15 May 1993* (Taipei, China: Crane Publishing, 1994), 625–648.

5. Reneta D. Lansiquot, "Real Classrooms in Virtual Worlds: Scaffolding Interdisciplinary Collaborative Writing," in *Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies: Intelligent and Adaptive Educational-Learning Systems: Achievements and Trends*, ed. Alejandro Peña-Ayala (Series Ed.) (New York: Springer, 2013), 269–292.

6. For detailed findings of our mixed-methodology studies, see Candido Cabo and Reneta D. Lansiquot, "Development of Interdisciplinary Problem-Solving Strategies Through Games and Computer Simulations," in *Cases on Interdisciplinary Research Trends in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: Studies on Urban Classrooms*, ed. Reneta D. Lansiquot (New York: Information Science Reference, 2013), 268–294. Cabo and Lansiquot, "Synergies Between Writing Stories"; Reneta D. Lansiquot and Candido Cabo. "Alice's Adventures in Programming Narratives," in *Transforming Virtual Learning: Cutting-Edge Technologies in Higher Education*, ed. Randy Hinrichs and Charles Wankel, vol. 4 (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2011), 311–331; Reneta D. Lansiquot and Candido Cabo, "Strengthening the Narrative of Computing with Learning Communities," in *Proceedings of the World Conference on Educational Media and Technology 2014* (Chesapeake, VA: AACE, 2014), 2217–23. For examples of games students created, see Reneta D. Lansiquot, Ashwin Satyanarayana, and Candido Cabo, "Using Interdisciplinary Game-Based Learning to Develop Problem Solving and Writing Skills," in *Proceedings of the 121st American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference* (Washington, D.C.: ASEE, 2014).

7. See Reneta D. Lansiquot, "Advanced Technical Writing: Blending Virtual Communities," *The Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology* 5, no. 1 (2009): 57–63; Lansiquot, "Real Classrooms in Virtual Worlds"; Reneta D. Lansiquot, "Towards Open-Source Virtual Worlds in Interdisciplinary Studies," in *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology*, ed. Mehdi Khosrow-Pour, 3d ed. (New York: Information Science Reference, 2015), 289–295.

8. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1991.

9. Papert, "Does Easy Do It?"

10. See Michele D. Dickey, "Engaging by Design: How Engagement Strategies in Popular Computer and Video Games Can Inform Instructional Design," *Educa-*

tional Technology Research and Development 53 (2005): 67–83; Julia Mason, "Video Games as Technical Communication Ecology," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2013): 219–36; Marc Prensky, "Simulation Nation: The Promise of Virtual Learning Activities," *Edutopia*, March 9, 2007, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.edutopia.org/literacy-computer-programming.

11. Lansiquot, "Advanced Technical Writing."

12. See Gee; Isabela Granic et al., "The Benefits of Playing Video Games," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 1 (2013): 66–78; Mayo; and Papert, "Does Easy Do It?"

13. Marc Prensky, "Programming Is the New Literacy," *Edutopia*, January 13, 2008, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.edutopia.org/literacy-computer-programming.

14. Granic et al.

15. George D. Kuh. *High-Impact Educational Practices* (Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2008).

16. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949); Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, 3d ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese, 2007).

17. Lansiquot et al., "Using Interdisciplinary Game-Based Learning."

18. See Ian Schreiber, "Teaching Game Design: Bloom's Taxonomy," August 4, 2008. http://teachingdesign.blogspot.com/2008/08/blooms-taxonomy.html; Paul Gestwicki, "Bloom's Taxonomy vs. SOLO for Serious Game Design," *Paul Gestwicki's Blog*, September 16, 2014, accessed June 26, 2015, http://paulgestwicki.blogspot.com/2014/09/blooms-taxonomy-vs-solo-for-serious.html.

19. Gestwicki.

20. Papert, "Does Easy Do It?"

21. Seymour Papert, *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996).

22. See Cabo et al., "Synergies Between Writing Stories and Writing Programs"; Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*; Mayo, "Video Games."

23. Krathwohl.

Bibliography

Alice. Accessed November 24, 2014. http://www.alice.org.

Blatner, Adam. "Role Paying in Education." October 18, 2009. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/rlplayedu.htm.

Bloom, Benjamin S., Max B. Englehart, Edward J. Furst, Walter H. Hill, and David R. Krathwohl. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, the Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, edited by Benjamin S. Bloom. New York: McKay, 1956.

Cabo, Candido, and Reneta D. Lansiquot. "Development of Interdisciplinary Problem-Solving Strategies through Games and Computer Simulations." In *Cases on Interdisciplinary Research Trends in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics: Studies on Urban Classrooms*, edited by Reneta D. Lansiquot. New York: Information Science Reference, 2013, 268–294.

Cabo, Candido, and Reneta D. Lansiquot. "Synergies Between Writing Stories and Writing Programs in Problem-Solving Courses." In *2014 IEEE Frontiers in Education (FIE) Conference*. New York: IEEE, 2014, 888–896.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon, 1949.

D'Angelo, Cynthia, Daisy Rutstein, Christopher Harris, Robert Bernard, Evgueni Borokhovski, and Geneva Haertel. *Simulations for STEM Learning: Systematic*

Review and Meta-Analysis (Executive Summary). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2013.

Dickey, Michele D. "Engaging by Design: How Engagement Strategies in Popular Computer and Video Games Can Inform Instructional Design." *Educational Technology Research and Development* 53 (2005): 67–83.

Elrod, Susan, and Mary J. S. Roth. *Leadership for Interdisciplinary Learning: A Practical Guide to Mobilizing, Implementing, and Sustaining Campus Efforts*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012.

Gee, James Paul. What *Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Gestwicki, Paul. "Bloom's Taxonomy vs. SOLO for Serious Game Design." September 16, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://paulgestwicki.blogspot.com/2014/09/blooms-taxonomy-vs-solo-for-serious.html.

Granic, Isabela, Adam Lobel, and Rutger C. M. E. Engels. "The Benefits of Playing Video Games." *American Psychologist* 69, no. 1 (2013): 66–78.

Krathwohl, David R. "A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview." *Theory into Practice* 41, no. 4 (2002): 212–18.

Kuh, George D. *High-Impact Educational Practices*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2008.

Lansiquot, Reneta D. "Advanced Technical Writing: Blending Virtual Communities." *The Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology* 5, no. 1 (2009): 57–63.

_____. "Real Classrooms in Virtual Worlds: Scaffolding Interdisciplinary Collaborative Writing." In *Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies: Intelligent and Adaptive Educational-Learning Systems: Achievements and Trends*, edited by Alejandro Peña-Ayala (Series Ed.). New York: Springer, 2013, 269–292.

_____. "Towards Open-Source Virtual Worlds in Interdisciplinary Studies." In *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology*, edited by Mehdi Khosrow-Pour, 3d ed. New York: Information Science Reference, 2015, 289–295.

Lansiquot, Reneta D., and Candido Cabo. "Alice's Adventures in Programming Narratives." In *Transforming Virtual Learning: Cutting-Edge Technologies in Higher Education*, edited by Randy Hinrichs and Charles Wankel, Vol. 4. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2011, 311–331.

Lansiquot, Reneta D., and Candido Cabo. "Strengthening the Narrative of Computing with Learning Communities." In *Proceedings of the World Conference on Educational Media and Technology 2014*. Chesapeake, VA: AACE, 2014, 2217–23.

Lansiquot, Reneta D., Ashwin Satyanarayana, and Candido Cabo. "Using Interdisciplinary Game-Based Learning to Develop Problem Solving and Writing Skills." In *Proceedings of the 121st American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference*. Washington, D.C.: ASEE, 2014.

Lattuca, Lisa R. *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Among College and University Faculty*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001.

Lattuca, Lisa R., Lois J. Voigt, and Kimberly Q. Faith. "Does Interdisciplinarity Promote Learning? Theoretical Support and Researchable Questions." *The Review of Higher Education* 28, no. 1 (2004): 23–48.

Mason, Julia. "Video Games as Technical Communication Ecology." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2013): 219–36.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Mayo, Merrilea J. "Video Games: A Route to Large-Scale STEM Education?" *Science* 323, no. 5910 (2009): 79–82.

Nestel, Debra, and Tanya Tierney. "Role-Play for Medical Students Learning About Communication: Guidelines for Maximizing Benefits." *BMC Medical Education* 7, no.3 (2007): 1–9.

OpenSimulator. Accessed November 24, 2014. http://opensimulator.org.

Papert, Seymour. *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap*. Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996.

_____. "Does Easy Do It? Children, Games, and Learning." *Game Developer.* June 1998, 88.

Phillips, Brian David. "Role-Playing Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom." In *Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference on English Teaching and Learning—15 May 1993*. Taipei, China: Crane Publishing, 1994, 625–648.

Prensky, Marc. "Programming Is the New Literacy." *Edutopia*. January 13, 2008. Accessed December 6, 2014. http://www.edutopia.org/literacy-computer-programming.

_____. "Simulation Nation: The Promise of Virtual Learning Activities." *Edutopia*. March 9, 2007. Accessed December 6, 2014. http://www.edutopia.org/literacy-computer-programming.

Project Kaleidoscope. *What Works in Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning in Science and Mathematics: Summary Report*. Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2011.

Schreiber, Ian. "Teaching Game Design: Bloom's Taxonomy." Last modified August 4, 2008. Accessed December 4, 2014. http://teachingdesign.blogspot.com/2008/08/blooms-taxonomy.html.

Second Life. Accessed November 24, 2014. http://www.secondlife.com.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, 3d ed. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese, 2007.

Part III

The Book of Change: Enacting Social Transformations

Teacher as Dungeon Master

Connected Learning, Democratic Classrooms, and Rolling for Initiative

ANTERO GARCIA

> Dungeon Mastering itself is no easy undertaking, to be sure. But Dungeon Mastering well is doubly difficult. There are few gamemasters around who are so superb in their conduct that they could disdain the opportunity to improve themselves in some way. Fortunately, this work addresses the matter at length, and gives you plenty of suggestions on all aspects of Dungeon Mastering (as well as some of the finer points) in order to help you improve your own efforts. Take heed, and always endeavor to make the game the best it can be—and **all** that it can be!
>
> —Mike Carr, Foreword
> to *Dungeon Master's Guide*
> (1979)[1]

By the time the first edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* emerged,[2] the role of the Dungeon Master had transformed from the purely arbitrating judge on the sidelines to the central producer of content and facilitator at the gaming table. Explaining the setting, emerging conflict, and how the world reacts to the decisions that participants make, the Dungeon Master—both in 1979 and continuing today—*teaches* players about the world in which they play. If the bound volumes of published role-playing game (RPG) books like *The Player's Handbook* and *The Dungeon Master's Guide* encapsulate the *system* of play, the Dungeon Master disseminates the actual play experience. More simply: for the majority of RPGs, the role of the Dungeon Master is a crucial component for people to actually be able to play the game.

Looking at how the culture of tabletop RPGs—particularly *Dungeons &*

Dragons—has changed over the past four years of the genre's existence, this essay highlights the ways that Dungeon Mastering offers powerful skills for teachers today. In doing so, I trace a history of participatory culture and models of democratic education. Rather than drawing A to B comparisons between classrooms and gaming—a potentially fraught exercise that trivializes gaming culture and simplifies the nuanced challenges of classroom pedagogy—I look at how Dungeon Mastering is entrenched in decades-long traditions of what Henry Jenkins et al. refer to as "participatory culture."[3] By looking at the foundations of participatory culture and this theory's extension into "connected learning,"[4] I highlight how the role of the Dungeon Master is one that *facilitates* powerful learning and literacy development for players, offers newer modes of learning engagement than what are currently being offered in schools, and provides students with contexts for learning that can be applied in the "real world."

Presently, there is a dearth of empirical data about how RPGs can affect academic learning. While this essay does not address this need, I provide a foundation and key principles of classroom practice that must be adapted from successful dungeon mastering. By discussing the anecdotal experiences of a middle school teacher, I highlight lessons of RPGs as they helped shape classroom learning over the course of a year.

A Brief Note on Vocabulary

Particularly in light of the oppressive rhetoric that is cast upon the current state of public education in the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is an, as yet, unspoken irony in comparing teachers to Dungeon Masters. The image of guarding and oppressing youth in labyrinthine school spaces is a telling metaphor that deserves elaboration. What's more, game design evolution has seen changes in the language in RPGs from "judge"[5] to "Dungeon Master"[6] to "Storyteller"[7] (to mention a few examples). These different names could be seen as a trajectory that highlights shifting narrative roles over time.[8] However, for the sake of this essay, I focus on the primary language of the "world's most popular role-playing game"[9] and adhere with comparing—not sardonically—teachers to Dungeon Masters. Further, in the context of this essay, I am using the *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) 5th Edition definition of a Dungeon Master; this is a particular stance with regards to the role of Dungeon Masters, and not one that is universally shared: "The Dungeon Master is the creative force behind a *D&D* game. The Dungeon Master creates a world for the other players to explore, and also creates and runs adventures that drive the story."[10]

Participatory Culture

In describing how digital tools make the production of media almost as seamless as the consumption of it, Henry Jenkins coined the term "participatory culture" to reflect this contemporary change.[11] In a co-authored white paper, he writes: "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways."[12] While I explore how participatory culture is funneling into the learning practices of young people later in this essay, it is important to recognize that tabletop role-playing has been historically ahead of the curve when it comes to participatory culture. Since its inception and its invocation of myriad inspirational sources in "Appendix N" of the first *Dungeon Master's Guide*, role-playing games have embraced Jenkins' notion of appropriation and recirculation of preexisting media.

It is important to acknowledge that the media genre of tabletop gaming predates the epochs of desktop publishing, What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get (WYSIWYG) functionality, and crowdfunding (though these advances very much affect the genre today).[13]At the same time, while participatory culture is typically enfolded within the genres of online participation, the virtual worlds that are explored, copied, and remixed in gaming modules are important proto-examples of participatory culture at work. For every evening that RPG participants explored the halls of a forgotten kingdom from Middle Earth, or interplanetary travel in games like *Gamma World*[14] and *Spelljammer*[15] landed players in storylines from *Star Trek*, the spirit of participatory culture was alive and well, thirty years before Jenkins coined the language. Building off of familiar cultural and storytelling tropes, the foundations of tabletop RPGs are built upon an active participation with the threads of preexisting media.

Similarly, the notion of "transmedia" can also be seen at work in early RPG play (and continuing today). Looking across media genres, transmedia can be understood as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."[16] Anecdotally, in my current *D&D* 5th Edition campaign, we are playing through the published adventure *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*.[17] Taking place in the world of the Forgotten Realms, players around the table invoke knowledge from *D&D* Forgotten Realms novels they have read, videogames they have played like *Baldur's Gate*[18] which takes place in the titular city, board games like *The Lords of Waterdeep* (the name of a large city in the Forgotten Realms), and past encounters in the world from previous games. Together, this information allows players to create a rich, loosely constructed history of the Realms. It is anything but forgotten at our table but is also far from comprehensive. Drawing from decades of knowledge scattered across myriad media platforms, the Forgotten Realms is an amorphous *space* in which players construct knowledge vis-à-vis transmedia experiences. Like many experiences in role-playing, this is not a definitive, empirical explanation of transmedia and participatory culture at work within gaming. However, for games that place in published settings like Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk, the world of the *Dresden Files*, or film and TV worlds like Middle Earth or the *Firefly* series, transmedia opportunities *extend* player understanding and provide platforms on which characterization and plot can be built. In this sense, one must recognize that since the 1970s RPGs have been a hotbed for powerful transmedia experiences that are collaborative, fan driven, and loosely open-ended.

Another thriving form of participatory culture that one should consider is the role of fan fiction. While digital distribution of fan fiction through online sites is currently undergoing significant debate around topics of monetization and ownership,[19] one could argue that *playing* within a preexisting fictional world is a multimodal form of fan fiction. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse discuss six ways that fan fiction can be interpreted:

1. Fan fiction as interpretation of source text.
2. Fan fiction as a communal gesture.
3. Fan fiction as a sociopolitical argument.
4. Fan fiction as individual engagement and identificatory practice.
5. Fan fiction as one element of audience response.
6. Fan fiction as a pedagogical tool.[20]

While one can look at RPGs aligning to all six of these different aspects of fan fiction, it is important to focus here on how the medium acts as a pedagogical tool. Even more importantly, I would argue that aspects of the remaining five points about fan fiction only bolster the utility of the medium as a mode of instruction and education. Though Hellekson and Busse emphasize that the genre promoted *individual* engagement, the co-construction of fan fiction narratives is unique to the ways RPGs function as collaborative fan fiction. Even if a Dungeon Master approaches her or his gaming group with an adaptation or remix of a popular storyline, the direction and details of how the narrative unfolds is largely in the collective hands of the players.

In a previous article, my colleague and I explored how digital learning ecologies exemplify the ways fan fiction communities offer powerful platforms for youth to learn and interact.[21] Building off the research of John Seely Brown, this essay references a "learning ecology" as "an open, complex adaptive system comprising elements that are dynamic and interdependent."[22]

Rather than looking at learning as a process that happens to individuals, Brown's language highlights the social engagement amongst participants, the environment in which these participants interact, and the various texts and media utilized; learning, then, is an ongoing component of rich spaces like tabletop gaming communities. The interaction of players, game mechanics, story, and visual aids and implements (like maps, figures, dice, and character sheets) could be a self-contained learning ecology. More broadly, one can imagine a local gaming community that shares ideas within a local brick and mortar store as a larger instantiation of such an ecology. That digital tools like online social networks extend such ecologies should be understood, particularly in light of Jenkins' definition of participatory culture. In light of this framing of a learning ecology, I argue here that the decision making of RPG Dungeon Masters functions as the bedrock on which powerful pedagogical instruction can emerge.

Though role-playing is a collaborative effort—each agent within the gaming ecology affects the experience and outcome of play—the Dungeon Master is the most deliberate in enacting his or her agency on the direction of a game. Yes, this is a generalization: some gaming systems place more agency in the hands of players and various modes of play are going to lend more direction within the purview of players. However, even when playing within the "sandbox" games that are guided by player choice, nearly every decision is mediated by the Dungeon Master's whim. Be it an interaction with a world-weary barkeep, a description of the woods-shrouded labyrinth that players choose to explore, or the weather patterns that may plague a lengthy road trip to Waterdeep, the Dungeon Master's role of facilitating all aspects of play outside of an individual player's control means that if their is a center to a singular gaming ecology it is the Dungeon Master.

Shoring Up Learning in an Age of Participation

Recently, a group of researchers has looked at the learning principles that emerge within today's context of participatory culture. Calling this kind of learning a "connected learning," these researchers help illustrate how such models of learning today are

> socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person pursues a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career possibilities, or civic engagement.[23]

Establishing youth interests and collaboration as platforms for understanding how young people are learning in the twenty-first century, there is a very clear through-line that bridges the research about participatory culture with the principles of learning today. By building on the notion of participatory culture—including transmedia and fan fiction—connected learning is a useful framework for educators to consider how to better leverage youth learning *as it is already occurring* for specific academic purposes.

Primarily framing learning principles in after school activities such as in online gaming communities[24] or around popular young adult (YA) literature,[25] connected learning *can* act as the groundwork for establishing new teaching practices within classrooms. As such, I believe that the forms of understanding and education that happen informally around a gaming table are precisely how connected learning can be mediated by teachers. More simply: connected learning classrooms have a lot to learn from Dungeon Masters. My own work has attempted to highlight how teachers are taking up models of connected learning within their classrooms today.[26] In traditional models of tabletop role-playing, the Dungeon Master and players sit and play with a mutually agreed upon set of rules, contexts, and cultural limits (a game that makes too many players uncomfortable with its content, for example, will quickly lose its player base). With this shared interest, connected learning highlights how information is distributed, stories are constructed, and understanding of rules and setting are reinforced over time. Tabletop role-play *is* connected learning in action.

While tabletop role-play is exemplary of connected learning it also highlights a key salient factor that can help schools sustain this new model of education: the role of a key facilitator. At least among most popular RPGs, the role of the Dungeon Master (or equivalent) is central to the play experience. This individual is present *but different* from others at the table. She or he constructs narrative; provides contextual support through description, taking on non-player character personas, and adding details to the world as requested by players; and arbitrates rulings on complex gaming systems. As every edition of *The Dungeon Master's Guide* illustrates, final ruling decisions are ultimately the decision of the Dungeon Master (at least within the realm of *D&D*; this can differ for other RPGs). There exists a burden for all players to ensure the gaming is a fun experience, but this is most centrally the Dungeon Master's underlying task. It is with this understanding that one can begin to see a much clearer role that a *teacher as Dungeon Master* model of classroom instruction can play in informing powerful learning. When the teacher is culling together and mediating the mutual interests of classroom participants, he or she is guiding forms of engagement and arbitrating as necessary. This is not simply a semantic shift in how one describes what teachers do; instead, this is an important acknowledgment that the teaching of teachers must incorporate the sound principles of mentorship, support, and forethought that are central to engaging RPG experiences. In the next section of this essay, I look at some of the foundations of these learning principles before more fully diving into examples of classroom Dungeon Mastering.

The Classroom as a Space for Democratic and Critical Inquiry

While this essay has thus far drawn connections between traditional forms of RPGs like *D&D* and forms of participatory culture and connected learning, relatively little of this description has focused on what teachers *do* within classrooms and schools. Set aside, for a moment, your own recollections of school and of how schooling is presently framed in the public media: the rote skill-and-drill preparation for high-stakes tests, the series of desks lined in rows, the drudgery of schedules guided by factory-modeled bells. Yes, these are often the vagaries of U.S. education. However, even looking at educational theory that extends more than 100 years into our past, the groundwork for powerful game-based learning and exploration *in schools* has been slowly brewing. Further, much like at the heart of one's favorite *D&D* campaign, the possibilities for transformative learning are most fully realized by a flexible mediator of learning and engagement: teachers *can be* the innovative Dungeon Master for today's schooling system.

More than a century ago, philosopher John Dewey challenged the archaic and disconnected traditions of schooling. The rote mechanics and the disconnect between "school and society" illustrated for Dewey that schools were preparing students in a context disembodied from the *real* world in which they will interact.[27] Both in terms of content of inquiry and in mode of pedagogical engagement, Dewey's concerns were not only *what* was being taught but *where* and *how*. Across his career, Dewey would revisit these sentiments; for many scholars these would be seen as culminating most succinctly in his 1938 work *Experience and Education*. Arguing for a "democratic" model of schooling, Dewey's vision is one that is built on sociocultural principles of learning frequently upheld in today's educational scholarship but not fully implemented within the current public schooling landscape. For Dewey, forms of inquiry, exploration, and meaningful connection between curriculum and *real* world interactions should be at the center of how we educate and engage with young people.

While Dewey's vision of democratic models of schooling shaped schools and educational philosophy in the U.S. in the early twentieth century, a "critical pedagogy" largely shaped by South American pedagogues like Paulo Freire has challenged conceptions of power and oppression in Western education over the past six decades.[28] I have looked at the convergence of

Deweyan forms of democracy and South American-influenced critical pedagogy in models of twenty-first century schooling elsewhere,[29] but it is important here to acknowledge that Dewey's vision of schooling—while interested in progressive education—did not specifically explore issues of power, labor, and liberation in ways that were intentionally taken up by Freire and, later, educational researchers like Ira Shor,[30] Ernest Morrell,[31] and Peter McLaren.[32] A key tenet of critical pedagogy, "problem-posing education," emphasizes that knowledge is not deposited by a teacher to a student via a "banking model of education," but rather that knowledge is created through ongoing questioning, inquiry, and dialogue.[33] More recently, Francesco Crocco has pointed to the possibility of merging critical pedagogy with traditional game-based pedagogies by arguing for a "Critical Gaming Pedagogy" that engages Freire's work to "promote critical thinking about hegemonic ideas and institutions rather than to propagate them."[34]

Bringing together the concepts of critical pedagogy and Dewey's progressivism, it is important to highlight how a teacher as Dungeon Master can bring these two bodies of educational theory together synergistically. On the one hand, Dewey illustrates how content knowledge learned in an English classroom, for instance, can be applied to a *specific* context from which to learn; for gamers, an encounter in a wayward dungeon is an opportunity for players to embody learning that is otherwise abstracted across texts in a gaming manual. On the other hand, critical pedagogy encourages teachers to take this context-specific application of learning and leverage it for liberatory purposes. To this extent, the possibilities of a Dungeon Master, both in the classroom and at the gaming table, that guides participants toward actively critiquing conceptions of power is one that would also guide a Freirean "problem-posing" model of education[35] and also build experiential, democratic learning opportunities. Further, such forms of learning are intentionally taken up with not only understanding *real* contexts for learning but for exploring the roots of issues of equity and justice.

Though contemporary research in critical pedagogy considers the role of schools as sites that orient students toward specific forms of labor, as noted by Jean Anyon[36] and Paul Willis,[37] the initial bedrock of Dewey's American progressive education offers a platform from which to understand the potential *relevance* of a Dungeon Master as teacher model. For instance, in 1932, a contemporary of Dewey's, George Counts, wrote the aptly titled pamphlet *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Advancing the issues of relevancy and access within schools, Counts' prescient call for progressive reform demands that "teachers must bridge the gap between school and society and play some part in the fashioning of those great common purposes which should bind the two together."[38] It is striking to recognize that the issues of relevancy at the center of Dewey and other pedagogical scholars' concerns are often found within the opportunity to "play" and take on identities and roles through simulation. What is important to see across the work of Dewey and his contemporaries is that this concern for relevance and bringing school *closer* to the needs of the "real world" continue today. Particularly as mainstream media describe the role of schools as preparing students for future careers that do not yet exist, the *elasticity* of instruction is crucial. Being able to manipulate and *play* with ideas and concepts is one main purpose of inquiry as Dewey describes it.

Play and *role*-play are key avenues for understanding society and one's role in it. Exploration and manipulation of principles and ideas is fundamental to learning for young people,[39] however, the creative principle of divergent thinking is not supported in most secondary school settings.[40] Johan Huizinga's formative theoretical work on games, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, illustrates how games can be understood as key ways of teaching and conveying culture.[41] Huizinga explains that games are played within a "magic circle" where social norms are ignored. Within the "ritual" of play, players are granted the agency to do things that society would judge as strange; "falling down" during Ring Around the Rosie, for example, is common and expected behavior in the "magic circle" of play. Similarly, talking in a fantastical patter as a haggling halfling bard may seem silly, but is within the expected norms of *D&D* role-play. Huizinga emphasizes that a main characteristic of games "is in fact freedom." Noting that "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity," Huizinga's work highlights how games can safely cordon off student exploration into a virtual space for students to explore.[42] While RPGs have historically developed around genre fiction settings like fantasy, science fiction, and the Wild West, there is little to prevent virtual exploration of contemporary settings. Having students at the helm to de-escalate global crisis, seek out new technologies, and mediate inner-city strife can all lend themselves to applicable new contexts of learning and play. Constructing such academic play as a "problem posing" mode of learning enables students to think critically about their own positionality and the collaboratory opportunities that emerge. Such play parallels longstanding use of simulations within education, but emphasizes the identity construction and mediation process. Like students developing "critical consciousness"—a nuanced, critical understanding of the world, one's place within it, and a clarified sense of agency to enact change—in a Freriean model of critical pedagogy, students can explore *who* the characters they play are[43]; their wants, desires, aspirations, and fears offer metacognitive illumination on how students interact and engage.

In fact, such virtual world learning is promoted in online gaming systems. Games like *World of Warcraft* are frequently upheld as powerful learning tools.[44] However, I would argue that one can adhere more closely to

Dewey's vision of bringing school and society closer to one another via non-digital contexts of learning. As Marshall McLuhan explains, Dewey's progressive models of education are not about high-tech advances in technology, but about intentional use of dialogue: "John Dewey worked to restore education to its primitive pre-print phase. He wanted to get the student out of the passive role of consumer of uniformly packaged learning."[45] By moving away from the consumption of print, Dewey not only signals key principles of participatory culture (only 70 years early!) but also harkens to modes of engagement that reflect oral culture. Describing a secondary orality, Walter Ong notes that "Its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, in concentration on the present moment" offers a powerful new mode of oral communication.[46] This prescient form of communication occurs in dialogue across a gaming table and, potentially, within the classroom. What this means for education and gaming is that the contexts for play and exploration require little to no digital technology; they require a safe setting for learning in which students are able to explore, imagine, and create.

The Dungeon Master Teacher: Connecting Learning, Constructing Contexts for Play

Currently, a smattering of gaming enthusiasts bring RPGs into K–12 schools and into their classrooms. These activities are shared anecdotally on blogs, in zines, and in conversations around gaming tables. While companies like Paizo are actively supporting libraries and schools to incorporate RPGs in the classroom,[47] there are two challenges that this process faces. First, there is a lack of empirical research on how RPGs are supporting classroom learning. Secondly, there is a lack of material to support teachers who are unfamiliar with RPGs but interested in incorporating Dungeon Master techniques. Among the many courses pre-service teachers are expected to take to receive their teaching license one would be hard pressed to find courses that discuss polyhedral dice, the rules statistics for flumphs, or the best way to avoid a slumber lich. Distilling this a bit more clearly, the parts of *playing* an RPG—narrating, mediating, socializing—are simply not a part of how teachers in the U.S. are prepared today.

As we've seen throughout this essay so far, Dungeon Masters—as the key central mediators in RPGs—support powerful forms of connected learning in schools. Further, if one returns to the roots of Dewey's and Freire's beliefs about student identity and agency in schools, a central challenge that persists in education today is that schools lack context of learning within the public sphere that students will eventually enter. As such, the connected learning role of the Dungeon Master is one that can bring in the elements of imagination, fun, and academic learning while simultaneously supporting youth-driven models of engagement. The remainder of this essay, then, addresses the second main challenge of incorporating RPGs within classrooms. As the teacher below highlights, there are some disparate examples of RPGs influencing education, but the widespread possibilities of sustainable educational change via role-playing are not seen yet. Building off a dialogue with a teacher on his extracurricular incorporation of RPGs, I offer a framework for radically transforming teaching practices through the art of Dungeon Mastering.

Chad Sansing, a middle school teacher in Virginia and member of the National Writing Project, ran a yearlong Pathfinder campaign for his students. Though this project began as an extracurricular endeavor, Sansing noted ways his students' participation shaped their academic and democratic identities. Interviewing Sansing about the campaign, he recalled the history of the program: "Last year, during the 4th 9 Weeks, several kids at school asked for a *D&D* club during advisory time. Serving as nerd-in-residence, I agreed to host the club and run the campaign." In a 5,000-word treatise, Sansing offered a synopsis of the story, the world he and his students constructed, and the ways this world was changed by the ideas and actions of the youth. Like any long-term campaign, the twists of player ingenuity take the players in myriad directions. This is not the neat story-arc of a five-act Shakespearean drama. Instead, the experience found Sansing constantly reconfiguring his campaign to meet his students' interests. Although an extracurricular program, Sansing's expertise as a teacher points to the ways the RPG sessions could creep into an English Language Arts curriculum. He notes,

> Before the adventure began, most students wrote back stories—without much help from me—that brought them together on the map I showed them of the campaign world. I asked them to come up with explanations for how they could all wind up in one particular nation at the same time. All kinds of writing and creativity ensued as we got characters built over the first three or four days of club.

Sansing guided much of the rules arbitration—not expecting most of his students to spend the money on or focus on the minutia of rules in a nearly 600-page book. Instead, he would suggest how the dice were used, offer key explanations of each player's character attributes, and help mediate what students *wanted* to do in combat with how these were executed mechanically. While some aspects of rules understanding can be seen as an important skill, Sansing highlights a key principle that Dungeon Masters employ: *rules can get in the way of engagement*. Worrying less about mechanics and more about the interests of students, Sansing emphasizes that taking on being a Dungeon Master-influenced teacher is about adjusting content toward allowing student voice to emerge.

By worrying less about the mechanics of a 3.5 edition *D&D* variant, Sansing allowed students' sense of adventure to guide what occurred. Though he designed the campaign, it was done so because he *knew* his students. In this sense another key lesson is presented: *relationships matter*. A successful Dungeon Master in the classroom is one that refines her or his instruction based on what she or he knows about the students. This is even more directly explained in *The Dungeon Master's Guide*. Noting the various interests of players, the *Guide* explains:

> Knowing what your players enjoy most about the *D&D* game helps you create and run adventures that they will enjoy and remember. Once you know which of the following activities each player in your group enjoys the most, you can tailor adventures that satisfy your players' preferences as much as a possible, thus keeping them engaged.[48]

The *Guide* goes on to provide an non-comprehensive list of activities including acting, exploring, instigating, fighting, optimizing, problem solving, and storytelling. Within a fictitious setting of a virtual world these are powerful activities to engage in. One can imagine extending such a list to more fully take on academic contexts of learning *if they seem conducive to what one knows students are interested in.*

By creating a gaming experience that was personalized and accessible for his students, Sansing offers an even more important lesson about being a classroom Dungeon Master: *learning should feel adventurous.* Reflecting on why his campaign was successful, Sansing said,

> Kids want to cooperate and learn with, through, and from people and stories that involve them in personal inquiry, trusting relationships, and opportunities for exploring identity at school. A well designed lesson, unit, curriculum, class, or year is one in which kids feel like adventurers, in which they feel like heroes, and in which they can apprehend the heroism of their peers, some of whom fight awful battles just to be present and to risk being seen and heard.

By making learning feel adventurous, one can see how schooling becomes much more than a rote delivery mechanism of content; it becomes a foundation on which students explore ideas, take on new identities, and generally get to try out new experiences in the safe confines of a teacher-mediated space. One can learn from this campaign that powerful teaching can look quite a bit like a memorable campaign: intellectual foes slain, journeys taken, memories created. Learning is leveled up.

A final lesson that Sansing offers is about the tension between structure and openness. As he reflected, "Playing *D&D* with my kids was like teaching them in a participatory learning environment—without them it would have fallen flat; with too much control on my part, the game would have sucked." One can glean from this the understanding that teachers as Dungeon Masters *should know when to back off.* As Farne notes, "On the one hand, play is considered as a ground on which adults intervene by building paths, materials, structures that give it an additional value; and yet, on the other hand, due to a pedagogical project, that very ground is preserved as natural as possible assuming that this is its true value."[49] This fleshing out of a "true value" in play and of providing concrete "structures" is the kind of mediation that Dungeon Masters engage in. It is a fine balance between prescription and open-ended play. Sansing provides this context while also harking back to the key focus for Dungeon Masters—making the game fun: "An explicit and repeatedly stated purpose of the group was to be a community and to enjoy our time together as co-creators of an awesome story."

Sansing thus illustrates four key foundations teachers can adapt that come from Dungeon Mastering:

1. Rules can get in the way of engagement.
2. Relationships matter.
3. Learning should feel adventurous.
4. Know when to back off.

One should keep in mind that these four elements work synergistically. Without knowing one's students one is unlikely to be able to know what instruction needs to be adjusted or what feels adventurous. Likewise, *some* structure is important to maintain a feeling of adventure. Knowing what pedagogical scaffolding can be taken away and what needs to remain in order to keep the experience held together is a skill that comes with teaching practice. Ultimately, these four elements can be read as benign truisms about classroom practice. However, it is important to consider them in light of what happens in RPG campaigns. As a Dungeon Master, one's responsibility is to arbitrate rules when necessary and remove them when they become little more than time-consuming clutter. Further, knowing how to mediate the many personalities encouraged at an RPG table is a delicate skill and one that can quickly undermine the element of fun if not done carefully. Additionally, without epic stakes on the table, there is little incentive for traditional RPG campaigns to proceed forward. While Sansing's students highlight some of these exceptions (some players were much more interested in the customization and progression of their own characters' storylines than a sense of death-defying adventure), it is the epic *quest* that provided the forward momentum of a year-long process of learning and community building. Sansing's experiences as a Dungeon Master echo a key academic belief noted by Jeff Howard in his work *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*. Exploring how digital games could replicate literary works, Howard highlights the powerful connections *across* various literary works, noting that "pedagogical applications of quests can potentially benefit humanities teachers in a broad range of educational situations."[50]

Though my conversation with Sansing and anecdotal flotsam and jetsam offer myriad ways to continue to endorse a Dungeon Master pedagogy within the classroom, I also want to offer a brief caution. While it is fruitful here to consider the pedagogical power of a Dungeon Master-approach to classroom teaching, it is important to also acknowledge some of the underlying tensions that exist. Because the RPG table does not hew to the same constraints of today's classroom, noting similarities and differences between the two modes of engagement is akin to meaningless navel gazing. However, looking at the differences between Dungeon Mastering and teaching illustrate conceptions of power and democracy within learning contexts. Looking at language from the first *Dungeon Master's Guide* in the 1970s, one is reminded of how RPGs can feel different even from the broad definitions of connected learning discussed earlier in this essay:

> The danger of a mutable system is that you or your players will go too far in some undesirable direction and end up with a short-lived campaign. Participants will always be pushing for a game which allows them to become strong and powerful far too quickly. Each will attempt to take the game out of your hands and mold it to his or her own ends. To satisfy this natural desire is to issue a death warrant to a campaign, for it will either be a one-player affair or the players will desert *en masse* for something more challenging and equitable.[51]

It is this description that—though the RPG genre has grown significantly over the past four decades—plagues the vision that it is a purely democratic affair. In ways that may not align even with the Deweyan principles of democratic schooling, Gygax offers here a distrust of players in tabletop games. While some RPG games are much broader in the freedoms they offer players (and some RPGs are played without the role of a Dungeon Master), one can imagine that one must maintain an optimistic belief in the capabilities and intentions of students. The epic quest one provides them can either uplift the professional interests of students, or squash intellectual desires. The responsibility of classroom Dungeon Masters is to do nothing less than instill feelings of intellectual curiosity and empowerment in the young adventurers as they set out to create change in the *real* world beyond the classroom.

Describing her work designing Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), Jane McGonigal argues that "games are a powerful platform for change."[52] Indeed, as the foundation for in-school learning ecologies, one can see the role of the Dungeon Master making learning an epic, customized challenge for students. Reflecting on some of the key takeaways from his campaign with his students, Sansing illustrates how the lessons of play, the lessons of schooling, and the lessons of civic identity and community are intermingled. He offers a set of key precepts that teacher and student alike can adopt:

> Natural 1s are bad, but failure is sometimes funny and always safe in our classroom. Natural 20s are good, but sometimes being great at something right off

> the bat changes what comes next or what's expected of us. Everyone has something to say, but some of us take more time to find our voices than others. Everyone wants to belong, and we can include them when we decide to be patient, inviting, and kind. Everyone has a sense of humor. Stories are best created together. Community sometimes requires sacrifice, even when sacrifice is just a willingness to be silly in front of others.

Conclusion: Teaching Beyond Failure

Nearly a century ago John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* that "From a very early age, however, there is no distinction of exclusive periods of play activity and work activity, but only one of emphasis."[53] As a mediator of the kinds of emphasis within a classroom, teachers can help issue powerful learning that emerges specifically from modes of play. While rules and specific gaming systems can come to mind to do this (this essay, for example, has largely used *D&D* examples of RPG play), it is equally important to recognize that powerful play stems from and spurs imagination. By stripping away archaic notions of high stakes testing, greater possibilities emerge. Learning can be driven from and guided by the collective imagination of students and teachers. Mediating the wants, questions, and desires of young people into an epic adventure is what a Dungeon Master can do in this setting.

This shift toward a classroom Dungeon Master is also one that changes the language of schooling. Typically, "failure" is abysmal and sorely looked down upon. To fail is to be unacceptable in school. However, failure is a regular, accepted part of RPG play. To fail may be a frustrating experience, but it is one in which growth emerges. One learns from failure and—while one does not look forward to the failed Will save at the 11th hour of an epic battle—it is an accepted part of how RPGs engage their participants. In this sense, consider how *different* schooling would be if failure were taken out of the picture. Even in the relatively short length of the development of the RPG genre, there has been significant growth and flexibility. As Appelcline notes[54]:

> The role-playing industry grew out of wargaming, a predominantly simulationist hobby. However, many of those wargamers were out to win, and that was the idea that infused the early RPG industry under gamemasters like Gary Gygax and Rob Kuntz. Primordial adventures like *S1: Tomb of Horrors* (1978) and other *D&D* tournament modules offered challenges that players might succeed *or* fail at.

The history of tabletop role-playing continues, and one can see a deliberate shift to "narrativist gaming style."[55] Appelcline's history largely looks at how such models of gaming are found in "indie" games. Ultimately RPGs aren't about "winning." There is no letter grade given in any edition of *D&D*. Judging success and progress was to take into account myriad qualitative and quantitative factors: my hit points, my level and experience, my sense of exhaustion after a long night of play, my yearning to play again soon. Dungeon Masters make learning participatory; they co-construct a fulfilling, challenging learning experience and do so in relation to the interests and needs of their participants. They mediate fun and offer epic opportunities for even the shyest participants to step forward and save the day. Roll for initiative.

Notes

1. Gary Gygax, *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1979), 2.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Maragaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, 2009).

4. Mimi Ito, Kris Gutierres, Sonia Livingstone, Bill Penuel, Jean Rhodes, Katie Salen, Juliet Schor, Julian Sefton-Green, and S. Craig Watkins, *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design* (Report for Connected Learning Research Network, 2013).

5. 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).

6. Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1974).

7. White Wolf Publishing, *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf Publishing, 1991).

8. Role Playing Public Radio, "What Is Happening to Tabletop Roleplaying Games? Panel at PAX East 2014." *Role Playing Public Radio,* 2014, accessed June 26, 2015, http://slangdesign.com/rppr/2014/04/panel-discussion/what-is-happening-to-tabletop-roleplaying-games-panel-at-pax-east-2014/.

9. Paizo Publishing, *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* (Redmond, WA: Paizo Publishing LLC, 2009).

10. Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014).

11. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

12. Jenkins, et al., *Participatory Culture*, 8.

13. Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '70–'79* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014). Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '80–'89* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014). Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '90–'99* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014). Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '00–'09* (Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014).

14. James M. Ward and Gary Jaquet, *Gamma World* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978).

15. Jeff Grub, *Spelljammer* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989).

16. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan:*

The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins, accessed June 26, 2015, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

17. Wizards of the Coast, *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014).

18. Black Isle Studios, *Baldur's Gate* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: BioWare, 1998).

19. Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, "The Problem with Amazon's New Fanfiction Platform, Kindle Worlds." *The Daily Dot*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.dailydot.com/business/kindle-words-amazon-fanfiction-problems/; Lev Grossman, "The Boy Who Lived Forever," *Time*, July 7, 2011, accessed June 26, 2015, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2081784,00.html

20. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 8–9.

21. Antero Garcia and Marcelle Haddix, "Reading YA with 'Dark Brown Skin': Race, Community, and Rue's Uprising," *The ALAN Review* 42 no. 2 (2015): 37–44.

22. John Seely Brown, "Growing Up Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn." *Change* (March/April 2000): 10–20.

23. Ito et al.

24. Matthew H. Rafalow and Katie Salen Tekinbas, *Welcome to Sackboy Planet: Connected Learning Among LittleBigPlanet 2 Players* (Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014).

25. Rachel Cody Pfister, *Hats for House Elves: Connected Learning and Civic Engagement in Hogwarts at Ravelry* (Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014).

26. Antero Garcia, ed., *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom* (Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014).

27. John Dewey, "The School and Society." *MW*. 1 (1897): 5–20.

28. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

29. Antero Garcia, "Good Reception: Utilizing Mobile Media and Games to Develop Critical Inner-City Agents of Social Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2012). Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell, *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming Inquiry with Researchers, Educators, and Students* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

30. Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

31. Ernest Morrell, *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

32. Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education (Fifth Edition)*. (Boston: Pearson, 2006).

33. Freire, 72–74.

34. Francesco Crocco, "Critical Gaming Pedagogy." *Radical Teacher* 91 (2011): 29.

35. Freire.

36. Jean Anyon, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

37. Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

38. George. S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: The John Day Company, 1932).

39. Neil Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Abrams, 1997).

40. Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* (North Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2011).

41. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Abingdon, Routledge, 1949).

42. *Ibid.*, 8.

43. Freire.

44. Mark Chen, *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011). Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

45. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 144.

46. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

47. Paizo Publishing, "Pathfinder Roleplaying Game for Schools and Libraries," Paizo Publishing LLC, accessed June 26, 2015, http://paizo.com/pathfinder/libraries.

48. Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeon Master's Guide,* 6.

49. Roberto Farne, "Pedagogy of Play" *Topoi* 24 (2005): 170.

50. Jeff Howard, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (Wellesley, MA, A.K. Peters, 2008), 146.

51. Gygax, 7.

52. Jane McGonigal, "Gaming Can Make a Better World." Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference 2010, *Ted Conferences, LLC*.

53. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 203.

54. Appelcline, *'80–'89*, 137.

55. *Ibid.*, 139.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anyon, Jean. *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '70–'79*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '80–'89*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '90–'99*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry '00–'09*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Arneson, Dave, and Gary Gygax. *Dungeons and Dragons*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1974.

Baker-Whitelaw, Gavia. "The Problem with Amazon's New Fanfiction Platform, Kindle Worlds." *The Daily Dot*. Last modified March 22, 2013. http://www.dailydot.com/business/kindle-words-amazon-fanfiction-problems/.

Black Isle Studios. *Baldur's Gate*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: BioWare, 1998.

Brosterman, Neil. *Inventing Kindergarten*. New York: Abrams, 1997.

Brown, John Seely. "Growing Up Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn." *Change* (March/April 2000): 10–20.

Chen, Mark. *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011.

Counts, George. S. *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* New York: The John Day Company, 1932.

Crocco, Francesco. "Critical Gaming Pedagogy." *Radical Teacher* 91 (2011): 27–41.

Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1916.

_____. *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938.

_____. "The School and Society." *MW*. 1: 5–20, 1897.

Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey, and Ernest Morrell. *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools.* New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

Farne, Roberto. "Pedagogy of Play." *Topoi* 24 (2005): 169–181.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.

Garcia, Antero. "Good Reception: Utilizing Mobile Media and Games to Develop Critical Inner-City Agents of Social Change" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Los Angeles, 2012.

Garcia, Antero, ed. *Teaching in the Connected Learning Classroom.* Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014.

Garcia, Antero, and Marcelle Haddix. "Reading YA with 'Dark Brown Skin': Race, Community, and Rue's Uprising." *The ALAN Review* 42 no. 2 (2015): 37–44.

Grossman, Lev. "The Boy Who Lived Forever." *Time*. July 7, 2011. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2081784,00.html.

Grub, Jeff. *Spelljammer.* Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989.

Gygax, Gary. *Dungeon Masters Guide*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1979.

Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Howard, Jeff. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives.* Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1949.

Ito, Mimi, Kris Gutierres, Sonia Livingstone, Bill Penuel, Jean Rhodes, Katie Salen, Juliet Schor, Julian Sefton-Green, and S. Craig Watkins. *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design*. Report for Connected Learning Research Network, 2013.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

_____. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 2007. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Purushotma, Maragaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice J. Robison. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century.* Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, 2009.

McGonigal, Jane. "Gaming Can Make a Better World." Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference 2010, Long Beach, Ted Conferences LLC, 2010.

McLaren, Peter. *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education (5th Edition).* Boston: Pearson, 2006.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

Mirra, Nicole, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell. *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming Inquiry with Researchers, Educators, and Students* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

Morrell, Ernest. *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation.* New York: Routledge, 2008.

Nardi, Bonnie. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

Paizo Publishing. *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook.* Redmond, WA: Paizo Publishing LLC, 2009.

_____. "Pathfinder Roleplaying Game for Schools and Libraries." Redmond, WA: Paizo Publishing LLC, 2013. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://paizo.com/pathfinder/libraries.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role Playing Games.* San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

Pfister, Rachel Cody. *Hats for House Elves: Connected Learning and Civic Engagement in Hogwarts at Ravelry*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014.

Rafalow, Matthew H., and Katie Salen Tekinbas. *Welcome to Sackboy Planet: Connected Learning Among LittleBigPlanet 2 Players*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014.

Robinson, Ken. *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative.* North Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2011.

Role Playing Public Radio. "What Is Happening to Tabletop Roleplaying Games? Panel at PAX East 2014." *Role Playing Public Radio,* 2014. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://slangdesign.com/rppr/2014/04/panel-discussion/what-is-happening-to-tabletop-roleplaying-games-panel-at-pax-east-2014/.

Shor, Ira. *Critical Teaching in Everyday Life.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Ward, James, M., and Gary Jaquet. *Gamma World*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978.

White Wolf Publishing. *Vampire: The Masquerade*. White Wolf Publishing, 1991.

Willis, Paul. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Wizards of the Coast. *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014.

_____. *Hoard of the Dragon Queen*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014.

Playing for Change

FreeMarket *and the Rise of Serious Tabletop Role-Playing Games*

Troy Leaman

As of 2015, digital (video) games are a commodity, a channel for persuasion, and a medium for education, but also an art form, an activist's tool, and a means of expression for the average person. While still a young medium, the digital game is now comparable in status to the newspaper, novel, radio, or film in its potential scope of influence and controversy. In its critical reception it has made the journey from source of moral panic, past tool of self-actualization and liberation from drudgery, to reach the sober spotlight that examines its position in a nexus of economic and political forces.

In contrast, how have tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) fared? They have been in existence as long as the "real" start of video gaming, that is, since the early market penetration of home gaming systems and video arcades in the early 1970s. No role-player over 40 can forget the Satanic panic that haunted the early days of the hobby and marked the hobby's rite of passage as an entirely new medium. The passing of fear brought a short honeymoon of beatification, and it is with a trivial amount of digging that one can find research papers that valorize the potential of the RPG as a means to self-actualize or learn empathy.[1] While once a profitable industry, the heyday of TRPGs' earning potential has passed. Yet, it is also undeniable that the larger, more lucrative digital game hobby itself owes something of a debt to TRPGs for some of its more popular genres, forms, and settings.[2]

Although TRPGs, as an economic industry, will never be as large a market force as digital games, they have an underdeveloped capacity as tools for fostering societal change. They afford potential conditions for deep, reflexive self- and societal exploration anywhere two people can sit down and talk, and, compared to digital games, TRPGs have lower development costs and greater versatility in creative scope. Beyond simply acquiring skill with playing a given game system, practitioners of the tabletop hobby can be seen as acquiring a body of knowledge built from a collection of learned heuristics—easily modifiable resolution systems and immersive/expressive techniques that provide a toolkit[3] they can take anywhere and use to crack open the fetters of consciousness through a shared interactive experience.

An expanded exploration of the TRPG's transformative potential is timely in light of the fact that digital games are becoming ensconced as a primary tool of mass persuasion for entrenched institutions. This consideration should not be seen as a conspiracy theory—there is no scheme being cinematically masterminded by a modern day James Bond villain. This is simply the result of groups with the money and know-how, such as the American military, looking for a natural channel for messages pertinent to their needs. TRPGs may provide the needed grassroots counterbalance, one that is open source, cheap, and adaptable. They could provide access to a social "laboratory" that can allow dynamic exploration of alternative possibilities to the dominant, static, institutional interests.

Digital games' penetration into an ever-growing sphere of institutional, corporate, and private worlds is visible in their implementation as "serious games." At its broadest definition, the serious game is one designed with a primary purpose other than entertainment. This primary purpose can be (non-exhaustively): educational (a classroom game designed to impart historical facts with context), practical instructional or vocational (a game teaching doctors how to recognize cancer cell masses), simulation-oriented (most wargames, emergency response exercises, and corporate exercises), persuasive (encouraging favorable reception of a political group's or social movement's goals by graphic demonstration of a situation requiring attention), marketing-oriented (interesting users in a product that sponsors the game or works its way into gameplay), or artistic (designed to provoke thought on a subject, perhaps without a final persuasive point in mind).

Digital games can be found serving all of these alternative primary purposes. TRPGs, I suggest, can do likewise, but, in particular, they excel in a hybrid of the persuasive and artistic serious game that I call the *aware serious game*. The aware serious game can serve the (non-entertainment) purpose of provoking player thought and mental exploration of ideas initially closed off or underdeveloped. This may be a free form exploration (like artistic serious games) or one that a designer creates with the aim of leading players to a particular viewpoint (like a persuasive game). But it is a specific feature of the particularly freeform and repurposable quality of TRPGs to allow any given game instance to shade from one serious form to the other by the whims of the Game Master or the players.

For the purpose of exploring avenues of social change, the most useful (aware) serious game TRPGs would be ones that create the most radical disjunction from the ideologically constituted self of the current historical moment. These could be games removed in space-time or culture from the reference point of neoliberal capitalist consumer subjecthood. Some existing games that might fit the bill include *Dog Eat Dog*, *Steal Away Jordan*, *Durance*, *Shock*, *Microscope*, and *FreeMarket*. Each of these in different ways presents a playing field for the imagination in which constitutive features of self-understanding are dislocated, unhinged, shifted, transfigured. The psychic mold is stretched in unexpected ways. Setting is largely responsible for creating an immersive texture that stretches normal experiential boundaries.

In the case of *Dog Eat Dog*, a framework is offered for the exploration of key colonial issues; players take on the roles of subaltern subjects struggling for self-determinacy, but against impossible (i.e., realistic) odds. *Steal Away Jordan* taps into the experiential vagaries of slaves in the antebellum South. The game's focus is not on escape so much as on delineating the texture of life under these conditions. Similarly, *Durance*, although staged with science fiction trappings, reproduces the experience of being a penal colonist based on the early Australian model. *Shock* is far less setting specific; its features remain unelaborated until defined by the players. The group chooses one significant technological or sociological "shock" factor whose impact on the society is decisive and whose ramifications are explored and played out with the greatest possible consistency and consequentiality. Essentially, the game examines the effects and complications of radical and sometimes catastrophic change. *Microscope* has the same openness in terms of setting and a similarly interesting linear drive in exploring the implications of the initial starting points of player decisions. By generating a world from ground zero and tracing its teleological arcs of development, players receive a visceral sense of evolutionary stages and constitutive growth arcs, of conditioning mechanisms, and of the dynamics of change and inertia, all of these being significant structural features of the temporal and experiential coordinates of life on our planet. As the need for technologically sensitive intervention in ecological shifts becomes ever more pressing, games like these become more and more pertinent. Finally, *FreeMarket*, a literary science fiction-based construct, plays with post-scarcity social models in a transhumanist setting. The game experience is centered on cooperation and experimentation with self-expression, unfettered by basic survival needs or current social protocols.

To demonstrate TRPGs' serious game potential I will take a detour through the better-mapped fields of digital game (and science fiction) studies to acquire some worked-out and readily applicable theories about the cognitive and persuasive potential inherent in game play. Then, after presenting these concepts in their original context, that of examining the operations of digital gaming as a persuasive medium, I will refocus these models onto TRPGs, bringing their unique strengths into view in the process. I will conclude by testing these theories in a case study of one of the games mentioned above, *FreeMarket,* to see how the transhumanist setting of this TRPG can be a vehicle for serious exploration of societal change.

The Persuasive Potential of the Digital Game

To glimpse the magnitude of digital games as tools of persuasion, consider one of their largest, best funded, and institutionally directed success stories. Within the last fifteen years, digital games have established themselves as a significant part of American military planning for training and recruitment. Wunderkind's *America's Army* has brought about such a boost in recruitment that the army has been able to consistently reach its enlistment targets for the first time in decades. Success breeds copycats, and other nations have rushed to follow suit, with Britain producing *Start Thinking Soldier* and China the dubious *Glorious Mission*. As game play seamlessly merges with online recruitment sites, young players are now better able to connect their gunmetal black fantasy worlds from the game screen to the real-world job market.

In his article "Serious Games and Social Change,"[4] serious game researcher Christoph Klimmt has laid out why digital games make a good channel for persuasion. Klimmt presents fifteen persuasive effect mechanisms, the last three, collected under the heading *Effect Mechanisms Related to Persuasion and Attitude Change*, being of most interest: "Situation Definition as Play Prevents Persuasion-Resistance Stance (Mechanism 3)," "Game Narrative Contributes to Persuasion (Mechanism 10)," and "Attitude Change may result from Misattribution of Attitude to Real-Life Source (Mechanism 13)."

In quick summary, the formal structure of the digital game does not resemble any of the more explicitly persuasive media because the individual is not expecting to encounter such mechanisms. The player, in fact, often has a naivety about potential persuasive encroachments in the game. Unlike in a biased, selective media presentation of news items, for instance, there is no visible imprint of an overt strategy at work here. Since players often do not expect persuasive stances, their resistance to these mechanisms is lower. In Klimmt's words, they are less likely to adopt the "anti-persuasive" stance during play, a kind of mental armor that would fortify the player with counter strategies—an awareness of conflicting, vested interest or bias, distortion, or omission. In other words, the digital game allows a persuasion attempt to "fly under the radar."

An anti-persuasion stance mentally places the individual into a state of wariness vis-à-vis attempts to shift her viewpoint on an issue, making such efforts easy to spot and dismiss. Digital games mask the mechanism of persuasion by changing the space of mental engagement from one of a direct address/discourse with the individual, with the line of persuasion presented on a platter for consideration, to an arena of immersion in sensory detail, where the lines of persuasion acquire a new form as texture elements or pieces of window dressing working with other elements to suture together the immersive background; therein biased selection, distortion, and propaganda-laden visual information become readily accepted as part of the play experience.

Also, many successful games provide a narrative, and narratives have the virtue of fostering a "transportation" or "immersion" into the game's story world, again wearing down resistance. Much of this aspect of Klimmt's work draws on narrative transportation studies by researchers like R.J. Gerrig, M.C. Green,[5] and T.C. Brock. This field addresses the ways in which the internal mental processes of reading a narrative result in readers empathizing with viewpoint characters and entering a state of perception that foregrounds the internal narrative world in their mental registers so strongly that the perception of the real world dims. This suggests that exploration of a fictional world through reading produces an experience that generates memories and thoughts as valid and salient as any primary world experience.

Ideas and values encountered in the story world are—by virtue of the psychological mechanisms brought into play during immersion—"…processed less critically (e.g. in terms of questioning credibility and truthfulness of the information), while [they are] still perceived as being a relevant source of information for real-world beliefs and attitudes)."[6] Klimmt also pinpoints a tendency in people "to confuse sources of information (especially fact and fiction sources), which opens a pathway for fictional information to affect real-world beliefs and thoughts."[7] Thus, slippage occurs. Real-world parameters that determine belief structure and behavior patterns are subtly realigned, augmented, even polluted with fictional ones and generate hidden shifts, veerings, a reconditioning and rise in vulnerability to persuasion.

Klimmt focuses on the positive ends to which such stealth persuasion could be put, such as changing attitudes towards sending girls to school in countries that repress women's education. But such stealth persuasion can just as easily be put into the service of more disagreeable agendas. By stealth persuasion, I mean any persuasive form that does not directly address the message receiver. Instead, it relies on hints, innuendo, or subtle pressures to induce one to form conclusions and fill in gaps from a provided narrative without explicit instruction to do so. It relies partially on people's natural proclivity to fill in such gaps or incorporate hints in order to aid narrative closure.

In *Games of Empire* (2009), Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter explore how such stealth persuasion has been applied to advance military interests. They posit that "Long-standing interaction of video game culture and the military apparatus is a component in the banalization of war."[8] Building on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) they suggest that populations undergoing war require heavy reconditioning and resocialization in order to "endure and endorse such an ongoing state,"[9] and digital games have their undoubted place in accomplishing it.

Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter partially demonstrate this theory using a case study of the game *Full Spectrum Warrior* (*FSW*), highlighting its effectiveness in contributing to the normalization process. They explain how the civilian game fits into the project of banalizing war:

> Implicit in this doctrine is an understanding of war as a project with not only military but also ideological and political dimensions. Maintaining an imperial populace's will to fight is as important as battlefield dominance … whatever the success or failure of simulators such as FSW in preparing soldiers for Baghdad, their role in habituating civilians to perpetual war may be as, or more, important … when the same militaristic identities and assumptions are reiterated by numerous media channels and asserted by many institutions, the chances for their reproduction rise. In societies on a war footing, militarization, as we mentioned earlier, becomes part of everyday life, from downloading a free mission from the Kuma War Web site to CNN reporting the daily threat level based on Homeland Security's color-coded terror alert system.[10]

Here, the authors express the notion that most digital games fall into step with the promotion of the rhetoric of Empire, in part by incorporating "conventional wisdom" about national identity goals. As players identify with characters who are pursuing those goals, an implicit rhetoric of "common sense" is generated, which is anything but ideologically neutral. Players will tend to be drawn towards games that reinforce their sense of comfort with the new status quo, games that help position them as part of the solution in the ongoing struggle of subduing Empire's enemies.

In contrast to this view of digital games as part of the infrastructure of imperial dominance, game maker and researcher Ian Bogost considers how games could be used in a more personal and idiosyncratically rhetorical fashion, one that considers the system of play/interaction as more important than any narrative values being smuggled in. In *Unit Operations* (2006) and *Persuasive Games* (2007) he discusses the potential of "procedural rhetoric": the choices a designer/programmer makes in the way her game computationally (procedurally) represents a system (models a slice of reality) make a statement about how that system works in the real world. The designer's choices indirectly create a commentary on the modeled system, and any striking differences from the player's understanding of that underlying model can create a productive dissonance or distancing effect that causes reflection on the represented system. This dissonance-inducing gap between presented model and player expectation Bogost calls "simulation fever." As digital games require discrete and nested sets of procedural algorithms to work, they present a fully configured model of another system that reflects the coder/designer's considered choices of the most significant features to present: a selection hierarchy is deployed following specific criteria. This creates a new form of rhetoric, differing from the oral and visual rhetoric common in our culture, one where the rhetorical argument is formed by the outline of the system or procedures designed to create a model, hence Bogost's term "procedural rhetoric."

Game designer Anna Anthropy develops a similarly oriented focus on the formal design of game systems and their potential to carry rhetorical meanings. Anthropy describes the plethora of programs that allow people to make their own small games without any real coding skills (examples include Scratch and Gamemaker). In her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012) she energetically argues that now is the moment for the average person to take advantage of these tools and tap into the communicative potential of digital games to make their own (called by her "personal" or "folk") games:

> What videogames need right now is to grow up. The videogame industry has spent millions upon million of dollars to develop more visually impressive way for a space marine to kill a monster. What they've invested almost nothing in is finding better ways to tell a story, and in exploring different stories to tell. That's for us to do: the people who don't have to sell thousands of copies of a game to break even, who aren't obliged to fill their games with eighty hours of content, who are beholden to no one, who are free to be silly and weird and creative and personal. Hobbyists and zinesters. You and Me.[11]

All this sets a scene for seeing the digital game as more than simply a channel for dominant political and economic agendas. Bringing Bogost's concepts into productive dialogue with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter yields insights into a zone of potential resistance to the hegemony of dominant ideological interests. The latter suggest that playing digital games encourages a kind of system thinking approach to life itself. Players learn to see and project causal patterns and consequences of game action/moves and to transfer those projections to analogous situations in the real world. In Ted Friedmann's words, "Playing a simulation means to become engrossed in a systemic logic that connects a myriad array of causes and effects. The simulation acts as a kind of map-in-time, visually and viscerally (as the player internalizes the game's logic) demonstrating the repercussions and interrelatedness of many different social decisions."[12]

This new level of understanding promoted through game play provides the basis for a cognitive leap in which one can conceive of new ways of approaching things in the real world. It provides an internal toolkit for reframing previously successful approaches into qualitatively different situations, taking effective interaction strategies into new playing fields. Moreover, this generates an awareness of a zone of mobility for potential interactive strategies with never before encountered situations perhaps leading to the creation of new social constructs that could productively displace problematic existing ones.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter advance the hope that this will encourage a sense of empowerment in individuals to rethink societal structures they normally accept as given, leading to a suppleness of approach that would change existing structures, not through outright destruction (such as by revolution) but by a withdrawal and reallocation of support to these newly framed systems. They call this the "Exodus from Empire," based on another concept borrowed from Negri and Hardt. In Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's wider view, digital games have the potential to go beyond being the site of passive ingestion of ideological thought, to becoming a vehicle for significant cultural change. They provide a space for conscious reflection and open up an experiential pathway for the generation of messages and ideas about new ways of being beyond the existing sociopolitical formats and systems.

In her work *Critical Play*, game designer Mary Flanagan also promotes the transformative potential of games, but complicates the issue by identifying conflicting values that may arise during the game design process and undermine this potential. The work is a broad study ranging from children's games to installation art and digital games. Flanagan first formulates the critical play method, which merges with the well-known iterative game design model (develop-playtest-revise-repeat) used by professional game designers across many subfields. To this she adds, at several key points in the iterative cycle, space to incorporate and evaluate designer values. By highlighting the important task of making sure that initially designated values are continually verified throughout the design process, she creates a methodology to help designers prevent their value goals from being subverted, re-aligned or weakened ("drifted") by the forces of the design process. This process is always being pulled in different directions by conflicting agendas that can impact the game's final form, such as the potential clash between the designers' avant-garde aesthetic desires and the audiences' market-shaped tastes.

The Persuasive Potential of TRPGs

Digital game analysis has unquestionably reached a level of complexity, of productive controversy that marks it as a maturely developed field of investigation, albeit with much unexplored terrain. TRPGs, by contrast, represent a relatively virgin field of study, one that can benefit, however, from a vigorous mining of the more established field. This is all the more so since conceptual schema and derivations from digital game analysis have an affinity for being translated to intuitions for TRPGs. Any emerging field builds its road maps, its structures of investigation by an intelligent and creative sourcing not only of facts but hypotheses, of cautiously imaginative but rigorously precise speculations. Borrowings from related fields can only enrich that process, conjoined with sober methodological reflection and an awareness of significant structural and phenomenological divergences.

As it happens, Bogost intended the concept of procedural rhetoric to be extended to non-digital systems of persuasion,[13] and it readily transplants into the TRPG context. However, some careful distinctions must be made. TRPG systems are not as strictly and comprehensively formulated as the coding of digital games (where a thing is only possible if its potential has been accounted for by the code). In the latter setting, all ramifications and implications of individual game components must be strictly and consequentially mapped out and codified. By contrast, TRPG system settings or mappings can have a certain latitude, a fuzziness, especially in relation to in-built zones of possibility and room for imaginative play. Game Masters will develop sensitivity to their players' naïve intuitions of the doable, for instance, while at the same time attempting to challenge such sensibilities with deliberate strategies of genre bending and intrusion into the game setting. And while some players and Game Masters prefer strict genre fidelity, a precisely rendered representation of "the real," others will playfully stretch and work in fantasy elements in a large variety of modes and genre inflections.

In the case of system mechanics, these can also sport designed biases regarding what can be done (favoring representational "accuracy" vs. imaginative freedom) or what should be done, offering room for modeling stylistic or genre-specific parameters. The game system ideally will encourage players' choices of character actions and behaviors to be in line with replicating a genre or consistent with a narrative logic to be followed.

The logic of the systemic replication or configuration of the fictional reality of the game through its setting and system mechanics reflects, like Bogost's concept of the digital game code's "argument," a deliberate strategy or position on how to model reality. Through its selection criteria and chosen representational focus or spin, a game system presents, even advocates, a position or evaluative posture, an "argument." That game systems carry such argumentative or persuasive thrusts through their representational configuration and its influence on the experience of play is a point already shown in many indie TRPG games, including Liam Burke's *Dog Eat Dog*, where the mechanics help enforce the unfair advantage that the colonial power has over native groups. Equally, Jason Morningstar's *Durance* incorporates mechanics to highlight similar power imbalances in a science fiction penal colony game based on the experience of English criminals in the setting of Australia.

Anthropy's concept of the zine game has implications and resonances for TRPG culture, as can be seen in the current movement to take a system or rules set and reskin it with different backgrounds/narratives. A popular system frequently hacked and modified is Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* (2010), which has spawned a number of adaptations for everything from dungeon crawls (*Dungeon World*) to the love lives of high school monsters (*Monsterhearts*). The *Apocalypse World* rules structure narrative flow (making trouble for the characters while allowing them to look "cool") in a way not particularly realistic simulation-wise but creating a good and engaging narrative. In addition, Baker supports the right of others to create hacks of his system. This may be a moot point, because it is legally impossible to copyright a TRPG rules system's mechanics.[14] An individual explanation or full expression of them can be copyrighted (the particular choice of words), but the underlying concepts themselves cannot (one cannot copyright the idea of the hit point), and thus all TRPG systems are technically available for these hacks.

Writer awareness of the responsibility to player communities to make systems open source is on the rise. Colin Fredericks' *Sufficiently Advanced* (2nd edition) sports a well thought-out end section where he explains his elegant design methodology (with diagrams) with specific advice on how to hack each rule element and its effect on the whole. The Cortex System (Margret Weiss Productions) boasts an entire book, the *Cortex Plus Hacker's Guide,* laying out how, based on the genre style and setting, one builds the system to match one's desired style of play. This, however, is limited by a focus on three base "flavors": heroic action, social melodrama, and superheroic.

Given that TRPGs share the digital game's power of expression through their system's procedural rhetoric (and potential to create critical distance) and have a library of usable systems to hack (also that writing a TRPG from scratch is easier to do than coding a comparatively complex digital game), TRPGs could be a medium of choice for game makers seeking to persuade and educate through play. Learning to design and build them could be a legitimate aspiration for anyone with a message to share. Many players develop a taste for the higher level gaming roles, and the progression from player to Game Master to designer is a natural one.

As far as their immersive power goes, although not as salient modality-wise as the visual and sound show of computer games, TRPGs can tap into equally potent channels of immersion experience similar to narrative transportation brought on by the "textual" flow of the game narrative. The persuasive effect of this textually-induced (imaginative rather than sensory) immersion is considered further below.

In addition, TRPGs have a strength that digital games by their digital nature will probably always lack, the effect of the intermediary human mind as the matrix or generative medium of the game world. Since 2003, the International Conference on Technologies for Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) and Entertainment, inspired by the writing of computer game designer Chris Crawford and the approach outlined in Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), has focused on what are essentially the efforts of coders to replace the role of the TRPG's Game Master. The Game Master enforces the game reality's laws and controls every non-player–controlled individual encountered during play. Commonly, the Game Master also constructs a narrative framework for the players with varying degrees of complexity.

IDS conferences are inundated with papers focusing on effective flexible digital narrative systems and believable AI for digital characters.[15] Although much good work has been done (and many frameworks for storytelling have been researched and codified) it is clear that the computer still cannot do the work of one human brain in fostering a compelling degree of cognitive and emotional investment in a world or even running a non-player character, and certainly not one that so readily responds to the whims and wishes of players.

Digital game studies make a ludological/narratological distinction between the effect of the interactive mechanics of play (similar to Bogost's procedurals or unit operations) on player reception vs. the effect of background/story elements on it. Studies (and the games themselves) tend to be skewed towards the ludological side with background/story a necessary element, but in many ways secondary to understanding the effect of gameplay. Seen from this perspective, a first-person shooter could be alternatively set in the Middle East, the Wild West, or on a spaceship without much change in player appreciation, whereas movement controls or enemy A.I. would be seen as playing a greater part in that experience. This slant often sees setting as simply window dressing.

The distinction is paralleled in TRPG culture where there is a concern with system and setting (in gamer slang, "crunch" and "fluff"), but here setting is on a more even keel with system. The relative importance of setting can be seen by how many settings in TRPGs are ported, with the background details identical, but into a completely different underlying set of mechanics (e.g., the *Traveller* setting being ported to the GURPS system and the Cthulhu Mythos setting expressed through BRP and Gumshoe mechanics).

Nothing but the Facts: The Lego of the Imagination?

This closer co-dominance of the narrative and mechanical aspects is due to the previously referenced importance of narrative textuality in TRPG immersion. Crucial to the particular form of narrative transportation that TRPGs engender is the accumulation of in-game narrative facts ("as-if truths," in other words, facts or truths that have validity only within the fictional universe, which are comparable to Kendal Walton's specific imaginings or fictional truths).[16] These are statements that are true within a particular game world and that can build successively on each other, such as, "Orcs on Skee are honorable, are good at chess, sport top-knots for hair styles, although my character orc, Brontus, does his in a tonsure and thinks chess play is a sign of moral failing."

Players may start a collection of these facts by absorbing source material understood as game canonical, or they may go in cold, but once play starts and a campaign ensues, the state of play generates more and more background details (about the characters, their beliefs and actions and the world of the game) and creates texture, a density of detail that allows the player's mind to subsume a portion of his subject consciousness with that of the game's background. In this it is very similar to the process of transportation that occurs when reading a novel intensified by dramatic engagement and the power to impact that narrative.

The unique setting of a game provides the beginning set of fictional truths, a seedbed to grow the narrative arcs and nourish the layers of fictional truths to be created in play. A wealth of fictional truths substantially enhances and augments the immersive potential of any secondary world. Mark J.P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds* explains

> Since details of the secondary world displace those of the Primary World in the audience member's attention, the more detail the secondary world asks the audience to keep in mind (especially details important to the understanding and enjoyment of the story), the more "full" the audience mind is of the secondary world, and the more absorbing the experience becomes.[17]

"As-if facts" creating a believable world will also provide a very different set of social rules and expectations for characters to navigate (something well known to *Empire of the Petal Throne* players or those into Japanese period role-playing). The experience navigating these worlds instructs and informs the player's thoughts on (in-game) culturally perceived subjects in a way that may bleed out into the real world in a manner similar to Klimmt's understanding of persuasive mechanisms in digital games.

Novelty Breeds Contre Temps

Settings and backgrounds may be built from keystone "as-if facts," which can form gameplay experiences through channels that can greatly impact a player's understanding of the world. A structural template for finding and building them can be found in concepts provided by science fiction literature theorist Darko Suvin with his *novum* and theory of Cognitive Estrangement.[18]

Here, Suvin builds upon Ernest Bloch's concept of the *novum* (pl.: *nova*), which is defined as an innovation or novelty (the *novum*) that can be validated by an internal cognitive logic (its existence and effect remain narratively internally consistent) and that, when introduced, creates in a narrative world a totalizing phenomenon, making significant changes in the narrative world compared to the normal (zero world) of the reader. Experience of this world by the act of reading creates a feedback oscillation moving from the author/reader's norm of reality to willing immersion in (acceptance of) the narrative's actualized *novum* to understand what is happening, and then back again to see reality afresh.[19]

Cognitive estrangement represents a unique instance of narrative transportation in which the alien elements of the fictive world are brought back into the reader's reality. By accepting immersion into a different mindset and space/time with strong internal identification, the reader brings back echoes of that mindset when she returns to her normal embodiment (physically/culturally in the real world). This places the reader as a "stranger in a strange land" and in a situation of critically apprising distance towards her own world. That critical distancing effect represents the position of cognitive estrangement that Suvin prizes as the epitome of what reading good science fiction should do for the reader.

A n*ovum's* effect can be judged on three factors: magnitude, plausibility, and relevance. Magnitude is the size of the change to the narrative world. It can be as small as the introduction of a new technology, social norm, or unusual character to the zero world, to as far reaching as an alternative space/time history with the influence of alternative social movements or entirely different dominant species as the focus.

Plausibility—in the form of logically (cognitively acceptable) internally coherent effects of a *novum*—is an important evaluative criterion for Suvin, and he dislikes stories that introduce a new wonder gadget but otherwise paint the world as going on very much the same as the zero world of the author/reader (i.e., introducing the teleportation booth to 1950s America would not leave it the same TV-loving, commie-hating, Madison Avenue-dazzled USA with an extra bit of gee whiz; in fact, it would not be improbable that the U.S. social structure would be completely destabilized). Suvin places much significance on the scientific/rational plausibility or possibility of the *novum*'s existence and integration within a fictional space with its consequences intricately worked out. However, he concedes that a lot can be learned from an implausible *novum* with plausibly worked out ramifications.

His concept of relevance is an index for how much the contemplation of the *novum* affects the reader and changes his understanding of the real world. Many stories exist with plausibly worked out world-changing wonders, which, while they provide a bit of escape, offer no alternative viewpoints to review one's world and change one's understanding of things. Suvin considers these false or flash-in-the-pan *novum*. Of the three criteria he proposes, relevance is the one he correlates with the generation of aesthetic pleasure in its contemplation. He accounts for this in the fact that one not only genuinely learns from the experience but that one's awareness of the scope of the possible is stretched. An inner dilation occurs that opens virtual vistas before the mind's eye, a dim sensation of spaciousness and unchartered potential. One senses an almost tactile enlargement of internal as well as projected conceptual and real spaces.

Any TRPG can be analyzed or designed for its thought-provoking potential by teasing out the key *novum* of its setting/background and considering the kind of seedbed for as-if facts they would generate. Not limited to science fiction studies' understanding of the word *novum*, one can trace the potential for player experiences in which a similar mental stretching might occur. Here, then, not only alien technological or futuristic social settings but any kind of cultural or historical settings whose social reality, norms, expectations and mental climates can create an estranging oscillation with one's own become a fertile soil for mental growth. In conjunction with this, the game system must be appraised for its efficacy in modeling the reality of that *novum*, how it might reinforce, displace, negate or float above it, keeping in mind that system in itself can by its modeling choices (i.e., procedural rhetoric) belie what appear prosaic.

TRPGs thus have two possible modulators for creating their unique mixture of immersion in oscillation with a productive estrangement. One is through how a game system communicates its model of reality and the other the potential *novum* of the game setting and how it creates and interpolates/shakes up the player in her experience as a character in a world different from her own. TRPGs can be said to have a potentially "co-determined" distancing effect as one or the other (or both) may be an influence on the player's experience. Additionally, the personal experience and knowledge that Game Masters and players bring to the game have the greatest effect. A thoughtful Game Master and player group can take a standard *Dungeons & Dragons* vanilla setting and generate breathtaking stories that would impress Suvin or, for that matter, Tolkien. Alternatively, a group can turn anything into a dungeon bash/bug hunt that triggers no more reflection or internal expansion than a *DOOM* session.

FreeMarket*: A Case Study in Serious Games*

A short case study of Luke Crane and Jared Sorenson's game *FreeMarket* (2010) will illustrate how these concepts might yield a productive framework for analysis of TRPGs and for their potential as serious games. *FreeMarket* provides a setting that incorporates *nova* with substantial magnitude and relevance. It also sports system rules that serve to illustrate some of the deliberation on the ways to integrate setting and mechanics, and thereby demonstrates how TRPG game system processes can function as a procedural rhetoric modeling experience. The game illustrates how setting ideas and system modeling can function in conjunction to create a player experience of productive and eye-opening estrangement. Furthermore, *FreeMarket*'s relative novelty, conceptual sophistication, and even distributive under-exposure offer incentives to commentators and players to study or play with its reservoir of ideas and concepts.

FreeMarket is a game in the transhumanist genre that shares concepts with the *Transhuman Space* setting for *GURPS*, *Eclipse Phase*, *Sufficiently Advanced*, and some older cyberpunk TRPGs. The game setting is thus informed by some of the philosophical and speculative concerns of a transhumanist philosophy whose roots stretch back to web discussions in the 1990s and grandfather studies like J.D. Bernal's *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* (1929) and J.B.S. Haldane's *Daedalus: Science and the Future* (1923). Interestingly, the relationship is reciprocal, and transhumanist discussion has been significantly influenced by concepts developed in the TRPGs.

One of transhumanism's foci is the quest for personal immortality and social, technological development into a posthuman, postmortality state of being, which is only dimly envisioned as achievable at present. It decenters the importance of "baseline" humanity by pushing for improvement on all aspects of the human "design," and it sometimes creates room for sharing the world with non-human minds (A.I., or in some cases animal species that humanity has uplifted to its level of intelligence or learned to communicate with). Debate is active on the methods, means, and possibilities of such projections.

The creation of the postscarcity society is one of the posited prerequisites for any kind of progress towards a transhuman way of being. In such an environment money no longer determines access to resources, and any material object can be readily created (printed) from raw materials that are not subject to scarcity flux. As is self evident, money, as a transaction value placeholder, becomes obsolete in such a social setting. A culture predicated on this kind of resource configuration naturally generates a different social structure and resource allocation system. While seemingly paradisiacal, these kinds of social determinacies create their own unique set of problems, something that *FreeMarket* is designed to actively investigate.

Although this social configuration is currently unachievable, explorations of this space of possibility are within reach. Like a *gedankenexperiment*, TRPGs offer an effective framework for a communal cooperative examination of its conditions. They provide the best open-ended, real-time configurable immersion in the space of play, with system mechanical contours providing suitable setting feedback. This exploration would not only aid in understanding the desirability and weakness of the ideas presented for consideration (the *nova)* but also open up the contrasting current world experience for critique, and both make noteworthy goals for serious game play.

Welcome to the Donut: FreeMarket Station, a Setting with Nova for Consideration

FreeMarket's setting is a space habitat near Saturn that serves as a relay for a massive data store on one of Saturn's moon. The station is fully automated and run by the station's computer, called the Aggregate, thus eliminating the need for work from the player characters, who are its inhabitants. The station is provided with plenty of sophisticated matter printers and can even print biological entities in the form of fully created human beings (there are no A.I. minds or animal uplifts here, however). Although station culture and infrastructure ensure that all basic needs—food, shelter, data (information is considered a need partially sustained through a cybernetic interface with others and the station as a whole)—are met without effort, access to further resources to build and create inessentials or cultural interests (realize self-actualization) is based on gaining social recognition for one's actions.

The Aggregate monitors something called "Flow," which is the intangible social currency players can draw on to do extraordinary things. Flow is increased by prosocial actions, activities that show cooperative behavior, increase social cohesion, or benefit others. Specific examples of such prosocial actions pertinent to the setting include: generosity (gift giving), keeping bargains, making friends, garnering positive attention (attaboys), and working cooperatively and efficiently with others on tasks. Some ways to spend/lose Flow include: impeding or irritating people with one's actions (which earns or rather incurs a "frownie"), using station resources to produce things (printing, cultivating, recycling), and committing actions against the mind, person, or property of another. Once a player's Flow value falls below zero, the individual may be considered for exile.

A player can also accomplish more by linking up with like-minded individuals to form ad hoc groups, to which the system is willing to grant considerable extra material and technological resources because the action of these groups tends to (in theory) benefit the society as a whole. Other setting *nova* with interesting implications include the discovery that memory has a quantifiable aspect that allows it to be stolen, manipulated, and written onto a blank (newly formed human body) with relative ease. This ability to write memory into new bodies and the maintenance of a database of copies of individuals' minds in case of replacement-need means that death is usually considered an inconvenience and murder rude, but not a criminal offence. Crime is not recognized in this setting. There are no "laws on the books" to constrain any player's behavior (although station automation works hard to prevent any serious sabotage). Only when a player becomes unpopular enough by his actions (represented mechanically by a substantial drop in Flow and/or accretion of "Frownies") does he become vulnerable to being voted off the station (never to return). The setting's identifiable *nova* then are: postscarcity, near immortality, no crime (although society eventually punishes antisocial individuals with exile or an ineffectually low Flow level), social currency gained by prosocial, generous actions, and freedom to experiment with life and with art, especially if working cooperatively within a group.

Exploring these *nova* provides a provocative contrast to the experience of life in contemporary society. By examining a subset, or selection of details, of *FreeMarket's* system mechanics, one can uncover their implied procedural rhetoric and see how they could shape the experience of these *nova* through play.

Flow as an Example of Procedural Rhetoric

Crane and Sorenson, as designers of the game, are aware of how game mechanics shape player experience through the channeling of character choice of actions and decisions. For several years they ran a popular convention seminar called "Game Design Is Mind Control."[20] The seminar dealt with game design in general, not limited to TRPGs in particular, and here they demonstrated that rules function to move players to perform never-before considered actions (within the space of play). By setting parameters on mobility and opportunity and offering restrictions, incentives, and a specifically channeled field of action, rules induce new modalities of engagement, new strategic thinking in players, a phenomenon that can be productively explored by intelligent game design.

FreeMarket is a game whose space of play, on its surface, models the experience of being an immortal cyborg living on FreeMarket Station—a place where all one's physical survival needs are taken care of. What then remains is the drive to explore creative and expressive needs, the primary arena and focus of action on the station and one regulated and constrained by Flow. The Flow mechanic thus represents a key area of exploration for questions of procedural rhetoric. How does it shape and configure the experience of the in-game setting? Flow is (in both game mechanics *and* in setting fact) a personal numerical rating, minutely monitored by the space station's computer (the Aggregate) and the game's Game Master (the SuperUser). Flow is risked in challenges and efforts to accomplish a task, like printing a vat cat, hacking someone's stereo computer, or writing an opera. By assigning the cost and reward of Flow for various actions, the system indirectly shapes the player character's continuing choice of action. In pricing some things high or offering great return on effort, the game system encourages the same course of actions in player strategy that the in-game society finds desirable.

Flow, however, is no absolute barrier; freedom of action is also a setting social value and a system-supported fact. The player character is always free to experiment and try something even if the cost of failure in terms of Flow expenditure is high. For example, the cost of actions against the station (such as hacking the Aggregate's ID system or trying to sabotage station property) is set at a high cost, and even succeeding at an action with such a high cost could lead to exile. However, friends provide safeguards against serious Flow expenditures that could cause Flow to drop below zero, and potentially trigger exile. This situation activates an involuntary Flow tax that can shift enough Flow to bring a reckless character back above zero. This makes "Friending" a social action with potentially serious consequences. The Flow mechanics reward cooperative action in a variety of ways, and thus the system/setting's procedural rhetoric supports sociability as a value greater even than the physical well-being of FreeMarket Station.

All story-significant activity resolution in the game is handled through a point-scoring, "perfect information" (transparent), escalating card draw system that narratively abstracts many of the things other games simulate through a minutia of die rolls. The abstractions are contoured by cybernetic metaphors such as "error correction" and "burning." What this loses in a "realistic" simulation experience of action, it gains in conveying a sense of the general experience of being a transhuman entity.

Experience of Play

Rather than providing players with another mayhem-centered game of pillaging and violence, *FreeMarket's* designers seemed intent on providing an experience of a different way of being, one constituted around the transhumanist concepts explored by their favorite science fiction authors. Crane and Sorenson

> wanted to make a challenging, different, type of roleplaying game.... So many of these [other] roleplaying games are just the same game dressed up to looked different. [They are just] adventure fiction: you form a group, you get into trouble with this group, you kill your way out of it and take stuff so that you can kill your way out of the next problem ... [we were] inspired by contemporary sci-

> ence fiction and it[s ideas] hadn't been addressed in any roleplaying game. Stuff by Cory Doctorow or Jim Monroe … Bruce Sterling … Gibson … Scott Westerfeld … new sci-fi concepts that had been started in the 80s that had been [since] overshadowed by cyberpunk … [we wanted to examine] the whole transhumanist movement.… [There are existing] games that make pretensions to be a transhumanist scifi game but [you just] get your party together and you go through space dungeons and kill shit and that's not science fiction.[21]

In both setting and mechanics, the common challenges players meet reflect some of the speculative elaborations of the authors. The card draw system, in conjunction with a steeply set Flow cost configuration, makes for a non-standard play experience. *FreeMarket* does not offer the kind of reward structure many escapist fantasy TRPGs provide. Flow is not easily maintained and character groups often fail without meeting their projected goals. This in-built experience of failure is, however, one the authors indicate as being productive. Failure downplays the all too common direct-reward, immediate-gratification experiences in consumer society, hence moving away from some of the materialistic values and stimulus reinforcements of contemporary culture. In the *FreeMarket* society, process is more important than goal achievement or consumer gratification. Cooperative networking and creative interplay, by being mechanically supported and reinforced, become the dominant experiential modes of engagement for character and player alike. One may speculate on the social projections and reform visions the authors may be offering to their players.

While some of the designers' statements seem to support active deliberation on these issues, they also strongly support player-driven interpretations of a setting with many unelaborated, unspecified features. These productive lacunas provide a large playing field for player exploration. Here one recognizes a fertile interplay of rather strictly defined and configured mechanics with more openly expressed setting features. Social hierarchies, for instance, are only vaguely defined. Other important setting features require elaboration by the players themselves and are often generated through play. Memories become the site of such figurations and imaginative constructions, and these have mechanical as well as dramatic functions. As game play proceeds, characters build a reservoir of meaningful memories on which the SuperUser draws to generate the narrative thrust (called the "mashup"). Since memories can be converted into data, manipulated, and stolen, they have a kind of currency and value in the game economy as well. In general, the game assigns a higher value to ephemeral cultural phenomena than does contemporary society, though this need not be expressed in terms of Flow.

All this makes for an uncommon game experience, and many players find the openness of the setting and the latitude of social protocols uninspiring and even problematic. A more experienced player group I informally polled online[22] acknowledged that the game is more suited to a game style with higher player initiative—one that is proactive rather than reactive, generating narrative rather than purely focused on dramatic response to Game Master-furnished background material. This particular group's interest lay in the more banal aspects of West Coast start-up culture, and its products, celebrities, and inane proliferation of marketing technologies were used by them as fuel for a productive, imaginative sand box game with pop-culture–infested comic overtones.

This specific playing instance of *FreeMarket* as a deconstruction of marketing and celebrity culture is well within the purview of the setting/rules, which can furnish an interesting platform of critique for the more irritating excesses of capitalist consumer culture. But this presents merely one possible case of the nuanced variety of examinations the game can accomplish if directed by active players. One sees here the abundant uses to which the game environment may be put, and that it encourages self-reflexivity and humorous elaboration on current social phenomena. In its potential as an aware serious game and its efficacy in drawing on its initial *nova,* it invites players to think about social structure, economy, the nature of law, social groups (tribal, ad hoc), technology's impact on society and infrastructure, and, finally, the changes to the fundamental nature of being human that derive from the permutations of these *nova*. In other words, the game can serve the (non-entertainment) function of encouraging players to learn and think about a vitally different society through as many different lenses as there are proactive player groups.

This variety is supported by the game's procedural rhetoric, its "mashup" mechanic, which uses player control over character memories as a means of setting generation, and the designers, in one interview, point to this as a deliberate effort on their part to leave the game's focus in player hands. With such a heavy emphasis on freedom of player interpretation, the designers seem to position the game more as an artistic—that is, a thought-provoking—game rather than one with a deliberate, author-designated persuasive or pedagogic slant. However, latitude exists for players to pull the game experience in those directions, making it an interesting hybrid genre, i.e., an aware serious game.

Unfortunately, even with this procedural support such sophisticated game play configurations are not necessarily the rule, however, and a substantial number of players polled online voiced frustrations. A recurring complaint was the openness of the setting and the unfamiliar abstractions of the card draw mechanics. *FreeMarket* as a system and as a setting, it turns out, is both controversial and unpopular with many gamers. The loose social protocols of the setting seem to invite raging and uninhibited dystopian articulations, particularly in players who construct a less politically or socially inflected background and perhaps lack imaginative maturity. Certainly, not all such dystopian interpretations of *FreeMarket* lead to productive evaluations of the potentials and limitations of such a culture or one's own. Many players also seem to prefer the finer grain resolution systems of more simulationist rules, using the conventional die roles to determine contingencies with well quantified and extensively elaborated parameters.

Conclusion: A Prescription for Change

The best way to see the potential of TRPGs as serious games is to search out games with disjunctive potential and to play them with the open-minded intent to learn more about oneself and the socially constituted world in which one lives. I have mentioned several games above that would make good starting points. Going beyond this initial sampling, the next step is to learn to design games that serve an author's intent to share an experience or idea—be it social critique or prescription for positive social change. *FreeMarket* is a free exploration, by the designers' intent, of a non-monetary based, cooperation-prescribed society that is open to both utopian and dystopian readings. Playing *FreeMarket*, with some structure provided by a Game Master acquainted with the game's weaknesses, could thus be a useful classroom or think-tank experience. Consequently, as a serious game *FreeMarket* could prove useful towards imagining social change.

Further development of TRPGs' potential as serious games is tied to finding tools suitable for analyzing the nuances and specificities of the medium. This study offers as a starting point two instruments appropriate for opening up TRPGs' structure and content for closer examination: the concepts of procedural rhetoric and *novum*. These evaluative implements can be used on any currently existing TRPG to judge its facility to serve as a serious game, whether it be to provoke thought (artistic), provide a viewpoint (persuasive), or somewhere in between (aware). Growing awareness of the interdependence of a TRPG's content and system with its putative designer goals will not only aid the development of new serious TRPGs but will also assist in the building of a library of potential serious games from among the existing abundance of titles.

In addition to *FreeMarket*, a pool of promising TRPGs like *Dog Eat Dog, Steal Away Jordan, Durance, Shock* and *Microscope,* while designed for (thoughtful) entertainment and often played solely with that aim, could be repurposed as serious, social change-oriented games. These games could be subjected to a design cycle akin to Flanagan's critical play method, in which scrutiny of the configuration of setting facts, *nova*, and system mechanics, combined with actual play and player feedback, yields refinements and evaluative coordinates that can be directed towards pre-established serious game values.

TRPGs can then take their place on the civic stage as instruments of play, exploration, and change.

NOTES

1. Sarah Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games; How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), Chapter 6.

2. Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008); and Simon Egenfieldt-Nelson, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

3. Todd Fuist, "The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as a Cultural Tool," *Immersive Gameplay*, eds. Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).

4. Christoph Klimmt, "Serious Games and Social Change: Why They (Should) Work," in *Serious Games: Mechanisms and Effect*, eds. Ute Ritterfeld, Michael Cody and Peter Vorderer (New York: Routledge, 2009), 248–270.

5. Melanie C. Green and John K. Donahue, "Simulated Worlds: Transportation into Narratives," in *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation*, eds. Keith D. Markman, William M.P. Klein, Julie A. Suhr (New York: Taylor and French Group LLC, 2009), 241–254.

6. Klimmt, 264.

7. *Ibid.*, 264.

8. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 100.

9. *Ibid.*, 100.

10. *Ibid.*, 116–117.

11. Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 109.

12. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 220.

13. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 46.

14. Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry'90–'99* (Silver Springs, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014) and Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry'00–'09* (Silver Springs, MD: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014) discuss the legal battles and rulings that determined that system mechanics could not be copyrighted.

15. The International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling publishes a yearly conference paper book through Springer. More information is provided at their website http://icids.org/

16. Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011) explains Walton's theories as they might pertain to Tabletop Role-Playing Games.

17. Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49.

18. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), Chapter 4.

19. *Ibid.*, 71.

20. Luke Crane and Jared Sorenson. "Episode 21: Game Design Is Mind Control." *Genesis of Legend: RPG Design Panel Cast.* Podcast audio. August 4, 2013. Accessed

June 26, 2014. http://www.genesisoflegend.com/2013/08/episode-21-game-design-is-mind-control.

21. Luke Crane Interview with walkerp. "Episode 9: Luke Crane on FreeMarket." *The RPG Haven: Podcast Haven.* Podcast audio. May 1, 2010. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.therpghaven.com/podcast/?p=244

22. Anonymous, *FreeMarket* thread on 4chan /tg May 14, 2015. Accessed June 26, 2015. Archived at http://suptg.thisisnotatrueending.com/archive/39949118/ (Posts 39950014 and 39956980).

Bibliography

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Role-playing Game Industry'90–'99.* Silver Springs: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Appelcline, Shannon, and John Adamus. *Designers & Dragons: A History of the Role-playing Game Industry'00–'09.* Silver Springs: Evil Hat Productions LLC, 2014.

Anthropy, Anna. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.

Barton, Matt. *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*. Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Bateman, Chris M. *Imaginary Games*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

_____. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games; How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greg de Pueter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Egenfeldt-Nelson, Simon, Jonas Heide Smith, Susana Pajares Tosca. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Green, Melanie C., and John K. Donahue. Simulated Worlds: Transportation into Narratives." *Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation* edited by Keith D. Markman, William M.P. Klein, Julie A. Suhr 241–254. New York: Taylor and French Group LLC, 2009.

Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

Flanagan, Mary, and Helen F. Nissenbaum. *Values at Play in Digital Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.

ICIDS. "ICIDS: Interactive Storytelling International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling" *ICIDS.* Accessed December 16, 2014. http://icids.org/.

Klimmt, Christoph. "Serious Games and Social Change: Why They (Should) Work." *Serious Games: Mechanisms and Effect.* eds. Ute Ritterfeld, Michael Cody and Peter Vorderer, 248–270. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Murdey, Chris. "Video Games Are Dead. A Chat with Storytronics Guru Chris Crawford." *GAMASUTRA.* June 12, 2006. Accessed December 16, 2014. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131131/video_games_are_dead_a_chat_with_.php.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Torner, Evan, and William J. White. *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.
Wolfe, J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Ludography

Baker, Vincent D. *Apocalypse World*. Lumpley Games, 2010.
Banks, Cam, et al. *Cortex Plus Hacker's Guide*. Margaret Weis Productions Ltd., 2013.
Barker, M.A.R. *Empire of the Petal Throne*. TSR Games, 1975.
Blumenstien, Lars, et al. *Eclipse Phase*. Posthuman Studios, 2009.
Burke, Liam. *Dog Eat Dog*. Liwanag Press, 2012.
Crane, Luke, and Jared Sorenson. *FreeMarket*. Sorencrane MRCZ, 2010.
Ellingboe, Julia Bond. *Steal Away Jordan*. Stone Baby Games, 2007.
Fredricks, Colins. *Sufficiently Advanced, 2nd edition*. Valent Games, 2014.
Hite, Kenneth. *Trail of Cthulhu*. Pelgrane Press, 2008.
Koebel, Adam, and Sage Latorra. *Dungeon World*. Sage Kobold Productions, 2011.
McDaldno, Joe. *Monsterhearts*. Buried Without Ceremony, 2012.
Meals, Mike, and Jeremy Crawford. *Dungeons & Dragons,* 5th edition. Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014.
Morningstar, Jason. *Durance*. Bully Pulpit Games. 2012.
Newman, Joshua A.C. *Shock*. The glyphpress, 2006
Peterson, Sandy, and Lynn Wilis. *Call of Cthulhu*. Chaosium, 2014 (original 1981).
Pulver, David L. *Transhuman Space*. Steve Jackson Games, 2003.
Robbins, Ben. *Microscope*. Lame Mage Productions, 2011.
Wiseman, Loren K. *GURPS: Traveller*. Steve Jackson Games, 2009.

Leveling Influence

Klout and the Introduction of Social Leveling

Joseph B. Meyer

When Sam Fiorella went up for an interview for a vice president position at a marketing agency with fifteen years of experience, he felt extremely qualified for the position and believed he had a good chance at getting the job. That is, until the interviewers asked him about his Klout score. After pulling up his score, something that Fiorella did not even know existed; the interviewer was disappointed to see a 34 next to Fiorella's name. Fiorella would later learn that he was eliminated specifically because his score was too low.[1] When *Wired* produced the article detailing Fiorella's story in April 2012, a flurry of stories, editorial opinions, and analysis began to appear examining what Klout was, and why it was (or was not) important. Alarms were raised about that little number barring access to jobs, providing material "perks" to people, and producing yet another way in which people can feel inferior to others with higher scores.

Klout, the social media online measurement tool that indexes one's "influence" on a scale of 1 to 100, is the emergence of a new form of social measurement that takes its cues from elements introduced by role-playing games (RPGs). By tracing the development of Klout and the explosive growth of video games in popular culture, this essay analyzes contemporary manifestations of what Gilles Deleuze has termed the *society of control*. Underlying this trend is the evolution of the term *level* from RPG mechanic to a ubiquitous signifier of power and status. That is, from an indicator of an avatar's total power (experience, abilities, access to items, etc.) in a game to a broadly understood indicator of position on any real or imagined hierarchy.

This evolution is facilitated, in part, by the growing influence of gaming in contemporary society, particularly in the gamification—"the permeation of non-game contexts with game elements"[2]—of work, consumption, and leisure over the last decade. As technology has evolved to allow for the collection and tracking of large amounts of data, the interpretation and application of that data has evolved with it. Broader cultural adoption and understanding of gamification along with evolutions in technology have influenced current trends in wearable computing and bolstered the quantified self movement. Klout represents yet another evolution beyond gamification through its measurement of social influence and—particularly relevant to my argument—its presentation as a singular indicator of (influential) power that reflects the function level serves in contemporary gaming.

Ultimately, level has grown beyond its humble origins as a mechanic, much as *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) grew far beyond a niche form of play. As level evolved from a single character statistic to the cumulative indicator of a character's power, *D&D* would evolve and influence an entire genre, eventually permeating much of gaming (broadly conceived) and popular culture. The creation of Klout during the cultural ascendance of gaming—in no small part due to the adoption of leveling and character persistence refined by RPGs into most genres of gaming—marks the emergence of transferring gaming cultural logics into broader cultural norms and social control.

Klout is not merely the gamification of social networking—mechanics from gaming placed on top of social networking—it is the digital manifestation of "invisible" social relations that produce material consequences for those that do not "measure up." The very real experience of Sam Fiorella being denied employment because of Klout raises the question: what happens when the mechanics of fantasy become the controls of reality?

Moving Beyond Gamification: Scoring Is Not the Point(s)

Klout, an online tool that launched in 2008, measures a user's influence across a range of social networks. Each user is provided a score, which Klout defines as "a number between 1–100 that represents your influence. The more influential you are, the higher your Klout score…. Influence is the ability to drive action. When you share something on social media or in real life and people respond, that's influence."[3] Utilizing a proprietary algorithm, Klout gathers data on a user's social networking activities through over 400 signals, which include content interaction, such as Facebook likes, Twitter retweets, and Instagram comments.

In an official blog post from 2011 titled "A Beginner's Guide to Klout," Megan Berry answers the question: "so what is Klout and why does it matter?"

> Klout measures influence across the social web. We assign a Klout Score from 1 to 100 based on your ability to drive action. We also find your most influential topics, your influencers, who you influence, as well as other stats surrounding your influence. Think of it as a social credit score that will increasingly impact your life…. We believe influence is the ability to drive action.[4]

Klout's application of scoring through statistical tracking of particular actions on the social web appears game-like at first glance, but is Klout another form of gamification or something more? Tracing the history of the ideas behind gamification, Felix Raczkowski opens his paper with the simple statement, "Digital games are about points."[5] Points underlie many gamification systems as a "magical" effect that simulate value and spur competition.[6] By tracing ideas back to psychiatric experiments in the 1960s, Raczkowski argues that, "Point-based, closed systems are not to be seen as inherently ludic phenomena, but as arrangements of human motivation, measurement, and experimentation…."[7] Klout does fall underneath a metric of measurement, and one that motivates users through its application of a score to their social networking practices, but there's something missing, particularly in regards to the fundamental nature of gamification and digital games being about points.

While Klout does in fact refer to its own rating system as a score, what is particularly point-like about the Klout score? In many games and gamified environments points are accumulated and are rarely taken away from the player or participant. The motivating goals of points within the system are to achieve a high score in order to move on to the next level, earn valuable prizes, or simply reach the top of a leaderboard. The Klout score, on the other hand, is a constantly variable rate that is not a simple exchange between an act of labor or skill on the one hand, and a rewarding of points on the other. Indeed, even the act of posting on social networks does not necessarily guarantee an accrual of points in the positive if one posts to social networks too much without the requisite engagement required to be considered an influential post. So the question becomes, what is the point of the Klout score?

If one takes a gamification view of Klout's purpose, the obvious outcome involves the perk system that is connected to users who have signed up for Klout. With perks, users with certain scores and topics of influence are offered marketing freebies, events, and privileged access above those with lower scores, and are then asked to tweet about their experience with the product or event. While tempting to reduce the workings of Klout to the "bullshit" of gamification that Ian Bogost has railed against, it does not reflect the same form of hiding work-as-play within hastily grafted-together game mechanics a la "exploitationware."[8] For perks to work, users have to sign up and create an entire Klout profile; this produces the incentive for the exploitative online marketing labor performed by users through their posting about free products to their social networks. But what about those who have not signed up willingly, those who are not signing up to produce free labor, posting about specific products or companies that reward them through perks? There is a not-so-subtle undertone of coerced labor through specific gamed systems within a particular workplace or marketing push, but when the gamified system is all encompassing, where does the game stop?

Taking Raczkowski's example as a starting point, Frequent Flyer Programs (FFPs) are utilized to provide motivation for flyers to maintain loyalty with a specific airline, and with accumulation of points comes a form of status:

> FFPs … establish a hierarchical architecture in closed spaces that externalizes an individual's "wealth of points" (or, simply, her score) in the form of status displays. Just as token economies enabled tiered access to different parts of the ward, so do the scoring economies of FFPs in airports…. However, architectural arrangements in physical space like these gradually gave way to purely digital structures in today's media environments…. The tiered progression and status displays are even more emphasized; the scores become universal (cf. Xbox Live Gamerscore)—psychiatric architecture is translated to software and hardware architecture.[9]

Within the self-contained space of a FFP, the status symbols are linked to the specific act of flying with a particular airline and the material rewards contained therein; however, as scores become universal the score itself becomes the privileged space of comparison across digital environments. Unlike a universal scoring system like Xbox Live, Klout is not a cumulative score but a fluctuating scale that must be consistently maintained. An Xbox Live user can choose to not play games and gain Gamerscore for a year, but still return to the same score they had before. With Klout, if a user does not maintain their social networking influence, their score diminishes. This produces not only an unfair advantage to those who choose to stay always-on and engaged with their social networks, but also an uneven playing field for those who do not even know they are being scored in the first place.

The metagame nature of Klout reflects what Joost Raessens has termed the "ludic turn" in culture, or a higher value placed upon play and games reflected in the trends of gamification in the corporate and education sectors as well as the emerging playfulness in media. This is of particular importance in relation to Klout's measure of social media influence, as it becomes a specific arbiter of the quality and reach of individuals within this playful ecosystem of new media. However, as explored above, even though this game is being played, large populations of the "players" are unaware of their participation in this new form of playful media experience. This lack of knowledge suggests a need for what Raessens has termed *ludoliteracy*. Ludoliteracy is "The ability to be immersed in, yet at the same time maintain critical distance to media, as well as the ability to address the arbitrary nature and mutability of rules."[10] Raessens goes into more detail regarding the nature of ludoliteracy in contemporary culture:

> Ludoliteracy … is applicable across the full spectrum of media. It involves playing by the rules, bending and adjusting the rules in order to move easily through the system, or where necessary and possible, adjusting the system or playing the system…. Considered as such, the term play is not only suitable for characterizing our contemporary media culture (playful) but also for defining the knowledge and skills (ludoliteracy or play competence) required to function in media culture.[11]

Ludoliteracy can be characterized as another structuring system of society within the digital space, and Klout is the numerical indicator of an individual's success within that specific structure. Klout and the algorithm that measures social media users' influence rely upon the assumption that everyone possesses a certain level of ludoliteracy. Much like other ordering structures in society, there are those that are served by the particular rules and functions, and those that are left out.

Klout reflects Raessens' "ludic turn" through its adoption of gaming measurement systems, specifically levels as indicators of power and experience. While codified within Klout's system as a "score," there is no static indicator of a particular action adding to a cumulative total. The Klout Score is instead indicative of a position on a hierarchical scale of power and prestige surrounding an individual's experience and skill in utilizing social networks. By framing Klout's scoring system as a hierarchical scale and its adoption as one form of ludoliteracy, one can trace Klout's lineage back to *D&D* and the cultural redefinition of the term level.

What is a level? The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides eleven definitions of level as a noun.[12] Reading through all of the definitions, the closest to providing a starting point for a deeper examination of a level in the context of RPGs and its adoption as a signifier of power is provided by definition 3.d.: "A position (on a real or imaginary scale) in respect of amount, intensity, extent, or the like; the relative amount or intensity of any property, attribute, or activity. Freq. preceded by a n. denoting the property, etc. referred to, as *danger level*, *energy level*, *noise level*."[13] In the case of RPGs, the property that is denoted is the *character level*. This definition gestures towards what level represents within RPGs, but only just. Indeed, it could be argued that this definition is perfect for representing the mechanics of what a level implies, but it is more than just the scale itself. Particularly relevant to the larger argument of this essay is definition 4.b.: "A plane or status in respect of rank or authority; position in a hierarchy. Freq. with a qualifying adj."[14] This definition provides the framework for my larger argument that level as a notional hierarchy in gaming—a place-holder for the various accumulation of skills and experience a character gains—has made the jump to a real structural hierarchy through its cultural construction as a sign of power in contemporary society. The evolution of the term level begins with its codification in *D&D* through the community playing, sharing, and constructing an understanding that went beyond the original intent of the creators.

From Mechanic to Sign: The Communal Construction of Level in D&D

Upon its release in 1974, the original *D&D* was well received, selling out its first-print run of 1,000 copies.[15] Over the next three years, *D&D* would increase its player-base exponentially, leading to the release of its genre-defining *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (*AD&D*), a series of three books released from 1977 to 1979, including the 1978 release of the *Player's Handbook*, which contains an extensive discussion of the leveling mechanic. In his forward to the *Player's Handbook*, Mike Carr opens by saying, "Players, players, and more players—that's what comprises the *D&D* phenomenon. And phenomenal is what it is, as the audience for this, the granddaddy of all RPGs, continues to expand."[16] Within *D&D*, the community was everything. The author of *AD&D*, Gary Gygax, takes great pains to address the players as participants within the fantasy mechanics that he has created, but also as the creators and influencers of those mechanics. In his preface to the *Player's Handbook*, Gygax writes:

> This latter part of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* project I approached with no small amount of trepidation. After all, the game's major appeal is to those persons with unusually active imagination and superior, active intellect—a very demanding audience indeed. Furthermore, a great majority of readers master their own dungeons and are necessarily creative—the most critical audience of all! Authoring these works means that, in a way, I have set myself up as a final arbiter of fantasy role playing in the minds of the majority of *D&D* adventurers.[17]

The original *D&D* was created as a set of guidelines, structured enough to provide players a general standard with which to operate within their world, but with enough ambiguity to allow the players the opportunity to tweak, expand, and otherwise modify their play experience. As Gary Alan Fine has pointed out, "One of the cardinal 'metarules' of FRP (Fantasy Role Play) gaming is that there are no 'rules,' the rulebooks are only guidelines."[18] The magic of RPGs lay within the communal production of the fantasy in which players find themselves. This establishing principle of openness to modification within the structure of the *D&D* rule set foreshadows the ubiquitous nature of many of the key concepts outlined within *D&D* in the subsequent forty years of RPG development. It also explains the dizzying array of interpretations and applications of the rule sets from tabletop, to live action, to video games and beyond.

One key concept fleshed out in detail within *AD&D* is character levels. During the initial run of *D&D* within the *Men and Magic* volume, the term level is utilized throughout the booklet, but little is said of its actual definition within the context of fantasy play. Indeed, its application bares many similarities to the initial definition of level examined above as an imagined scale of quantity or quality. It is not until halfway through the booklet that level is defined explicitly as relates to the player character: "There is no theoretical limit to how high a character may progress, i.e. 20th level Lord, 20th level Wizard, etc. Distinct names have only been included for the base levels, but this does not influence progression."[19] The ambiguity inherent within many of the rules established within this guidebook was both a blessing and a curse for many players looking for clarification, and the creators were well aware of this double-edged sword; the title page included the following: "Inquiries regarding rules should be accompanied by a stamped return envelope and sent to Tactical Studies Rules, POB 756, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin 53147."[20] That offer of good faith towards players digging deeper into the rule sets of the game world seems to have opened up a constructive dialogue between Gygax and the players, clearly articulated in the *Player's Handbook*'s "Explanation of the Usages of the Term 'Level'":

> The term *level* has multiple meanings in this game system. Although substitute terminology could have been used in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, common usage of the term *level* to include multiple meanings is prevalent amongst existing players, so the term has been retained herein.… It was initially contemplated to term character power as *rank*, spell complexity was to be termed *power*, and monster strength was to be termed as *order*.… However, because of existing usage, level is retained throughout with all four meanings, and it is not as confusing as it may now seem.[21]

The "existing usage" was predicated by the fact that *Men & Magic* applied the term level to multiple mechanics and systems without a proper definition of what the authors intended, leading to players utilizing the terminology and contextualizing level within its specific application of play.

This contextualization of level by the community of players reflects what Fine has termed an *idioculture*—a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction.[22] In the follow-up *Player's Handbook*, Gygax recognized that attempting to redefine the levels of play into "rank," "power," and "order" would have alienated the idioculture developed around *D&D*. Instead, Gygax explicitly details the four usages of level within a role-playing experience in order to provide a reference point for newcomers and clarification for past players:

> 1. *Level as an indication of character power*: A player character begins the game at 1st level, i.e. the lowest possible level for a player character. The higher the level number, the more powerful the character is.
>
> 2. *Level as used to indicate the depth of the dungeon complex beneath the ground*: The 1st level of a dungeon is the first layer of the underground complex of tunnels, passages, rooms, chambers, and so forth. It is the 1st level beneath the ground. Beneath the 1st level is the 2nd, below that is the 3rd, 4th, 5th, etc. The higher the number, the lower the dungeon level (and the more hazardous its perils).
>
> 3. *Level as a measure of magic spell difficulty*: The magic spells available to some classes of characters are graded by difficulty factor, which, incidentally, reflects the spells' effectiveness to some extent. 1st level spells are the basic ones available to beginning characters. They are generally the least powerful spells. Next come 2nd level spells, then come 3rd level spells, and so on. The highest level of any type of magic spell is 9th level, spells usable only by 18th level magic-users; lesser magic-users can possibly employ such spells under certain circumstances which are explained hereafter, but only at considerable risk.
>
> 4. *Level as a gauge of a "monster's" potential threat*: Relatively weak creatures, monsters with few hit points, limited or non-existent magical abilities, those which to little damage when attacking, and those which have weak, or totally lack, venom are grouped together and called 1st level monsters. Slightly more powerful creatures are ordered into 2nd level, then comes 3rd, 4th, 5th, and son all the way up to 10th level (the highest, which includes the greatest monsters, demon princes, etc.).[23]

While the first usage is especially important to my analysis of level in the context of social processes, I have provided the extensive quote to illustrate the complexity of level in its usage as a mechanic within RPGs. Examined more closely, the term level as defined by Gygax is rooted within a matrix of power. Explicitly stated in usage 1, a character's level is indicative of their power, the higher the number, the more powerful that character is. This applies similarly to the monsters encountered, the spells available, and the levels of a dungeon. When placed within this matrix of power, a character's ability to take on a monster, utilize a spell, or plumb deeper depths within a dungeon is intricately linked to their level. As indicated in the extensive definitions of level quoted above, Michael Tresca's pointed observation that "of all the artifacts created by *Dungeons & Dragons*, the term 'level' has probably caused the most confusion"[24] is not far off. Encounters with higher-level creatures may lead to death, discovery of high-level spells may lead to frustration at the realization that one does not have the skills to utilize the spell, or the next level of the dungeon isn't accessible due to an inability to pick a lock because one lacks a high-level ability. As Tresca states, "level was explicitly tied to personal power…"[25] and that personal power opens or denies access to character progression. In RPGs, these barriers are meant to be overcome through a retreat to other areas to "level-up" one's character and gain new skills; they are core-mechanics to a richer experience for the players.

How does one gain this power? In RPGs, levels are gained through accumulation of *experience*. As David Ewalt notes, this experience system is a key element of *D&D* that enhances character persistence by allowing player characters to learn from their experiences.[26] According to the *Player's Handbook*:

> Experience is the measure of a character's ability in his or her chosen profession, the character's class … as he or she completes adventures and returns to an established base of operations, the Dungeon Master will award experience points to the character for treasure gained and opponents captured or slain and for solving or overcoming problems through professional means.[27]

For each monster killed, or challenge overcome, the player's character gains experience. Once the character gains enough experience they advance a level, gain access to new abilities, and—particularly relevant to this essay—become more powerful.[28] Returning to Tresca's quote above, level is tied to power "… instead of social status or good standing in a community."[29] The leveling and experience mechanics within *D&D* are intimately tied to individual achievement and skill, and not just any action provides gains to character progression and power. Acts are explicitly defined as valuable within a system. In the case of *D&D* that system is slaying monsters and collecting loot.

This bounds the limits of the play-space in order to provide an entertaining experience for the players so the action is centered on exploring dungeons and fighting monsters—not praying, training, and study. As Gygax explains, "none of this is suitable to gaming. It is, therefore, discarded and subsumed as taking place on a character's 'off hours.'"[30] As RPGs have matured and expanded, acts such as prayer, study, and training have actually become game mechanics themselves. In one of the most popular role-playing video games in the last few years, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, players gain experience through traditional avenues, such as defeating monsters and going on epic quests, but they could also elect to gain experience and levels through clandestine activities, such as pickpocketing and lock-picking, or by becoming a blacksmith or practicing speech (improving their bargaining prowess or abilities to influence citizens). Indeed, the openness of the *D&D* systems has fostered experimentation within the role-playing genre, both tabletop and virtual, that has allowed for not only the expansion of RPGs, but also the redefinition of other game genres and perceptions of what is of value and merits awards of experience.

Considering all of these subtleties that go into the creation and understanding of the term level, I offer this definition: A level is a numericallybased *sign* indicating a character's cumulative ability and experience within pre-defined parameters, such as profession, skill, personality, or any combination therein. Ultimately, a level can be viewed as an all-encompassing signifier of the potential, value, and worth of any character in a particular system or structure.

Level—communally constructed—becomes *the* indicator of power within RPGs. Throughout its early iterations and development, *D&D*'s ambiguously defined terminology and open structure provided the opportunity for the players and community to define and deploy the rules as they saw fit. In the case of the term level, it became an idiocultural shorthand for character power checks against a variety of systems within *D&D*. As level became the accepted measurement of power its ubiquity grew along with RPGs. While many different systems were developed over the course of *D&*D's forty years of existence (not least of which *D&D* itself!), nearly all games included levels. While *D&D* set the term, the adoption of level into a broader cultural understanding was facilitated by the rising popularity of gaming in society, particularly the meteoric rise of video games as *the* dominant entertainment media in the last decade. This was spurred, in no small part, by the smash success of the *Call of Duty* franchise and its introduction of RPG mechanics into its First Person Shooter (FPS) gameplay. With the leap of RPG mechanics to other genres of video gaming in the late 2000s, level evolved from an idiocultural term to a broadly understood cultural signifier transmitted by other forms of popular culture.

Video Games Level Up: RPG Mechanics in Contemporary Gaming

On November 13, 2012, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* was released worldwide. Within 24 hours, the game had accumulated $500 million worth of sales,[31] making *Call of Duty* the largest entertainment launch[32] of the year for the fourth consecutive year.[33] Almost a year later, on September 17, 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V* was released and generated $800 million worth of sales in 24 hours,[34] far eclipsing the sales of *Black Ops 2*. To say that video games have become a force in the entertainment industry would be a gross understatement. What both of these franchises share are online multiplayer components that provide persistent character advancement through a leveling system first introduced by *D&D*. The popularity and subsequent saturation of RPG tropes in contemporary culture can thus be traced trough the translation and adoption of the role-playing mechanics of *D&D* into videogames from their early development to present day.

Matt Barton's *Dungeons and Desktops* traces the history of computer role-playing games (CRPGs) from their humble origins as mainframe-based distractions created by university students in their spare time, to shared social worlds in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*, and sprawling single-player epics like *Mass Effect* and *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*. What connects all of these games according to Barton is that they all incorporate a numerical leveling system based on an experience point system.[35] These systems, which allowed for character persistence and growth, were one of the key innovations that Dave Arneson—co-creator of *D&D*—introduced.[36] Published in 2008, *Dungeons and Desktops* ends just as hit MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* were taking RPG mechanics mainstream to millions of subscribers.

On November 23, 2004, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) was released on PC and by the end of the first quarter of 2005 *WoW* had achieved subscription numbers north of 1.5 million players,[37] but that was just the beginning of the astronomical success of this game. By the end of 2007, *WoW* had hit 10 million subscribers riding the wave of the release of its first expansion *The Burning Crusade* earlier that year, as well as the announcement of its second expansion *The Wrath of the Lich King*.[38] By the end of 2010, *WoW* had hit the 12 million subscriber mark[39] and utterly decimated its competitors in the market. While new MMORPGs would be released over the last ten years, none of them would come close to the user-base that *WoW* would maintain. This would be due not only to *WoW*-as-game, but also through its cultural capital that would develop well outside "gamer culture."

WoW became a cultural phenomenon that inserted itself into the popular imaginary. On October 4, 2006, Comedy Central's *South Park* would air an episode featuring *WoW* titled "Make Love, Not Warcraft." Utilizing a combination of in-game recordings from *WoW* and the iconic style of *South Park*, "Make Love, Not Warcraft" became Comedy Central's highest-rated midseason premier since the year 2000. In late 2007, game developer Blizzard released a series of commercials featuring popular culture icons like Mr. T, William Shatner, and Verne Troyer talking about their character avatars in *WoW*. The success and increasing awareness of *WoW* and other RPGs began to circulate beyond niche markets. 2008's *Role Models,* starring Paul Rudd and Seann William Scott, featured an epic LARP (Live Action Role-Play) battle as the conclusion to the film, business journals began publishing articles about the value of *WoW* in the workplace,[40] and Cartoon Network developed a live-action show titled *Level Up*. Due to the popularity of *WoW* and other MMORPGs and CRPGs, core RPG mechanics such as experience points and levels became more recognizable to a broader public and fundamentally changed the landscape of contemporary gaming.

Indeed, one of the joys that Barton attributes to RPGs in general comes from watching a party level up and become more powerful, but the key to the growth of MMORPGs comes from the praise and envy from other players. As Barton notes, "…it is far more rewarding in a MMORPG, where thousands of other people can be aware of one's achievements. Receiving recognition for one's prowess is a powerful incentive to continue playing any game."[41] As online gaming grew throughout the 2000s, video game developers outside of the RPG genre began experimenting with ways to keep players engaged with their games outside of the main campaign.

The watershed moment in the transference of RPG leveling mechanics into broader gaming culture was with the release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* on November 5, 2007. *Modern Warfare* was the first *Call of Duty* to introduce a leveling system to the multiplayer component of the game, creating an addictive feedback loop for players with constant experience gains throughout matches and a reward system allowing players to unlock new weapons and modifications for their avatar. This was by no means the first time that an FPS game had included numeric rankings for players: *Halo* offered Trueskill rankings based off of player wins, for instance, but *Modern Warfare* offered the first fully realized RPG-based mechanics, featuring persistent character advancement through the accumulation of experience in matches. *Modern Warfare*'s sequel, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, released in 2009, would begin a four year streak for *Call of Duty*'s domination of the sales charts and usher in the saturation of RPG leveling throughout gaming.

Grand Theft Auto V's $800 million in sales in its first 24 hours illustrates the increasing influence of video games on contemporary culture. It also illustrates the ubiquitous nature of RPG leveling mechanics in video games. The three main characters throughout the campaign level up various skills, and the multiplayer component, *Grand Theft Auto Online*, includes player levels gained through completing various online game modes. As video games have made the shift to always on, connected worlds, the use of levels to allow players to distinguish between one another based off of their experience within the worlds has expanded exponentially. From levels making appearances in racing games like *Forza 5* and *The Crew*, to horror games like *Dead Rising 3*, character levels have become almost standard features for any game providing online multiplayer components.

I would be remiss not to note that it is not just console gaming making levels ubiquitous; mobile gaming has also utilized leveling systems to encourage player engagement. QuizUp, an online quiz game on mobile devices, provides separate levels for each category a player engages with, allowing accumulation of levels overall, but also an experience reset monthly for local, national, and global rankings. This is just one example of the myriad ways leveling mechanics have taken over many areas of gaming that reach a large and diverse population across the world. Its saturation is nearly complete within gaming space. It seems logical that eventually these mechanics would find their way into other aspects of society, and Klout marks one of the first attempts at translating leveling mechanics to reality.

With Klout the "simple" mechanics of leveling in gaming are transformed from a persistent indicator of the cumulative total of past accomplishments to a system of control designed around risk, individualism, and marketing prowess. Indeed, at first glance Klout's design and implementation of its scoring system is a far cry from those found in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. However, each system ultimately comes down to a singular number ranking the power of the person/character to the environment and characters around them. The level-as-mechanic in RPGs, when framed in the contemporary context of near-ubiquitous recognition through its cultural transmission via popular video games, becomes a new structuring system of society that falls in line with Raessens' "ludic turn." It becomes imperative that individuals gain the proper ludoliteracy to comprehend level, not just as a mechanic, but as a signifier of power in contemporary society.

As level jumped into broader cultural acceptance and understanding, and the "ludic turn" became more pronounced through gamification experiments in various structuring systems of society, a thirty-year-old computer scientist began to wonder how influential his opinions on videogames, restaurants, and neighbors were on Facebook and Twitter—and how he could measure that influence.

Recipe for Klout: Hyper-Individuation, Curated-Self and Social Leveling

The creator of Klout, Joe Fernandez, states that the idea for Klout came in 2007 after he went through jaw surgery and had his jaw wired shut for three months.[42] Being only able to communicate with friends and family via social networks, Fernandez began to think about how his posts influenced others, and how they in turn influenced him. After some data crunching of his own, outsourcing coding to Singapore, and eventually moving to Singapore for four months to complete the project, Klout would launch on Christmas Eve 2008 and by September 2009 Fernandez had relocated his company from New York to San Francisco to be near the developers of the social networks his algorithm relied upon. In the *Wired* article that provides the above origin of Klout, Mark Schaefer is quoted as saying "This is the democratization of influence.… Suddenly regular people can carve out a niche by creating content that moves quickly through an engaged network. For brands, that's buzz. And for the first time in history, we can measure it."[43] The democratization of influence that Klout fosters mirrors similar rhetoric that occurred during the 1990s around the democratization of financial management facilitated by computer networking.

In *Financialization of Daily Life*, Randy Martin traces the impact that new technologies of the 1990s had on producing the hyper-individuated subject of the neoliberal restructuring of global capital that had occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. As global markets shifted and job precarity skyrocketed, new technologies of financial management, spurred by the Personal Computer and widespread Internet access, began a process that Martin has termed financialization. Martin states, "Financialization promises a way to develop the self, when even the noblest of professions cannot emit a call that one can answer with a lifetime. It offers a highly elastic mode of self-mastery that channels doubt over uncertain identity into fruitful activity."[44] Indeed, as businesses began to abdicate their responsibilities towards their workers, convenient portals online opened up to allow individuals to manage their stock portfolios, apply for insurance, and manage their various financial accounts. Financial individualism flourished as self-made millionaires began proclaiming their secrets to success on the stock market and ways to maximize retirement savings while minimizing risk, securing an individual's future for the uncertainty surrounding employment in all levels of labor. The security of seniority seemed to vanish overnight, and the age of the savvy investor began.

As Martin notes, "…financialization does not simply blur boundaries so as to create seepage; it insinuates an orientation toward accounting and risk management into all domains of life. This statement does not mean that all times and places are the same, but that … they are all subject to the same culture of measurement."[45] Financialization fundamentally shifted the ways in which individuals conceived of themselves as subjects—no longer was a strict separation between work and leisure a given, or even available. An individual's success or failure in securing their future relied upon constant vigilance in the management of their finances, not in their loyalty to an employer. Precarity became the default, and an individual's success lay primarily in their management of risk factors for a future unknown: "When risk is culture, life is lived to control outcomes and embrace uncertainty."[46] As corporate profits soared and wages diminished,[47] employment no longer signaled security; financial acumen and an embracing of risk could provide the illusion of security.

The same financialization is present within Klout's own conception of itself. In Berry's description of Klout she encourages users to "think of it as a *social credit score* that will increasingly impact your life [emphasis added]."[48] This statement is less seepage of financialization than a one-to-one parity of Martin's culture of measurement. If the 1990s were a period of shifting to a culture of risk focused on individual financial management, the 2000s can be seen as a refinement of management techniques into production of social value.

This production of social value is what Alison Hearn has termed “self-branding.” Hearn states:

> Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit.[49]

Hearn argues that self-branding arises due to a post–Fordist, postmodern culture in which written language has lost all meaning and promotional culture has taken over. This promotional culture privileges the commodity-self in which self-branding is a particular form of innovative and flexible labor. Just as financial management seeped into many aspects of life like managing risk outside of work, self-branding blurs the lines between public and private, labor and leisure, as individuals create blogs about movies, post links on their Facebook, or tweet about a product they enjoy. Klout has incentivized and centralized the cultural value that a multitude of self-branding users have created on the social web to produce the potential material profit Hearn alludes to in the above quote. If Klout was merely a clearinghouse for self-branding individuals willing to sell their influence that would be one thing; but Klout aspires for more.

In Hearn’s conception of self-branding “work on the production of a branded ‘self’ involves creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings.”[50] The difference between Hearn’s branded “self” and Klout lays in the detachable image or narrative that is set for sale. The Klout score is intimately tied with the individual that it is attached to. There is no separate creation of a particular “self” that is then sold to the highest bidder. Indeed, if an individual has a profile on one of the eight social networks in its algorithm, Klout has a score for them. In a follow up blog post three months after “A Beginners Guide to Klout” *The Official Klout Blog* made the following blog post, “100 Million People Have Klout.”[51] An interesting addendum to that would be to answer: how many of those people were actually aware they had Klout?

While issues of multiple accounts on Twitter or Instagram may necessitate pause when examining numbers of users within the Klout system, real-name-based social networks like LinkedIn and Facebook do not allow for multiplicity or anonymity. Thus, I would argue that Klout represents more than just a score of influence; it becomes much more akin to a level as defined above. Klout becomes an all-encompassing signifier of the *social* potential, value, and worth of any social network user. Klout is the leveling system that allows a culturally constructed understanding of the value surrounding social networking—spurred in part by the "ludic turn" produced through the cultural transmission of level-as-power via popular gaming. All users of social networks have been given a social level—whether they are aware of it or not—through Klout's algorithm. Unfortunately—much like the arbitrariness of the credit scores Klout aspires to be—this can have devastating consequences for those without the requisite ludoliteracy required to interpret and understand this new structuring system of society.

The measurement techniques employed to create the Klout score begins to reflect what Gilles Deleuze has termed the *society of control*, which takes over a previous society of *discipline*. Deleuze explains that,

> In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything—the corporation, the education system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.[52]

These metastable, coexisting states are reflected in Klout's all-encompassing score that takes all social media posts of a specific user into consideration. Tellingly, much like Martin focuses upon the financial aspects of hyper-individualism, and Klout is attempting to become the social credit score for users, Deleuze also defers to monetary terms in order to clarify his theory:

> Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold in as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies.[53]

Klout and the codification of social influence becomes one more floating metric of control in which individuals are measured against one another in an ever-increasingly fragmented and uncertain life. As Deleuze states, "Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite, and discontinuous."[54] The continuous turnover present in the society of control is reflected in the system design Klout uses to bracket its measurements of social influence.

Klout's interface design and communication of information mirror the same type of precarity that plagues the financialization of daily life and lies at the core of a society of control. The Klout score is compiled based only on the last 90 days of a user's social networking activity, making the Klout score something that must be maintained through constant engagement with social networking communities lest a user's score degrade. This design produces what Martin terms the "routinization of risk," which "…makes a particular historical and economic arrangement appear to be natural. This makes common sense out of what was hitherto nonsensical."[55] Klout takes the ambiguous nature of brands and individuals influencing their communities online and codifies it into a common sense score from 1 to 100.

The Klout score becomes a hierarchical scale that allows the comparison of individuals' power to influence others through social networks. Much as a character's level in an RPG is predicated on the accumulation of experience through specific acts, an individual's Klout score is predicated on the accumulation of engagement with other users of social networking sites. Indeed, just as a level 100 player in *WoW* is more valuable in a city raid than a level 60 player, Fiorella's score of 34 was passed up in favor of a 67—because they were deemed more valuable. Even without the knowledge of the systems and mechanics underlying each of these hierarchies, the outcome is the same. Regardless of scales—whether 1–30 (*D&D*), 1–50 (*CoD*), 1–100 (Klout and *WoW*), or even an infinite number of levels—the result is a system of immediate comparison between subjects utilizing a numerical signifier of power and worth.

Much like *D&D* and the games that it has inspired, Klout's system makes immediate comparison universal and ubiquitous. While striving to become as influential in an individual's life as a credit score, the Klout score moves beyond the privacy and mystery that surrounds a credit score—itself not even provided in a standard credit report unless requested by an individual—and makes every user within its (real) world instantaneously accessible and comparable. Our reality is now a part of the multiverse in which every character has a numeric indicator that dictates their power, access, and ability. As soon as a user creates a social networking account they have become a player within the system. As society continues to place increasing value upon an individual's ability to navigate and exploit online social networks effectively, the Klout score becomes increasingly important to living in contemporary society.

The Klout score thus becomes a *social level*, a numeric value placed on every user of social networking websites by algorithm-driven content measurement tools. This is especially damning for those who are unaware that they are even being measured; Klout becomes a way to encourage development and influence while simultaneously punishing those who do not foster a particular type of engagement and marketability. As Martin points out, financial punishment has been used to control individuals or nations: "directed violence has ever been an instrument of world power, but now punishment has usurped conquest as a rationale as if to remind the unpunished that they must play by the rules or their turn will be next."[56] Klout also acts as a mode of social punishment for those that refuse to engage in its specifically defined networked social practices. Much like a credit score, those who refuse to participate will find their access to certain necessities (like housing, or in the case of Klout, a job) in contemporary society denied them. Unlike a credit score, however, anyone can look at a Klout score at any time and make a judgment of the value of any user of social networks.

With Klout and the social level, individuals' lives become intimately tied up with their influence and marketability. This intimate connection becomes more than just a "branded self" as Hearn discusses, but a process of constant curation and delivery of influential content on social networks. This "curated self" is an involved process that is highly selective, but *inseparable* from the individual. There is no longer a comfortable distancing between an individual's "real self" and their "virtual selves." Indeed, for those that create a profile on Klout and connect all of their accounts, all of their networks become extensions of this score, and even provide an advantage against those that have not opted-in.

The Klout platform also encourages constant engagement and content curation for the betterment of an individual's Klout score. This design provides the opportunity for users to level up through the process of self-curation. The home page for Klout informs the user that they have yet to follow a number of new accounts for that day, or post links, and suggests both users and links that it has calculated will be of interest to the user's followers, reflecting the "grinding" prevalent in many RPGs (particularly MMORPGs) that provide daily quests players can engage in to continuously gain in-game material benefits or increase status with certain factions. This social network grind fundamentally challenges the imagined organic nature of user influence, changing the ways in which a user has previously engaged with their community. This becomes a process of *social leveling* in which individuals attempt to increase their social level by changing their online behaviors to include such actions as sharing links, commenting on posts, and an overall higher engagement with those in their networks. Much as the change in attitudes towards financial management in the 1990s went from security through employment to constant vigilance and management of assets online, changing attitudes in the power of influence through online social networks has caused a shift from organic engagement to a daily management of content creation, curation, and delivery. These changing attitudes are not necessarily for the better either. As Tresca points out:

> The problem with status and levels is that it begins to shape the reality of the game; lower-level players perceive themselves as worthless and high-level players perceive themselves as morally superior. Of course, the primary component to success in any level-based system is time—players with more time on their hands are capable of becoming much more powerful than similar player who cannot devote as much attention to the game. The prestige associate with all high-level players is not necessarily well-deserved.[57]

The application of the social level to all users of social networks becomes a structuring system in which many of the players do not realize they are in a game. While the cultural knowledge transmission of the meaning of a number next to one's name has allowed users to recognize their position within new media hierarchy, the ludoliteracy required to "play the game" has not been transmitted. Indeed, the prestige associated with high social levels may be just as little deserved as Tresca's gamers, and may simply amplify the flaws in current conceptions of social value and worth in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The ubiquitous nature of measuring social influence moves the Klout score beyond the bullshit of gamification and into a broader cultural transference of RPG mechanics into the real world—the creation of the social level. Taken within a matrix of power in which the level is the concrete numerical representation of an individual's experience, skills, and value—cross referenced, compiled, and codified—there is no longer an endgame or goal to grind towards. The social level becomes an instant, publicly available indicator of an individual's entire social value within the digital media landscape that has very real material consequences, as illustrated by Sam Fiorella's unfortunate introduction to his Klout score.[58] This trend is particularly alarming as the last decade has continued to build on the process of individualization outlined in Martin's financialization of daily life, with corporations continuing not only to reduce the cost of labor, but even the opportunity for employment for new entrants into the labor market. As Hearn's branded-self evolves into a curated-self through a shift from the separate digital self to an all-encompassing social-media-presence-as-self due to the flight of unemployed workers to the utopic panacea of the Internet, an individual's online presence and influence become ever-more valuable.

Klout becomes an indicator of what the endgame of a society of control and the financialization of daily life may be. Returning to the "Postscript," Deleuze sketches a future vision of metastable states and individual modulation and how they would affect individuals:

> The conception of a control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant … is not necessarily one of science fiction. Félix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation.[59]

Klout is that which tracks an individual's social worth and influence in social networks, but also simultaneously becomes a means with which an employer can instantly compare potential employees, an airline can provide expanded service to high-level influencers, or a user can compare themselves and change their own ways of interacting online. While Klout isn't an all-encompassing metric for every aspect of life, it does measure an increasingly important, culturally valued practice in the use of social networks online. As a confluence of RPG mechanics and social influence, the fantastic and the real, and the measurable and the ambiguous, Klout represents a new focus on the way in which an individual's cultural value is assigned.

For what is influence but the power to effect change? What does the assignation of a number detailing an individual's influence provide in the broader discourse on human relations? By approaching Klout as an application of RPG mechanics to social relations, connections to the ways in which power operates in society can be made. Indeed, as indicated in my discussion of levels in RPGs, the level is a matrix of power, indicating a characters ability to access and interact with the world. By transferring these mechanics from avatar to player, a new matrix of power is created in reality, that of the social level. This social level has far reaching implications for those who do not fit within the arbitrary structure that Klout creates. Indeed, questions as to who are served, and who is left out, must be raised. Much as Raczkowski's example of the Frequent Flyer Programs creating spaces of privilege for higher level passengers, the shift to universal scoring mechanisms of increasingly valued exchanges on social media produces digital *and* material spaces of privilege.

These newly codified spaces of privilege are not created in a vacuum. While a relatively new structuring system of society, Klout's manifestation as a ludic phenomenon spurred in part by the "ludic turn" does not negate the influence of other structuring systems of society. An intersectional analysis of Klout and social levels, taking in the operations of race, gender, and class on access to and use of social networks, is critical. Klout's algorithm, proprietary and shrouded in mystery, relies heavily upon the publicly accessible information and profiles of the users it measures. The daily violence and micro-aggressions perpetrated upon particular populations online and off make many users weary of connecting various social networking accounts, making profiles public, or posting "engaging" topics. If Klout is a way to measure influence on social networking—itself a reflection of a continuing trend of hyper-individualism and precarity in daily life—its complicity in the current social landscape—online and off—becomes one more tool of discipline and control.

NOTES

1. Seth Stevenson, "What Your Klout Score Really Means," *Wired*, April 24, 2012, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.wired.com/2012/04/ff_klout/all/.

2. Niklas Schrape, "Gamification and Governmentality," in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014), 22.

3. "Score," *Klout*, accessed January 1, 2015, https://klout.com/corp/score.

4. Megan Berry, "A Beginner's Guide to Klout," *The Official Klout Blog*, June 7, 2011, accessed January 1, 2015, http://blog.klout.com/2011/06/a-beginners-guide-to-klout/.

5. Felix Raczkowski, "Making Points the Point: Towards a History of Ideas of Gamification," in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014), 141.

6. *Ibid.*, 145.

7. *Ibid.*, 146.

8. Ian Bogost, "Gamification Is Bullshit: My Position Statement at the Wharton Gamification Symposium," *Ian Bogost Blog*, August 8, 2011, accessed January 1, 2015, http://bogost.com/writing/blog/gamification_is_bullshit/.

9. Raczkowski, 150.

10. Joost Raessens, "The Ludification of Culture," in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014), 109.

11. *Ibid.*

12. In total, the *OED* offers 29 main definitions (plus a large variety of variations of each) including noun/verb/adjective. Other sources provide a variety of definitions as well: Google provides 10 in a "define": search, Merriam-Webster 27, and Dictionary.com provides 37.

13. "level, n.," *OED* Online, March 2015, Oxford University Press, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/107653?rskey=gr6QeJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

14. *Ibid.*

15. "Wizards of the Coast History of TSR," Wizards of the Coast, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.wizards.com/dnd/DnDArchives_History.asp.

16. Mike Carr, "Foreword," in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook*, by Gary Gygax (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978), 2.

17. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978), 5.

18. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 115.

19. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons and Dragons: Volume 1 Men & Magic* (Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974), 18.

20. *Ibid.,* 1.

21. Gygax, *Player's Handbook*, 8. Emphasis in original.

22. Fine, 136.

23. Gygax, *Player's Handbook*, 8.

24. Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 89.

25. *Ibid.*, 90.

26. David M. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 22.

27. Gygax, *Player's Handbook*, 106.

28. Ewalt, 22.

29. Tresca, 90.

30. Gygax, *Player's Handbook*, 106.

31. Matt Warman, "Call of Duty: Black Ops II Sales Hit $500 Million in First 24 Hours," *Telegraph*, November 16, 2012, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/9683341/Call-of-duty-Black-Ops-II-sales-hit-500-million-in-first-24-hours.html.

32. And I do mean "entertainment" broadly. To put the *Black Ops 2* release into perspective, the highest domestic grossing film of 2012 was Marvel's *The Avengers*, which would gross just over $623 million over the course of five months. Accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avengers11.htm.

33. The *Call of Duty* Franchise is one of a multitude of "Triple A" video game franchises that is on a yearly development cycle. Prior to *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2*, the three preceding franchises had also topped the list on day one sales: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011).

34. Christopher Dring, "GTA V Makes a Record $800m in 24-Hours," *MCV: The Market for Computer & Video Games*, September 18, 2013, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.mcvuk.com/news/read/gta-v-makes-a-record-800m-in-24-hours/0121279.

35. Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008), 7.

36. *Ibid.*, 19.

37. "Number of World of Warcraft Subscribers from 1st Quarter 2005 to 3rd Quarter 2014 (in Millions)," *Statista*, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/.

38. *The Wrath of the Lich King* was especially momentous as it would contain the conclusion to the storyline introduced by Blizzard in *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*, the expansion to their Real-Time Strategy game on which *WoW* was based.

39. As of this writing, *World of Warcraft*'s subscriber base had decline to 10 million, but that is still a significant amount of subscribers in comparison to any other subscription-based MMORPG.

40. John Hagel and John Seely Brown, "How World of Warcraft Promotes Innovation," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, January 14, 2009, accessed January 1, 2015, http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2009–01–14/how-world-of-warcraft-promotes-innovationbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice.

41. Barton, 432.

42. Stevenson.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9.

45. *Ibid.*, 43.

46. *Ibid.,* 144.

47. See Figure 1.6 in David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.

48. *The Official Klout Blog*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://blog.klout.com/2011/06/a-beginners-guide-to-klout/

49. Alison Hearn, "'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self,'" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2) (2008): 198.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Joe Fernandez, "100 Million People Have Klout," *The Official Klout Blog*, September 7, 2011, accessed January 1, 2015, http://blog.klout.com/2011/09/100-million-people-have-klout/.

52. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 5.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 6.

55. Martin, 107.

56. *Ibid.,* 153.
57. Tresca, 132.
58. Stevenson.
59. Deleuze, 7.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barton, Matt. *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games.* Wellesley, MA: A. K. Peters, 2008.

Berry, Megan. "A Beginner's Guide to Klout." *The Official Klout Blog*, June 7, 2011. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://blog.klout.com/2011/06/a-beginners-guide-to-klout/.

Bogost, Ian "Gamification Is Bullshit: My Position Statement at the Wharton Gamification Symposium." *Ian Bogost Blog*, August 8, 2011. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://bogost.com/writing/blog/gamification_is_bullshit/.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

Dring, Christopher. "GTA V Makes a Record $800m in 24-Hours." *MCV: The Market for Computer & Video Games*, September 18, 2013. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.mcvuk.com/news/read/gta-v-makes-a-record-800m-in-24-hours/0121279.

Ewalt, David M. *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It.* New York: Scribner, 2013.

Fernandez, Joe. "100 Million People Have Klout." *The Official Klout Blog*, September 7, 2011. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://blog.klout.com/2011/09/100-million-people-have-klout/.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gygax, Gary. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook.* Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978.

Gygax, Gary, and Dave Arneson. *Dungeons and Dragons: Volume 1 Men & Magic.* Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974.

Hagel, John, and John Seely Brown. "How World of Warcraft Promotes Innovation." *Bloomberg Businessweek*, January 14, 2009. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2009-01-14/how-world-of-warcraft-promotes-innovationbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice.

Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hearn, Alison. "'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self.'" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2) (2008): 197–217.

Klout. "Score." Accessed January 1, 2015. https://klout.com/corp/score.

"level, n." *OED* Online, March 2015. Oxford University Press. Accessed May 1, 2015. http://www.oed.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/Entry/107653?rskey=gr6QeJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

Martin, Randy. *Financialization of Daily Life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.

Raczkowski, Felix. "Making Points the Point: Towards a History of Ideas of Gamification." In *Rethinking Gamification*, edited by Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino and Niklas Schrape, 141–160. Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014.

Raessens, Joost. "The Ludification of Culture." In *Rethinking Gamification*, edited by Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino and Niklas Schrape, 91–114. Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014.

Statista. "Number of World of Warcraft Subscribers from 1st Quarter 2005 to 3rd Quarter 2014 (in Millions)." Accessed January 1, 2015. http://www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/.

Stevenson, Seth. "What Your Klout Score Really Means." *Wired*, April 24, 2012. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.wired.com/2012/04/ff_klout/all/.

Tresca, Michael J. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Warman, Matt. "Call of Duty: Black Ops II Sales Hit $500 Million in First 24 Hours." *Telegraph*, November 16, 2012. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/9683341/Call-of-duty-Black-Ops-II-sales-hit-500-million-in-first-24-hours.html.

Wizards of the Coast. "Wizards of the Coast History of TSR." Accessed January 1, 2015. http://www.wizards.com/dnd/DnDArchives_History.asp.

This page intentionally left blank

Part IV

The Manual of Play: Seeding New Avenues of Gaming

Shapers, Portals and Exotic Matter

Living Fiction and Augmented Reality in Google's Ingress

KAI-UWE WERBECK

Introduction: Ingress *and the City of Bits*

Google's successful smartphone app *Ingress* has been described as a fascinating combination of a "virtual scavenger hunt and the board game *Risk*."[1] While this is a suitable short-hand of its basic game mechanics, *Ingress* also borrows from Role-Playing Games (RPGs). Since their emergence as a mass cultural phenomenon in the 1970s, RPGs have constantly mutated, from the still influential pen-and-paper systems to LARPs (Live Action Role-Play) and a wide variety of digital iterations. With *Ingress*, the genre has again entered a new stage. It blends RPG elements with what William J. Mitchell has termed the "City of Bits," in which "the real city that surrounds us and the video city that guides us are held in perfect coincidence."[2] *Ingress* retains prominent RPG characteristics—for example, the attack system, the inventory of items, and the elaborate background story—and superimposes them onto twenty-first-century urban space.[3] Players join one of two competing factions and use their smartphones' GPS function to fight for so-called "portals," digital constructs attached to corporeal landmarks. As players have to be in physical proximity to the portals in order to affect them, the gameplay creates a contested, liminal space between the game world and the concrete affordances of the city. In a video interview with DICE, John Hanke, the app's inventor, calls the result "Living Fiction," explaining that "a local player event in London will be designed to demonstrate how players interact with the storyline and change it, by playing in the real world and how the news gets fed back to the larger game community."[4]

After first illustrating the structural similarities (and differences) between earlier RPGs—both analog and digital—and Hanke's living fiction, I argue that by inscribing (role-playing) game-like narratives into urban space via smartphones, *Ingress* both challenges and consolidates the "postmodern" condition, in which, ostensibly, experience is always already mediated and spatiality rendered topsy-turvy.[5] At stake in this analysis of *Ingress*—and by implication the blossoming genres of living fiction and augmented reality games writ larger—is an answer to the question "how the lessons learned from narrativist RPGs [...] can be brought to digital media" as well as an analysis of modes of perception and experience in highly networked and media saturated societies.[6] Drawing a line from the first tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) to video games to online games such as *Ingress* allows me to discuss the cultural currency that role-playing still has and to illuminate how the genre is co-opted into new meaning producing systems of communication. To this end, the essay follows Gary Alan Fine who, in his seminal sociological study on RPGs, sets up a triptych of three frames: "commonsense reality, the gaming rules, and the content of the gaming fantasy itself."[7] Fine already acknowledges that the complex interactions of these frameworks change their relations to each other, a fluctuation that he calls "frame oscillations."[8] In other words, the ratio of Fine's three categories will vary in the actualization of any given gaming session: some players will focus heavily on rules and treat the RPG more like a board game, while others may eschew heavy regulation in favor of story-telling. Frame oscillation is at work in *Ingress*: the primary framework gains in importance as the superimposition of a virtual map onto physical space is critical to success in *Ingress*. The secondary framework—the structural core of the RPG defined through rules—is delegated to the app, while the tertiary framework—the layer of the game that generates the actual role-playing—undergoes substantial revisions and is externalized; story-lines in *Ingress* are mainly advanced by a group of non-player characters played by actors brought to life in videos that are disseminated via the smartphone and Internet channels such as google+.

The notion that *Ingress* shares its DNA with the RPG genre is widely accepted but remains under-utilized in research. Its entry on *Wikipedia*, for example, calls the app an "augmented reality massive multi-player online role-playing GPS dependent game."[9] In an interview, Hanke is asked if he foresees "any chance of developing player roles (much like player classes in RPGs) where one's role would adjust one's attributes and capabilities in the game (attackers, builders, linkers, farmers, etc., maybe with the possibility of growing multi-role characters)?"[10] Hanke replies "good ideas," suggesting an awareness that *Ingress* has the potential for further developments toward RPG components.[11] Co-creator Flint Dille, a role-playing industry veteran, further mentions in an interview that "missions" in *Ingress* are similar to "quests that you might go on in a traditional RPG" but at the same time acknowledges that the game's structure necessitates changes to how these quests are planned and executed.[12] Along the lines of Dille's comment, this essay is not an attempt to force *Ingress* into a generic straitjacket; quite the contrary, the term RPG in itself is understood here as by no means fixed and monolithic. The genre has always been fluid, prioritizing certain characteristics prevalent to its current permutation and omitting others while retaining permeable and mutable boundaries throughout.[13] *Ingress* is not (yet) a full-blown RPG in the sense of performative inter-personal narratives, but it succeeds, I argue, in establishing the genre as a central part of the online-gaming community as it repeats evolutionary steps the genre has taken before. While the app's current position mirrors the early days of role-playing, in particular its relation to military strategy, as well as single-player video- and computer games, it already gestures toward the near-future amalgamation of augmented realities and RPGs.

Framing Ingress: The Genealogy of Role-Playing Games

In order to localize the shared DNA between earlier RPGs and *Ingress* and query the ramifications of role-playing elements being injected into the *City of Bits*, I will take a step back and familiarize readers with the app. Tasked with the amalgamation of map services and online games, Niantic Labs, a Google-owned start up, began developing the game in 2004 and made it available for beta-testing in 2012. Hanke and his team set up a storyline that frames the game's explicitly "technological" representation of space as depicted on the "scanner," the smartphone's display. *Ingress* proposes the existence of an alien race, the Shapers, who have released "exotic matter" to earth. The players choose a side and join either the Enlightened faction, which believes that "exotic matter," or "XM" in the game's diction, is beneficial to mankind, or the Resistance, which suspects the Shapers to have rather sinister ambitions with regard to Earth's future. In the game, the two factions are assigned color codes (blue for the Resistance and green for the Enlightened) that are applied to the game's world map, a minimalistic, black-and-grey topography that represents the physical environment as a simplified abstraction.[14] Gradually, this minimalistic "augmented" reality—presented from a slightly canted bird's eye view and zigzagged by other topographical elements that correspond to the actual surroundings—is populated with blue, green, and grey fountains of energy that symbolize strategically important diegetic elements, in particular the highly contested portals and pools of XM. Exotic Matter replenishes the energy bar, which in turn enables the players to take action; each operation—from attacking enemy portals to fortifying one's own—costs a certain amount of energy, a system similar to video game RPGs.

Ingress grants the players a (digital) view of their immediate surroundings with the current physical location being at the center, creating an abstract yet fascinating map into which photorealistic images are inserted whenever a portal is accessed. If so desired, ominous sounds that seem to come straight out of some sci-fi movie—including crackling, robotic voices—supplement the experience. Fighting for territorial supremacy, players—represented by an arrow on the scanner—secure, connect, and defend their own faction's portals, while trying to take down those of the other faction. To this end, they fortify and link their portals using devices called "resonators" (among other items), creating powerful fields of connected landmarks that cover the map in green and blue geometries, respectively. In true RPG fashion, successful actions generate Access Points (AP), which in turn slowly raise the experience level of the individual players; the higher this level, the more powerful are the items that the player can use to attack or mod a portal. Hacking portals, players harvest items that can be stored for later use. Next to weapons of varying power, collectable items—some common, others extremely rare—include so-called portal shields (which raise the defense level of the portals) and multi-hacks that allow the portal to yield more items when hacked. It is noteworthy that the portals can be highly modified while level is the sole indicator of a player's power; the app does not include an additional numeric set of typical RPG skills, such as *Strength* or *Wisdom*. Players can earn so-called badges, obtained through the completion of specific tasks, for example, by hacking a certain number of unique portals or maintaining them for a specific period of time.[15] Long-time success in *Ingress* is facilitated by some degree of cooperation, the working together of players from the same faction in order to achieve their goals. Taking the idea of a party of adventurers to the extreme, strength comes in numbers, even though it is important to note that the game can be played alone without any difficulty.[16] "Parties" in *Ingress* are ultimately asynchronous; players are not required to be in the same physical location at the same time to work on a project. While keeping these recalibrations in mind, it is safe to say that *Ingress* assimilates strategic elements that refer back to the pre-history of RPGs.

According to academic lore, the genealogy of modern RPGs begins with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's 1974 *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*). Calling *D&D* the "lingua franca" of RPGs, Erik Mona notes that its "most primal form" has a direct connection to strategic tabletop games, in particular *Chain-*

mail, a miniature game created by Gygax and set in a medieval world that Arneson later extended.[17] This development is noteworthy as it pertains to *Ingress*' partial return to the genre's beginnings and illustrates the frame oscillations mentioned above. RPGs rely on a base—Fine's secondary framework—that consists of a set of rules, reminiscent of the thematically-aligned battle simulations that preceded *D&D*.[18] Exploring the world beyond the battlefield, the game evolved and gradually added the element of role-playing, eventually granting a more free-form gaming experience realized in the third framework: "If you could imagine it, and the game master was willing to go along, it could happen."[19] However, *Ingress* neglects the third framework with regard to the acting out of roles and rather focuses on a specific, communal form of embodiment. Thus, it shifts toward LARPs and the physical locations in which they play out their reenactments.[20] While *Ingress* players often disregard props and costumes, the localities in which they gather in large numbers during important events regularly radiate a distinctly sci-fi feel.[21] The lack of traditional interpersonal narratives has to do with the game's reliance on mass media—the smartphone, of course, but also platforms such as Twitter—and thus mirrors a development that can also be observed in RPGs played on video game consoles and home computers. The publisher, however, fills in these gaps and creates a narrative in which important in-game events—at times decided by the mass actions of players—are acted out and visualized in videos that flesh out the world of *Ingress*. In other words, the effort to propel the storyline forward is to a certain extent outsourced, a tactic similar to early computer- and video games.

The scope and focus of this essay neither calls nor allows for a detailed history of digital RPGs, but it is necessary to sketch out some of the seminal and most influential titles, in particular with regard to features these games first implemented and to which *Ingress* takes recourse.[22] In the case of *D&D*, the diegetic world either directly translated into video- and computer game spin-offs or at least inspired games that reproduce its "lingua franca" in electronic code. The speed with which the emergent digital culture of the later 1970s and early 1980s adopted—and maybe even paralleled—pen-and-paper RPGs indicates an affinity between new media and the gaming model.[23] At this point it is noteworthy that the history of RPG evolution is in itself a contested topic; with the genre being in steady flux it is difficult to trace a clear-cut genealogy in which one realization of the game precedes the other. As Sarah Lynne Bowman points out, "the first computer-based RPGs emerged in the 1970s, around the same time as the pen-and-paper games."[24] Already in the 1970s, one sees the first games implicitly referencing tabletop systems, for example Don Woods and Will Crowther's all-text computer program *Colossal Cave Adventure* and its Atari VCS remake by Warren Robinett, *Adventure* (this time around using simple graphics), in which the programmer "had to draw his *dungeons and dragons*" and "where players found weapon and other inventory."[25] While *Akalabeth*, the precursor to the long-running *Ultima* series, according to Matt Barton "included many conventions that are present in even the most modern CRPG," the next title of importance for *Ingress*' genealogy is in fact New World Computing's 1995 *Heroes of Might and Magic*. Barton cites "the choice of character class, attributes, a store from which to buy weapons and armor, a leveling system based on experience points, strategic combat with increasingly powerful foes, and a large area to explore" as some of these conventions.[26] They all, with the possible exception of character classes, find their equivalent in *Ingress* in some shape or form. While character classes are indeed absent from the app, some players understand themselves as fulfilling certain functions for their faction. *Ingress*, it seems, replays this concurrent evolution in front of our eyes and at the same time changes some parameters.

There are other cues that *Ingress* takes from famous digital trail-blazers. *Diablo*, released in 1996, is considered the prime example of a "limited character development system," where the role-playing element is sacrificed in favor of fantasy-soaked action, another reconfiguration that returns with a vengeance in the augmented reality game.[27] *Diablo* is also noteworthy in this context because it is part of a phalanx of computer games that populated the Internet with role-players in large numbers. Bridging the gap between isolated computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and online games, *Diablo* was instrumental in the development of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), another strain of role-playing DNA that resurfaces in *Ingress*.[28] As Mitchell reminds us, already in "1994 the video game pioneer Nolan Bushnell was speculating about the possibility of network supported, intercity competitive games involving tens of thousands of participants on each team," a prophecy that fulfilled itself quickly via networked games.[29] *Neverwinter Nights* (1991–1997) stands out as the first successful MMORPG set in the official *D&D* universe and the first online game to use a graphics interface. In 1997, *Ultima Online* was launched, another benchmark in the evolution of fantasy oriented multi-player worlds that stands as the breakthrough system for internet gaming. The trend arguably culminated in the spectacular success of Blizzard's MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Due to its immense impact on the popular imagination, it marks the apex of the symbiotic relationship between RPG and digital mass medium. As Michael J. Tresca writes, in 2004 *WoW* "exploded onto the scene" and "perfected what the other MMORPGs struggled to achieve."[30] Almost a decade later, *Ingress* profits from the genre's gradual migration into the digital realm and yet again reconfigures what it means to role-play with others "online" by taking the game to the streets. An interesting question, then, is how this transmogrification affects what Sarah Lynne Bowman calls fluidity in RPGs, the recalibration of ones' personality that "applies not only to our values, attitudes, and behaviors, but also to our very sense of ego-concept."[31]

Divergences and Overlaps: Role-Playing Elements in Ingress

In order to convincingly triangulate pen-and-paper systems, digital RPGs, and *Ingress*' augmented reality with regard to fluidity, certain core features of the genre have to be set in relation to each other. Bowman offers a useful definition of role-playing games that provides a guideline for the following comparison. Bowman writes, "A role-playing game should establish some sense of community through a ritualized, shared story telling experience amongst multiple players."[32] *Ingress* brings together an extremely large number of people, even though the communal aspect is complicated by the fact that the media component immediately jettisons the necessity of being in close proximity to other players. As I will show in greater detail later, *Ingress*' game mechanics also affect the gaming style in that the app—like many video game RPGs—simplifies the narrative created between players and focuses more on algorithms to decide outcomes rather than story-telling. Bowman's second core feature, similar to Fine's frame, concerns "some form of game system, which provides the framework for the enactment of specific scenarios and the solving of problems within them."[33] In contrast to the first main feature, *Ingress* easily adheres to this aspect, having the rules implemented and upheld through the technology and algorithms underlying the app. Her last point pertains to the possibility to "alter [the players'] sense of identity" in order to "develop an alternate Self through a process known as identity alteration."[34] The players and the guide, the game master, share "a co-created story space," a precondition that is reformulated in the context of *Ingress*.[35] An *Ingress* character is called an *Agent*, a fictional construct that nonetheless remains rather closely linked to the actual person enacting the role in the co-created story space, which in turn is inextricably intertwined with the real world.

What then is the story that the app tells? In *Ingress*, the sudden appearance of XM sets in motion a large-scale fight for the future of mankind. *Ingress* shares the sci-fi genre with RPG systems such as *Shadowrun* or *Star Wars*. As is the case with tabletop RPGs such as *D&D*, *Vampire: The Masquerade* or the German wizards-and-warriors system *Das Schwarze Auge* (*The Dark Eye*), the publishers flesh out the world in which the role-playing unfolds on various levels, from supplemental materials to multi-media tie-ins. While *D&D*, for example, spawned two feature films, *Vampire*'s World of Darkness produced a large number of novels and a TV show, some of these dealing with cataclysmic changes affecting the system's master narrative. The fantasy world of *Das Schwarze Auge* serves as the setting for numerous computer games that incorporate the events of the pen-and-paper version. *Ingress*, too, offers supplements: novels accompany the game play, while actors playing in-game characters attend fan conventions and appear in the so-called *Ingress Reports*, elaborated newsreels reporting on everything game related. The announcer, Susanna Moyer, not only covers large-scale events but also directly "communicates" with non-player characters essential to the story.[36] Blurring the line between fact and fiction, one report, for example, investigates the "declining health of enlightened ideologue Roland Jarvis" in dramatic fashion, including a feed of CCTV footage showing an actor playing Jarvis being brought to some secret facility presumably for treatment. The reports thus create a continuous story arc that introduces new elements to the game and populates the in-game world with non-player characters that take up the role-playing where players may be too focused on their smartphones to engage in performative practices.

Closely related to the gradual extension of the in-game world, campaigns add to the feeling of continuity and coherence. Campaigns often advance the respective RPG's master narrative as they tend to deal with major events affecting at least parts of the fictional world. Usually stretched out over longer periods—both with regard to playing and in-game time—campaigns increase the density of the narrative elements and create networks between otherwise unrelated events. While *Vampire: The Masquerade* leveled the playing field through the cataclysmic events surrounding *Gehenna* (2004), *Das Schwarze Auge* opted for a radical reshaping of its main continent's political and social structures in *Das Jahr des Feuers* (*The Year of Fire*, 2004–2006). In the case of *Ingress*, campaign-like events take place when so-called *anomalies* are initiated. During these *anomalies*, players come together in larger urban areas to realize meticulously planned projects and to battle for supremacy. Expanding *Ingress*' master narrative, *anomalies* result in the emergence of higher concentrations of XM around the globe, which then triggers a multi-city artifact hunt. Depending on which faction wins the *anomaly*, the storyline advances differently, giving players the possibility to influence the course of *Ingress* history on the macro-scale. Multi-media texts, such as the aforementioned, elaborately produced videos, illustrate the outcome on the level of narrative, while changes made to the game play within the second framework also reflect the victory of one faction. Yet, what may sound like an augmented reality-telenovela follows a master plan: Hanke has stated in an interview that he has a blueprint for the current *Ingress* storyline planned out and that he is able to determine when it will come to a grand finale of the narrative.[37]

Whereas *Ingress*' narrative is thus to a certain extent prescribed (more akin in structure to early video games than pen-and-paper systems), the in-game world in *Ingress* is expanding exponentially. While the possibilities for imagined landscapes are in principle infinite for the pen-and-paper systems, players often refer to maps that define the geopolitics of the game. To be sure, new game settings start out with a lot of *terra incognita* but, especially in long-lasting publications, the single topographical dots become connected over time as more and more supplemental material is released.[38] Games such as *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and the aforementioned *Das Schwarze Auge* offer full-fledged worlds, including their own history, culture, and geography. Video- and computer games (at least before online-games were common) feature semi-open-worlds, limited in principle through the capacity of the storage medium and the imagination of the programmers. With the size of the worlds and the degree of potential exploration varying, video game RPGs offer a somewhat non-linear trajectory that—in contrast to pen-and-paper systems—usually leads to the eventual denouement of the game with the options for differing paths toward completion being rather minimal at times. With the availability of new technological possibilities (including the option to purchase add-ons via the internet), the so-called sand-box games (Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto IV* being a prime example) return to considerably larger maps—open worlds—that impose only theoretical boundaries and offer the player an experience that more closely resembles that of a pen-and-paper RPG in terms of in-game space. In this regard, *Ingress* takes the next step and declares the whole world its map.

The new media component of the app affects the tertiary framework in *Ingress*, a development that one also sees replicated in the move from pen-and-paper to video game RPGs as well, albeit in less extreme fashion.[39] While tabletop groups vary significantly in their application of role-playing elements, a certain minimum of communication between the characters' roles is essential to the experience. Role-playing elements, of course, differ from the mere execution of rules established through the game's structural base, e.g., how the system handles the outcome of action through dice rolls, categories, and numbers. Both the more mathematical and the interpersonal level of playing are present, even though—as explicated above—the ratio between the two factors can vary significantly.[40] Video and computer RPGs from the early machines of the 1970s roughly up to the 64-bit consoles at the end of the twentieth century reduced their role-playing elements mostly because interpersonal exchange was difficult to realize as the Internet was neither widely available nor efficient enough to allow for verbal exchanges in multiplayer games (except for players in the same physical location). Communication with non-player characters in the game world was usually possible but limited to only a few, repetitive, pre-programmed dialogue options.[41] Later, games such as *WoW*, at least theoretically, reinstated role-playing elements into the diegetic, digital landscape. However, Barton has convincingly argued that the interaction between MMORPG players (via headphones and microphones, for example) differs significantly from those taking place between members of tabletop groups, and that the sheer number of participants in the former in fact renders the game's master narrative almost meaningless with regard to the actions of single players.[42] *Ingress* also performs such a reduction of role-playing elements and—while potentially bringing together large groups of players physically as well as virtually—neither encourages nor necessitates the production of interpersonal fantasy narratives, even though the *Ingress* community actively discusses the game itself on social media platforms.[43]

In most RPGs, characters are assigned attributes (regulated in some shape or form) that the players can improve over time. When certain tasks or quests are completed, players are awarded points, which in turn allow them to increase the power level of their character. Whenever a pre-determined threshold is crossed, the character's level increases, a development that—regulated through the rules of the system—becomes gradually more time-consuming. *Ingress* follows this pattern to a degree; players collect XM and use it to attack, defend, or modify a portal, adopting the rule-based part of fighting in role-playing. As briefly mentioned above, the players receive Access Points (AP) that ultimately raise their characters' level, increasing their ability to deploy more powerful resonators and other items. Yet, by comparison, the characters in *Ingress* are simplified, bare-bone constructs that encourage players to understand themselves as taking up the role of an *Agent*. They only differ in their affiliation to one of the factions, their names, and the number of AP they have collected. However, many *Ingress* players distinguish themselves with regard to their approach to the game. Some specialize in solving cryptic riddles that may hold the key to the next *anomaly*, while others, for example, focus on the organization of group attacks. This said, one significant difference between the smart phone game and other variants of RPGs becomes quickly apparent. If one defines RPGs solely through the aspect of performative player-to-player interaction, then *Ingress* cannot be considered a role-playing game. However, the genre has always been subject to modifications with regard to how the role-playing is enacted. As I have shown, many elements in *Ingress* are directly reminiscent of other types of RPGs, borrowed from strategy board games as well as pen-and-paper systems, LARPS, and digital games, including MMORPGs.

Reconfiguring Urban Space: Ingress and Mediated Modes of Experience

As outlined above, *Ingress* selectively picks elements from role-playing games, a genre that has historically been in constant flux. While certain aspects are conserved and intensified in Google's app, others are drastically reduced or jettisoned altogether. The question now becomes how the inscription of *Ingress*' specific brand of role-playing into modern, predominantly urban public spaces affects postmodern modes of experience.[44] On the most basic level, *Ingress* injects a game-related playfulness into the city, regardless of the sincerity and competitive spirit that some players exhibit as *Agents* of either the Enlightened or the Resistance. As Gary Alan Fine notes, "fantasy worlds constitute a 'social world'" and the "fantasy content, shared by participants, coupled with the complex subsociety of gaming, suggests that this truly constitutes a 'universe of discourse.'"[45] Urban space, usually heavily regulated and restricted by law and convention, is turned into a discourse in which rigid patterns of meaning are challenged. A "'make-believe' world set apart from the everyday world" is thus performed in plain sight, producing a parallel narrative in the process. In this respect, the app generates a form of community similar to that of online groups such as MMORPG guilds, but realizes these communal happenings in the streets, parks, and social spaces of a given community (and beyond). In order to assess the game's complex effects on the subject's modes of experience, I look at three prominent urban theorists whose ideas in conjunction situate the RPG-like structure of *Ingress* vis-à-vis the networked societies of the twenty-first century.

To be clear, my argument is not primarily interested in hailing *Ingress* as a means to draw role-players (or their stereotypes) out of their clichéd basements. Bowman already does a great job in her study outlining the criticisms and campaigns leveled against RPGs, while making a valid claim in favor of the cognitive and social benefits of the genre.[46] Rather, I am interested in ways in which Google's app can illuminate the subject under the auspices of ubiquitous computing in conjunction with role-playing. In an interview with Georg Pichler, Hanke states "ten years from now reality and the virtual world will interact seamlessly," suggesting that augmented reality games have not yet realized their full potential.[47] In order to analyze some of these potentials, I turn to Guy Debord and his technique of *dérive*, Mark Hansen's concept of *bodies in code*, and Jean Baudrillard's philosophy of the *simulacrum*. Debord's writings help one to understand the geopolitical implications of the game, taking into account a subversive or even utopian under-current endemic to the playful interaction with a given spatial paradigm.[48] Hansen's work enables one to rethink the role of the body in highly mediated environments, a change in focus that not only challenges notions about the validity of mediated experiences, but also queries the phenomenology of augmented reality writ large.[49] Finally, Baudrillard's often-cited concept of the *simulacrum*—the dangerous copy without an original—allows one to ponder the ontological quality of the images that playing *Ingress* produces when the digital and the physical world overlap.[50] It is not my primary goal to rethink Debord, Hansen, and

Baudrillard in this essay. Rather, the theories under consideration here help illustrate how Google's app implicitly interferes with and queries questions of body-politics, phenomenology, and image theory respectively.

The scope of this essay does not allow me to go into greater detail with regard to urban theory, but it should be noted that Debord, Hansen, and Baudrillard to a certain degree all belong to an intellectual tradition that queries space as part of the system of capitalist accumulation. While my argument is not contingent upon a critique of capitalist ideas—after all *Ingress* is a commercial product even though it can be played for free—the game clearly partakes in the production of social space staged in the public sphere. Critical in this regard is Henri Lefebvre whose writings on the city directly influenced Debord. As Lefebvre argues in his neo–Marxist attempt to shatter bourgeoisie ideology—what he terms "mystification"—through the "*autocritique* of the everyday," the streets are a contested space organized by signals, symbols, and signs that "we read and move through."[51] His thinking also informs the writings of Michel de Certeau who in *The Practices of Everyday Life* argues that consumption is a means of production by those who are not actually producers but "reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production."[52] For him, walking becomes an intervention into "an electronicized and computerized megalopolis," an act that is reminiscent of the "hunters and rural folks of earlier days."[53] Again, while I am hesitant to grant *Ingress* the political currency necessary to declare it a direct representation of these theories, the insertion of the body into urban space marked by a high saturation with electronic networks is a concept that—as I show in my following analysis of Debord, Hansen, and Baudrillard—helps to illustrate how Google's app may affect our understanding of the city in the twenty-first century.

Debord, the driving force behind the avant-garde *International Situationist* movement, championed the concept of *dérive* as a means to re-read the city under late-capitalism: "Among the various situationist techniques, *dérive* constitutes the act of a hasty traversal of varied environments."[54] Reminiscent of flânerie, *dérive*, according to Debord, leads to a desired feeling of being lost and afloat in the streets, which in turn recalibrates the sensorium of the subject:

> One or more persons devoted to *dérive*—for a shorter or longer period of time—eschew their general automatisms with regard to patterns of movement and action, and disregard their relations, work and leisure activities, in order to give themselves up to the suggestions of the topography and its respective encounters.[55]

The result is a geo-psychological experience of the urban environment that fosters a sense of adventure, which it uses as a revolutionary tool against what Debord terms the sedated *society of the spectacle*. This sense of adventure and the possibility of chance encounters is an integral part of *Ingress* as players move quickly through spaces that are not necessarily part of their daily itinerary. The game reestablishes the city as a map that can be reexamined and reappropriated, facilitating a new, coincidental outlook on the world as one moves from portal to portal. My goal is not to charge *Ingress* with an explicitly political energy: if at all, Debord's subversive impetus is implemented into the game as something decidedly "not real" in that its narrative incorporates the possibility of revolution into its background story. While the game uses terms such as *Resistance* to label one of its competing factions, and players are referred to as *Agents*, it is not subversive in and of itself. However, the utopian potential inscribed in new modes of experiencing the city re-emerges in the game, role-playing the city as if it were a stage for performances outside of the accepted norms and off the beaten paths.

Ingress players find new ways to engage with their surroundings as they drift through the city, even though their interactions are always mediated, filtered through the "scanner" of their smartphones. The game—cheating notwithstanding—cannot be played without the players' movement through Euclidean space. The centrality of the "portals" with regard to a successful taking part in the action illustrates the allure of setting up "new" physical places underneath the digital foil. While Niantic has the last word in establishing the portals, players are allowed to submit suggestions for new portals. As Google states on its *Ingress* web site, the acceptance criteria for "good portals" include:

> A LOCATION WITH A COOL STORY, A PLACE IN HISTORY OR EDUCATIONAL VALUE, […] A COOL PIECE OF ART OR UNIQUE ARCHITECTURE, […] A HIDDEN GEM OR HYPER-LOCAL SPOT […] More off-the-beaten-path tourist attractions (i.e., if you weren't a local, you wouldn't necessarily know to go here). A COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE. […] A POINT OF INTEREST THAT FACILITATES DISCOVERY/EXERCISE. Promotes the idea of "Adventures on foot." Encourages outdoor exploration.[56]

The selection of suitable "portals" presupposes, at least to a certain extent, a familiarity with the environment and a wish to contribute to the hybrid world of *Ingress*. Players will preferably establish historically or culturally significant portals to which they have relatively easy access (while the competition may not) in their everyday lives, contributing to the diegetic world and its master narrative in highly personalized ways. As a result, the quest for suitable portal locations may foster knowledge about and awareness of the geo- and topography in the vicinity of one's home, but at the same time alter its meaning by interacting playfully with history. This produces a utopian experience—no matter how fallacious—of having the power to write the narrative rather than being subjected to one.

A second critical aspect is the convergence and amalgamation of physical experience and technology, to which *Ingress* also contributes. Hansen labels individuals who experience technology as an extension rather than a limitation of "bodies in code," and while his study focuses on aesthetic theories and their application to multi-media art (explicitly disregarding traditional video games), the technologically enhanced physical experience he describes corresponds to the one taking place in *Ingress*. Hansen argues that embodiment is realized in "conjunction with technics."[57] Thus, augmented realities expand the scope of bodily (motor) activity, instead of confining them. The immersion in virtual realities broadens human perception and the range of experience. Hansen declares every reality a "mixed reality" and states that "motor-activity […] holds the key to fluid and functional crossings between virtual and physical realms."[58] His theories help one to see how *Ingress* bridges the gap between the analog and the digital: the actual bodies of the players are brought back into the public's eye. If postmodernity and its digital networks indeed reconfigure space and render it a surface—an argument that also resonates with Baudrillard's skepticism toward our modes of experience—the app rethinks that condition. The importance of spatiality is reinforced and brought to the fore again, while temporality shifts from pure simultaneity to a continuum in which actions are played out in asynchronous ways. While tabletop RPGs and many video games "slow down" in-game time by breaking up combat into stretched out units—"in order for players to fully examine each decision"[59]—*Ingress* happens in real time, with participants even securing and destroying portals while driving in their cars.

In general, *Ingress* favors the technical component when it comes to ensuring a smooth gaming experience with the smartphone replacing the game master as the referee. In this respect it is closer to digital RPG renditions, minimizing the need for discussions of rules and relying more on algorithms than literary interpretation with regard to the outcome of the actions. As soon as the machine sanctions the move, the player's action becomes part of the game world as the dice roll (and by proxy, chance) loses in importance. *Ingress* visualizes the networked quality of new media in impressive ways, highlighting our reliance on technology as well as rendering visible the transnational vectors of modern mass-communication. The game's maps with their links between portals are playful visualizations of information flows similar to the ephemeral data streams of mass-communication. *Ingress*' visualizations range from local portal links to huge projects that can span extremely large areas. In each case, the game connects dots, creating a palimpsest of blue and green lines that denotes the moves made by the players as part of the game—a digital diagram of the postmodern gospel of constant connectivity that has even become an aesthetic practice known as field art. The app thus gives form to Hansen's theoretical framework that sets up the city as a (partially made-up) narrative in which meaning is negotiated through technology in conjunction with the human body. In putting their augmented bodies "out there," players perform the intervention of new media into the quotidian as a game.

Last but not least, *Ingress* squarely positions the digital image vis-à-vis a concrete reality that the former allegedly has undermined—as theorists of the postmodern have argued—to a point where the latter is distorted beyond recognition. Baudrillard famously assumes an existential crisis playing out "behind" the image, a development giving rise to the reign of the *simulacrum*. He explains, "Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is a reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."[60] *Ingress* relates to this discussion as it comments on Baudrillard's assumed deterioration and/or disappearance of the physical world. The game suggests that the image (the representation on the "scanner") indeed differs from reality (the landmark doubling as portal) but still relates to the original place depicted on the screen. This is not to say that *Ingress* is the solution to the presumed loss of depth in postmodernity—as articulated by, among others, Paul Virilio—but rather that it addresses the problem and offers a conciliatory perspective. The networks of digital technology, Virilio argues, alter the meaning of space as they allow users to connect without being physically present in the same location.[61] While not all is well just because a physical object functions as the foundation for a digital pastime, a two-way connection between the two ontological layers is established. Further studies will be necessary to gauge the relevance of the actual topography underlying the game-play, and they may find that the digital image indeed overshadows or obfuscates the (historically charged) narrative right in front of the players' augmented eyes. But the general engagement with the surrounding landscape (even if mediated) is undeniable.

The player's gaze oscillates between the abstract representation on the screen—and it is noteworthy here that the graphical interface could be much more elaborate if so desired—and its more detailed real-world equivalent. In the process, both matrices are sutured together, softening Baudrillard's critique of the (digital) image: *Ingress* suggests that reality is staging a comeback in the age of ubiquitous computing. Role-playing's shared communities—filtered through the electronic mass media sieve—reverse the experiential insufficiency attributed to the rise of the digital image that knows no original. Role-playing *bodies in code* counter the absence of meaning and recharge that which is behind the screen with a new narrative. The result is a hybrid image that imbues the digital representation with a surrogate *there has been* in the sense of Roland Barthes, who claims that any photograph is linked with a "thing that has been there" via an umbilical cord of light.[62] The digital construct is inscribed with a past that it borrows from the landmark's history and then injects into the story being told within the expanding *Ingress* universe. While this could widen the gap between reality and image world, there is also a more conciliatory reading in which the injection of corporeality into a fantastic game world shared by many creates a Third Space that counters a possible ontological and existential crisis brought forth by the *simulacrum* that Baudrillard predicted in the 1980s. In that case, the fear of a vanishing reality is alleviated by an opening up toward the (allegedly escapist) fantasies that are so central to games in general and RPGs in particular.

Conclusion: Toward the Endgame

Ingress superimposes digital landscapes over Euclidean space and in the process inscribes its role-playing narrative into the fabric of the city, even if this only happens in a historically contingent mode of pretense. Thus, the underlying aspects of RPGs illustrated in this essay bleed into the first framework, a playful exploration of a (usually heavily regulated) realm, the city. As *Ingress* adds an element of physical mobility to the mix and creates an overlap between diegetic and non-diegetic topographies, the game impacts experiences of the city in a way reminiscent of seminal critical theories of urban space.[63] The application of these theories on urban space should not suggest that the GPS-based app has political implications *per se* but rather that it illuminates specific socio-political and cultural conditions shaping life in the twenty-first century. Urban theorist Joel Kotkin addresses issues of identity and spirituality in the cities of the twenty-first century and argues that "urban areas, in the end, must be held together by a consciousness that unites their people in a shared identity."[64] What was achieved by priests in earlier times, he claims, is now achieved through dominant paradigms, such as "due process, freedom of belief, the basic right of property."[65] RPGs, including augmented realities embedded in living fictions such as *Ingress*, offer another venue to add an adhesive to communities after the digital divide even though one has to be careful not to take the utopian potential at face value. Researchers, I contend, have plenty of reasons to conduct more theoretical, cognitive, and sociological studies on *Ingress* that will further the debates brought up in this essay.

In conclusion, I would like to point out the release of another related Google product, *Endgame*, as it continues the evolution toward augmented reality RPGs begun by *Ingress*. In an attempt to bring together digital media, film, literature, and the physical world, *Endgame* closes some of the gaps that still separate *Ingress* from traditional RPGs. The multi-media project kicked off on October 7, 2014, with the release of the first of three novels, *Endgame: The Calling*, supplemented by short films, Google apps, and even a planned feature film. Man-on-man combat becomes possible in *Endgame*, while the reward of the densely plotted campaign is real money. Three "pots of gold" are hidden across the globe, and *Endgame*'s multi-media narrative yields clues to players as to where to find these treasures.[66] Thus, while the amalgamation of the first and third framework one encounters in *Ingress* continues, additional RPG tropes (such as the hidden gold or the groups of twelve characters that comprise a party in *Endgame*) are added to the mix. In other words, as in RPGs, the players shape the future of their in-game world, with the difference that it is not an isolated party that creates their own storyline but rather one master narrative decided by representatives of the whole faction, updating the parameters of role-playing as well as proving that the genre continues to influence life in the twenty-first century, arguably on a bigger scale than ever before. With Google's current setbacks regarding its augmented reality project *Glass*, the next generation hardware comes in the form of *Android Wear*. The gadget—essentially a multi-media wristwatch—has been made compatible with *Ingress* in 2015 in part to make the game more conducive to interpersonal exchanges.[67] Looking at independent developments such as the virtual reality goggle *Oculus Rift* (even though at the moment no advancements have been made to integrate the app with *Rift*), it is easy to imagine how the dungeons and dragons of more traditional gaming systems will virtually inhabit the very same university campuses and parks that already are *Ingress*' battleground.

NOTES

1. Mirjam Hauck, "Eine Runde Weltherrschaft," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/google-spiel-ingress-eine-runde-weltherrschaft-1.2047760 (my translation).

2. William J. Mitchell, *The City of Bits* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 41.

3. While *Ingress* can of course be played in non-urban areas, the majority of the action takes place in larger cities with their plethora of portals.

4. "Ingress' John Hanke & Flint Dille: Designing Living Fiction," *DICE*, accessed June 26, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8YTDEJyfs0.

5. Let me briefly cite two key intellectual figures that define the debate on postmodern space implied here. First, Frederic Jameson famously states that in postmodernity "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 12. Second, Paul Virilio, the patron saint of the postmodern, established his idea of the collapse of space and time in cyberspace, arguing that the concept of *telepresence* counters the twentieth-century paradigm in which the idea of traversing through and covering of vast areas of space was dominant. This move from real-space infrastructures, such as airports or railway station, to interactive and immaterial ones, leads to the phenomenon of "being telepresent." Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (New York: Verso, 2008), 10.

6. Greg Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String," in *Second-Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, Pat Harrigan et al., eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 12.

7. Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 240.

9. "Ingress (game)," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ingress_(game).

10. Andrea Di Simone, "Interview with Niantic's John Hanke," *DecodeIngress*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://decodeingress.me/2013/08/19/interview-with-niantics-john-hanke.

11. *Ibid.*

12. "Ingress' John Hanke & Flint Dille: Designing Living Fiction," *DICE*, accessed June 26, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8YTDEJyfs0.

13. In one of his blogs, Martin Boonham writes that in "typical role playing game (RPG) fashion, individual players also earn experience points," highlighting one of the many shared characteristics between traditional RPGs and *Ingress*. Martin Boonham, "Google Enters Augmented Reality with New Ingress Game," *Mapcite*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.mapcite.com/posts/2012/december/google-enters-augmented-reality-with-new-ingress-game.aspx.

14. *Ingress* cites a common trope of modernity and employs a representation of space that is deliberately minimalistic and appeals to certain concepts about how "scanners" in the sci-fi genre are supposed to look. To be sure, the capacity of the smartphone would have allowed for a Google Map–like representation of the surroundings but the programmers decided against it.

15. For details on how to play the game see the web site *DecodeIngress*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://decodeingress.me/ingress-manual/leveling/.

16. Recently the possibility of "soloing," the completion of individual quests not directly linked to the master narrative of *Ingress*, has been added to the game. While players are often completing their tasks on their own, they still remain a part of their faction.

17. Erik Mona, "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons*," in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, Pat Harrigan, et al., eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 25.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Costikyan, 5.

20. In LARPs players "physically, and socially, act out their characters' roles […]; it can be argued that they are closer in form to improvisational theater than to their RPG cousins." Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Tabletop Systems," in *SecondPerson: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, Pat Harrigan et al., eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 2.

21. See for example "Ingress Report: Raw Feed, Sept 4," accessed June 26, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiyvXZ1pzb8.

22. As Michael J. Tresca notes, there exists a "direct line of evolution from Middle-Earth to *Dungeons & Dragons* to computer role-playing games (CRPGs)." Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 60.

23. Tresca names the 1982 *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Cloudy Mountain* as "one of the first RPGs to be officially licensed for a gaming platform." Tresca, 138. Interestingly, it took D&D (minus the *Advanced*) six more years to become "part of the CRPG platform that had spawned so many imitators." Tresca, 141.

24. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Function of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 23.

25. Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). 186–187.

26. Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: A.K. Peters, 2008), 1.

27. *Ibid.*, 318.

28. MMORPGs are defined as "computer network-mediated games in which at least one thousand players are role-playing simultaneously in a graphical environment." Miroslaw Filiciak, "Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Mark J.P. Wolf et al., eds. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 87.

29. Mitchell, *City*, 64.

30. Tresca, 166.

31. Bowman, 138.

32. *Ibid.*, 11.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

35. *Ibid.*, 12.

36. "Ingress Report: Raw Feed, Aug 28," accessed June 26, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWG1mdZMF9o.

37. Georg Pichler, "'Ingress'-Erfinder: In zehn Jahren werden Realität und Videospiele verschmelzen," *Der Standard*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://derstandard.at/2000009068912/Ingress-Erfinder-In-zehn-Jahren-werden-Realitaet-und-Videospiele-verschmelzen (my translation).

38. It is neither "uncommon for RPGs to be based on licensed properties" nor "to generate novels and short-stories based on their proprietary game world and characters." Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 3.

39. Digital RPGs "have limited repeat playability because they are tied to an ultimately linear story." Costikyan, 9.

40. "Paper RPGs […] are social affairs; players get together periodically to play, and spend at least as much time role-playing for their friends as they do trying to maximize their character's effectiveness in a purely structural context." Costikyan, 9.

41. Costykian argues that "the game systems of tabletop RPGs are in some ways very similar to those of digital RPGs—sometimes identical, in fact, in the case of computer RPGs licensed from tabletop games. They are, however, vastly more free-form." *Ibid.*

42. See Barton, 365–426.

43. Many of these observations are based my own *Ingress* experiences. Additional input and guidance have been provided by a group of German players, in particular Kai Timmermann (Agent @MrT).

44. Bowman brings the postmodern condition into contact with RPGs. "In the postmodern world—particularly with the advent of online communities—humans must establish a stronger fluidity in order to adept to the fast pace of cultural change," thus creating a "sense of multiplicity." Bowman, 153.

45. Fine, 231.

46. Bowman's study offers convincing proof that even "though mainstream sources misunderstand and subsequently dismiss role-playing games as escapist, time-wasting, and even potentially dangerous, the evidence from academic and professional sources clearly delineate numerous positive benefits." Bowman, 102.

47. Pichler.

48. Guy Debord. "Theorie des Umherschweifens," in *Situationistische Interna-*

tionale: Der Beginn einer Epoche, Roberto Ohrt et al., eds. (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 2008), 64–67.

49. Mark B.N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

50. Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra & Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

51. Henri Lefebvre. *Key Writings*. Stuart Elden et al., eds. (New York: Continuum, 2003), 88.

52. Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Transl. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

53. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

54. Debord, 64 (my translation).

55. *Ibid.* (my translation).

56. "Google Support," accessed June 26, 2015, https://support.google.com/ingress/answer/3066197?hl=en&ref_topic=3261457.

57. Hansen, 20.

58. *Ibid.*, 2.

59. Bowman, 114. She further elaborates that "this slowing down of time into manageable segments may be an essential aspect of human consciousness." *Ibid.*

60. Baudrillard, 6.

61. Further, Virilio claims that "the urbanization of real time is in fact first the urbanization of *one's own body* plugged into various interfaces" so that the body is "becoming the last urban frontier." Virilio, 11. It is interesting to see how games such as *Ingress* realize and at the same time challenge the idea of the body as the nexus of telepresence.

62. The observer of a photograph knows that his gaze rests on something that once existed and, according to Barthes, "has been here." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 77.

63. In her study on functions of role-playing games, Bowman refers to the performative aspects of RPGs, drawing a line from the latter to avant-garde movements such as Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, which seek "to liberate communities and individuals from oppressive situations and beliefs by challenging existent power structures." Bowman, 40.

64. Joel Kotkin, *The City: A Global History* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 157.

65. *Ibid.*, 159.

66. Nathan Ingraham, "Welcome to Endgame," *TheVerge*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/7/6927605/welcome-to-endgame-google-worldwide-augmented-reality-game.

67. Steve Dent, "Google Ingress Android Wear," *Engadget*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.engadget.com/2015/02/27/google-ingress-android-wear/.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Barton, Matt. *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*. Wellesley: A.K. Peters., 2008.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra & Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Boonham, Martin. "Google Enters Augmented Reality with New Ingress Game."

Mapcite. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.mapcite.com/posts/2012/december/google-enters-augmented-reality-with-new-ingress-game.aspx.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Function of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Costikyan, Greg. "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String." In *SecondPerson: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. 5–13.

Debord, Guy. "Theorie des Umherschweifens." In *Situationistische Internationale: Der Beginn einer Epoche*. Edited and translated by Pierre Gallissaires, Hanna Mittelstädt and Roberto Ohrt. Hamburg: Edition Nautilus, 2008. 64–67.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Dent, Steve. "Google Ingress Android Wear." *Engadget*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.engadget.com/2015/02/27/google-ingress-android-wear/.

Di Simone, Andrea. "Interview with Niantic's John Hanke." *DecodeIngress*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://decodeingress.me/2013/08/19/interview-with-niantics-john-hanke.

Filiciak, Miroslaw. "Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Pattern in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games." In *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2003. 87–102.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Frey, James, and Nils Johnson-Shelton. *Endgame: The Calling*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014.

Hansen, Mark B.N. *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Harrigan, Pat ,and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. "Tabletop Systems." In *SecondPerson: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. 1–4.

Hauck, Mirjam. "Eine Runde Weltherrschaft." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.sueddeutsche.de/digital/google-spiel-ingress-eine-runde-weltherrschaft-1.2047760.

Ingraham, Nathan. "Welcome to Endgame." *TheVerge*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/7/6927605/welcome-to-endgame-google-worldwide-augmented-reality-game.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

Kotkin, Joel. *The City: A Global History*. New York: Modern Library, 2006.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Key Writings*, edited by Stuart Elden et al. New York: Continuum, 2003.

Mitchell, William J. *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

Mona, Erik. "From the Basement to the Basic Set: The Early Years of *Dungeons and Dragons*." In *SecondPerson: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. 25–30.

Pichler, Georg. "'Ingress'-Erfinder: In zehn Jahren werden Realität und Videospiele verschmelzen." *Der Standard*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://derstandard.at/

2000009068912/Ingress-Erfinder-In-zehn-Jahren-werden-Realitaet-und-Videospiele-verschmelzen.
Tresca, Michael J. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.
Virilio, Paul. *Open Sky*. Critical Thinkers Edition. New York: Verso, 2008.

Role-Playing and Strategy Games

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. TSR Games. 1977.
Chainmail. Guidon Games et al. 1971.
Dungeons & Dragons. TSR Games. 1974.
Risk: The Continental Game. Parker Bros. et al. 1959.
Das Schwarze Auge. Schmidt Spiele et al. 1984.
Star Wars: The Role-Playing Game. West End Games, 1987.
Shadowrun. FASA Corporation, 1989.
Vampire: The Masquerade. White Wolf Publishing, 1991.

Video and Computer Games

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Cloudy Mountain. Mattel, 1982.
Akalabeth. California Pacific Computer Co., 1979.
Adventure. Atari, 1979.
Colossal Cave Adventure. CRL, 1976.
Diablo. Blizzard Entertainment, 1996.
Grant Theft Auto IV. Rockstar Games, 2008.
Heroes of Might and Magic. New World Computing, 1995.
Ingress (closed release). Google, 2012.
Ingress (general release). Google, 2013.
Neverwinter Nights. Strategic Simulations Inc. 1991.
Ultima. California Pacific Computer Co. et al., 1979.
Ultima Online. Electronic Arts, 1997.
World of Warcraft. Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

Descent to *Munchkin*

From Pen-and-Paper to Board and Card

CATHLENA MARTIN *and* BENTON TYLER

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) have effectively made the transition from pen-and-paper to digital media through the creation of computer role-playing games (CRPGs). CRPG genres like Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are ubiquitous in console and online play. While TRPGs have not received the critical attention that computer games have in academic circles, several scholars have traced the succession of their impact on digital games. However, TRPGs have also had a significant impact on the analog hobby market of board and card games, and this influence of TRPGs has largely been neglected. Just as J.R.R. Tolkien's novels helped inspire the creation of the genre's environments and races through *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), and tabletop wargaming influenced its initial mechanics, the TRPG industry has in turn influenced other analog games via settings and mechanics, even leading to parodies. Specifically, we analyze how TRPGs, primarily *D&D*, have influenced board and card games to create an RPG-lite experience. In our discussion, we use the term RPG-lite to describe board and card games in which players control a character and use their powers and skills to acquire equipment and gain levels, but in general there is little to no expectation of theatrical personification.

Our essay furthers the work that several game scholars and designers have begun on TRPGs as an influential and antecedent genre. In *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games*, Michael Tresca successfully connects miniature wargames, play by post, interactive fiction, MUDs, online role-playing games, MMORPGs, and live action role-playing games (LARPs),[1] but he neglects to discuss board games and the impact that fantasy role-playing games have had on board games within its evolution. He mentions collectible card games (CCGs), but primarily focuses on miniature games in the essay dedicated to these two genres. Similarly, in Greg Costikyan's article "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String," he extols the impact and inspiration of TRPGs on "a whole slew of other genres, including computer/console RPGs, MMOs, LARPs, and the esoteric 'indie' RPG movement,"[2] yet he does not mention board games either. In her monograph on narrative in TRPGs, Jennifer Grouling Cover briefly mentions board games in relation to TRPGs, but only to dispel Espen Aarseth's claim that *D&D* is a board game in order to strengthen her definition of a TRPG.[3] She does, however, support further study of board games, and includes an endnote calling for more studies in this area.[4] We seek to provide an introductory foray into this study by positing three ways that analog games have co-opted the TRPG, analyzing how various designers have extrapolated TRPG elements and adapted them to fit within the constraints of board and card games.

The games we discuss negotiate a balance between deriving inspiration from TRPGs and maintaining the necessary mechanics in order to create an RPG-lite board or card game. One genre is not superior to the other, they just offer different play experiences based on the conventions of genre expectations. While some board games do lack the flexibility of a DM's subjective control, board games and card games clearly offer a number of advantages such as more generally objective rules and quicker playtimes. TRPGs and RPG-lite games are two distinct categories, and it is necessary to compare RPG-lite games to their immediate predecessor in order to analyze the influential relationship between the two, though several of the games covered in this essay can be seen as harkening back to *D&D*'s wargaming roots.

The first aspect we will explore is games in which the environment is directly taken from a RPG setting. While this category is the most obvious, being a marketing tie-in for already established intellectual properties, these games play a significant role by continuing to spread the influence of TRPGs. There are several published games like this, but this essay primarily focuses on games based on *D&D*. Analyzing games in the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series will illustrate the cultural pervasiveness of this franchise as it migrates media. While the first category focuses specifically on setting, the second category addresses the impact of standard TRPG mechanics on board games. We will consider games in which gamers play a specific character with attributes, skills, and/or special abilities of their own, specifically *Descent* (2012).[5] The titles discussed will include both tie-ins to published TRPGs and games with original content and stories. Finally, we explore the comedic and lighthearted side of TRPGs with an examination of games that parody them. The TRPG industry has established itself with such a strong history that the genre provides ample fodder for levity in regards to both settings and mechanics. In *Munchkin* (2001), players are involved in min/maxing their characters (i.e., minimizing weaknesses while maximizing a character's power based largely on using the best available combination of items and abilities) in the most ludicrous ways.[6] In examining prominent examples from these three categories, we provide an overview of the cultural impact of the TRPG[7] genre on the design of board and card games, thus showing the significant influence that it has had on the analog gaming industry.

In selecting these games we look at the best representative sample from each group, as well as the popularity and availability of the games in each category. Additionally, in choosing a TRPG to compare the games in each category with, we focus on *D&D*. Most would agree that *D&D* has historically been the most popular franchise within the TRPG world. In his brief early history of *D&D*, Erik Mona states that it "remains the most popular and financially successful brand in the adventure gaming industry," clarifying this assertion with a footnote that "this fact is so well established in the conventional wisdom of the adventure game industry that it's difficult to find adequate sourcing for the assertion, and it seems ridiculous to even try."[8] Given its influential and groundbreaking long-term status, it is the touchstone against which we will compare the RPG-lite board games we discuss.

D&D *Adventure System Cooperative Game Series*

The games that currently comprise the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series, *Castle Ravenloft* (2010),[9] *Wrath of Ashardalon* (2010),[10] and *The Legend of Drizzt* (2011),[11] are three primary examples of board games that occur within official *D&D* settings[12] and also retain several of *D&D*'s core mechanics.[13] Despite having virtually identical gameplay, each derive their setting from different *D&D* source material and are akin to a TRPG minus a dungeon master (DM) or an emphasis on role-playing. These games, set on interlocking modular tiles, are dungeon crawlers focusing primarily on specific quests and combat, where "each player can explore further into the dungeon (turn over new tiles), move through the already explored parts of the dungeon, and fight monsters. When a new dungeon tile is revealed, there is typically an encounter of some sort, and new monsters to combat are added. Slain monsters reward the players with treasure and experience points, allowing them to level up and increase their skills during play."[14] Each game in the series has thirteen individual adventures detailed in their respective adventure book,[15] and each of these thirty-nine scenarios outlines specific goals or objectives.

The first game in the series to be released, *Castle Ravenloft,* was inspired by the *D&D* adventure module *Ravenloft* by Tracy and Laura Hickman published in 1983.[16] This cooperative board game consists of individual but thematically-linked adventures players must complete in order to defeat the final boss. Just as in the original adventure module, the board game centers on the primary villain, vampiric master of the castle Count Strahd Von Zarovich. The game rulebook even uses the original tagline printed on the cover of the module, "The master of Ravenloft is having guests for dinner—and you are invited."[17] The game also includes named non-player characters (NPCs) from the module, such as Madam Eva.

The example of Madam Eva demonstrates a fundamental difference between the board game and the TRPG. The module provides her with dialog within the script read to the players and allows the DM to role-play her character with some guidance. When player characters (PCs) enter the tent they are told:

> Within, all is dimly illuminated in pools of red light. A small, low table stands across from the doorway, covered in a black velvet cloth. Glints of light seem to flash from a crystal ball on the table as a hunched figure peers into its depths. She speaks. Her voice crackles like dry weeds. Her tone soars and falls like the wind outside. "At last you have arrived!" Her sudden cackling laughter bursts like mad lightning from her withered lips.[18]

This text in the module for the players is followed by general instructions to the DM:

> This is Madame Eva. She speaks the name of each PC, and makes some reference to a past deed of each PC. She asks the PCs if they wish their fortunes to be read.… This old woman may seem crazed and mad to the PCs but she is, in fact, quite cunning and sharp of mind. She is never fooled by adventurers (she has seen a good many in her time) and is very neutral. She serves Strahd as long as that benefits her and her troupe. She never gives aid and never needs any.[19]

The module continues by providing stats for Madame Eva, as well as a list of spells she can cast each day. The instructions to the DM give guidance for becoming the character of Madame Eva, embodying the heart of a TRPG: role-playing. Such improvisational storytelling contrasts with the narrative-thin board game, which in the game's adventure book simply instructs one player to read the following text to the other players:

> You have learned that Strahd has been secretly constructing a Flesh Golem in his workshop beneath Castle Ravenloft. The mystic Madam Eva has explained that normal items found throughout the dungeon, such as mirrors and portraits, can have a soothing effect on the Flesh Golem. "You can calm the creature, or you can destroy it," Madam Eva explains. "Be careful, however, for some items can have the opposite effect on such creatures." Now you descend into the dungeon crypts to one more disrupt Strahd's evil plans…[20]

After this opening text, the heroes must complete their goal of either destroying or pacifying the Flesh Golem. Madam Eva has been relegated to an opening descriptive paragraph. Stripped of characterization and personal agency, she becomes mere flavor text to set the stage, and has no further interaction with the characters. The players have no reason to role-play conversation with this NPC, nor is there a DM to personify Madam Eva. The free-form theatrical gameplay of a TRPG is simplified to fit the exploratory and combat driven mechanics of the board game.

Overall, the game thematically follows the original adventure module, drawing inspiration from its characters and setting, but it appropriates little more than a story outline and a named villain from the module. The original *Ravenloft* module was "designed for a party of six to eight player characters (PCs) of the 5th to 7th levels of experience."[21] Within the board game (itself designed for one to five people), players select from pre-generated characters that have predefined races and classes from 1st edition[22] and 2nd edition *AD&D*[23]; these include a human rogue, a human ranger, and a dwarf cleric.[24] Players may also select either a dragonborn fighter or an eladrin wizard, neither of which were introduced as playable races in the core rulebooks until the 4th edition.[25] Interestingly, players may not choose to be a paladin (introduced in 1st edition), arguably the character class most equipped to deal with the evil and undead roaming the castle.

Since in the board game it is not possible to progress characters beyond level two, early encounters are not as necessary as a means to improve stats as they are in typical adventure modules. The module has the party "start their adventure in an old inn, a few hours march east of the gates of Barovia,"[26] while the board game starts players in a crypt of Castle Ravenloft itself, thus providing *in medias res* so that players may partake in immediate action. Yet the gameplay becomes repetitive due to the constraints imposed by the tile-based adventuring mechanics. In the board game, adventurers do initially wake up in the castle seeking a way to escape, but eleven of the thirteen adventures force players to start outside of the castle, entering it again with each new adventure. Thus, the reductionist changes from the TRPG to the board game mechanics are a result of the need for a more structured and condensed system of rules and no DM.

In an interview, one of the designers of the board game *Castle Ravenloft*, Mike Mearls, describes the transformation from TRPG to a board game: "While it is a DM-less adventure, it is still a dungeon crawl. So, it has that *D&D* feel that you can experience if you don't have a DM or enough players for the RPG."[27] In addition to not having a DM, the time expectations are quite different as it typically takes an hour or less to complete each adventure, which fits the market expectations that board games are completed in a single sitting. By contrast, typical tabletop sessions may last three to six hours and could continue with weekly meetings for several months or even years as part of a sequence of TRPG campaigns. According to Mearls, "It is important to remember that this is not an RPG, and thus concessions had to be made to make the best board game we could make."[28] These reductionist concessions help create the RPG-lite board game.

The second game in the series, *Wrath of Ashardalon*, is based on a great wyrm red dragon that has been referenced in several *D&D* texts over the years. The dragon, Ashardalon, was originally introduced in *The Sunless Citadel*, a 3rd edition site-based adventure for 1st level characters to progress to either 2nd or 3rd level.[29] In this adventure, players can learn additional information, including rumors of an ancient dragon and his cult. For instance, "Player characters who succeed at a Knowledge check (history, geography, or local, DC12), or ask someone in Oakhurst know that the desolation is attributed to the ancient rampage of a dragon named Ashardalon."[30] They can also visit Ashardalon's Shrine:

> Dragon-carved granite blocks tile this chamber's walls and ceiling, through many are crumbled and broken creating stony debris on the floor. A huge marble statue of a rearing dragon still stands in the curve of the western wall. The eye sockets of the dragon are empty, but a red glow lingers there, providing reddish light throughout the chamber. The effulgence casts an inky shadow behind the statue's wide wings. A crumbling 5-foot-diameter circular redstone tile is inset in the floor in front of the rearing dragon carving. Runes are carved around the circular tile's inner edge.[31]

The shrine alludes to followers that worship and serve Ashardalon. It is possible for 3rd edition *D&D*[32] PCs and NPCs to take the prestige class Disciple of Asharadon that is outlined in the *Draconomicon*; however, entry is restricted to evil dragons.[33] After completing *The Sunless Citadel*, it is not until two years and 16 levels later that PCs may actually engage Ashardalon in battle in the *Bastion of Broken Souls*.[34]

The *Bastion of Broken Souls* is an adventure module for 18th level heroes to progress to "20th level (and perhaps beyond) by the conclusion" of the adventure.[35] In *Bastion*, "Ashardalon is a red dragon of unmatched power, a great wyrm few could hope to stand before … with a new 'heart' in the form of a living demon," which makes him half-fiend.[36] In the board game Ashardalon is not mentioned as being a half-demon, but he is still the target of the final battle. Yet given his statistics, the board game creates a seemingly easy target of 12 hit points (HP) compared to the mighty adversary in the module of 700 HP. The extremes in hit points makes it seem as if the titular dragon is comparatively weak in the board game, but when looking at the relative distribution of power between PCs and NPCs in the board game this is not necessarily the case. This difference illustrates how the board game mechanics are scaled down from the TRPG adventures in order to accommodate board game balance.

Once Ashardalon is slain in the adventure module, the demon Ammet, who has inhabited Ashardalon's heart, appears. Depending on the particular unfolding of the adventure, PCs may have to fight Ammet as well. In the end, success means the following: "The ancient dragon Ashardalon, after more than a thousand years of atrocities that culminated in his invasion of the Bastion of Unborn Souls, now lies dead and utterly vanquished. The PCs are now among the most powerful mortal creatures in existence. Few powers outshine theirs, and even the deities know their names. They are counted as heroes now and forever."[37] Epic levels may be reached and a brief description is explained in the module on how to handle this process. This major accomplishment is contrasted to the more minor victory in the board game adventure book: "The villagers welcome you and celebrate the day the red dragon fell, recording your names in their tales and legends as the Heroes of Firestorm Peak!"[38] The adventure module and the board game, while both being grounded in the battle against Ashardalon, have little other significant crossover NPCs except for generic kobolds, which are typical minions for evil dragons in *D&D*.

In contrast, the latest game in the series, *The Legend of Drizzt,* follows R. A. Salvatore's fantasy stories and retains a plethora of named characters from the source texts. Instead of pulling material that appeared originally in *D&D* adventure modules as the previous two games did, *Drizzt* appropriates specific characters from several Salvatore novels. For example, the eponymous character, Drizzt Do'Urden, appears in over twenty novels that have spanned more than twenty years, many of which made the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. Instead of providing five generic adventurers like its predecessor games, *Drizzt* offers seven named PCs taken directly from Salvatore's novels, and many of these characters appear in novels together, providing textual interaction and backstory before the game even begins. For instance, Jarlaxle Baenre and Artemis Entreri are featured prominently in several novels and appear together in *Servant of the Shard*.[39] Wulfgar, Regis, and Artemis Entreri are all in *The Halfling's Gem*,[40] and Regis, Catti-brie, Bruenor Battlehammer, and Drizzt Do'Urden are all in *Passage to Dawn*.[41] In a nod to the source text, adventure eight in the board game is named "Passage to Dawn," and the recommended player choices include the same four heroes: Regis, Catti-brie, Bruenor, and Drizzt. Additionally, the objective of the adventure aligns with the original novel by incorporating Errtu as a primary villain. In fact, several of the adventures draw their titles from either books or series' names within Salvatore's *The Legend of Drizzt* series.

When asked in an interview about creating games based on his works, Salvatore stated, "My job is to give the players a thematic basis for letting their imaginations fly, to work with the designers to fashion a world worth exploring."[42] While he was specifically speaking of video games, the same is true for the board game named after one of his most beloved and enduring characters. The ensemble cast of *The Legend of Drizzt* novel series extends beyond just using a *D&D* setting for the game and allows players to embody some of their favorite named characters developed throughout the Salvatore novels.

While *Drizzt* draws more deeply on the source text for characterization and narrative, all three games share the same core mechanics even though the settings may be different. In comparing *Castle Ravenloft* to *Wrath of Ashardalon*, Mearls asserts that even "the rules are exactly the same."[43] The games are standalone, but have the added flexibility that they can be used in conjunction with each other by removing any PC and inserting them into one of the other games.

PCs provide an interesting point of comparison between TRPGs and the board games. By comparing classes, items, statistics, and mechanics, the board game designers' inspiration is revealed. The playable classes from these three board games are taken from a variety of *D&D* sources, and primarily include core classes with a few generic combatant types. The first game includes fighter, rogue, ranger, cleric, and wizard as available PC classes. The second game introduces paladin, and the third game adds assassin, archer, barbarian, battlerager, and mercenary. The classes available in the board games come from a range of core rule editions: fighter, ranger, cleric, paladin, and assassin are from 1st edition *AD&D*; rogue and wizard are from 2nd edition; barbarian is from 3rd edition. Archer (Catti-brie) and mercenary (Jarlaxle) are interesting choices in the third game since they are not specific classes available from core editions of *D&D*, but rather are used to describe the occupations of named characters from the Salvatore novels. Similarly, most of the races are extracted from those most commonly appearing in the core *D&D* rules, such as human, dwarf, half-orc, elf, dragonborn, and eladrin. Most of these appear as early as 1st edition, but dragonborn and eladrin do not appear as playable races in a core book until the 4th edition. Based on their class and race choices, the board game designers did not restrict their selections to a particular edition, or even—in the instance of archer and mercenary—common classes in the combined *D&D* universe. They instead selected a hodgepodge of races and classes to provide players with a potentially balanced adventuring party. They used the same approach with player stats, abilities, and items.

In the board games, each PC hero card has individual statistics for that character, including stats for armor class (AC), hit points (HP), speed, and surge value. These numerical quantifiers are drawn from different editions, being interpreted from the TRPG into a board game mechanic. HP have been a primary staple of *D&D* since 1st edition. AC was present in 1st and 2nd edition, but beginning with 3rd edition, AC starts at 10 and typically increases.

The board game models AC from the 3rd edition usage as all PCs in the board game have an AC of above 10. Surge value is loosely derived from 4th edition, but rather than indicating the number of times a character may use a healing surge, it indicates the number of HP restored by a healing surge token. Lastly, speed is most closely tied to 3rd edition, with most PCs in the board game able to move the same distance as PCs in 3rd edition. Movement is typically six spaces, which is the equivalent of thirty feet as each square represents five feet. This speed is adjusted depending on the weight of a character's armor, with heavier armor naturally slowing a character down. In the board games, for instance, all fighters and clerics (classes that typically wear heavier types of armor) move at a speed of five, while the lightly armored barbarian has a speed of seven.

In addition to the four given stats, PCs in the board games also have individualized abilities and powers printed on their hero cards, as well as specialized items. In some cases the powers and abilities roughly parallel class abilities, skills, feats, and racial abilities from *D&D*. For instance, the barbarian has a daily power of "great cleave" that shares the name and has roughly the same overall effect as the 3rd edition feat. Similarly, the rogue has access to the "hide" and "tumble" utility powers, which are both rogue class skills from 3rd edition. Additionally, in the board game players may acquire treasure in the form of items to use in their quests in order to supplement attributes and abilities or to provide additional effects. While some items, like "brooch of shielding"[44] and "wand of magic missiles,"[45] appear as early as 1st edition, others, such as "bracers of the blinding strike," do not appear until later.

For all components of the game, including classes, races, statistics, abilities and items, the designers of these board games drew inspiration from multiple editions of *D&D*. According to Mearls, "we wanted to maintain the *D&D* feel with the mechanics. So basically, it is an extension of *D&D* if you are already a player or a gateway to *D&D* if you are unfamiliar."[46] The games go beyond an extension of *D&D* and re-market the TRPG into a distilled gameplay experience reliant on the board as opposed to the DM. Yet even with this modification in medium made in a reductionist manner, the designers succeed in their attempt to appropriate elements of *D&D* and insert material directly from the canon into the RPG-lite board games.

The basic gameplay for the board games is fairly simple and straightforward. On his or her turn, a player may take up to two actions: a double move or a move and an attack. After the hero phase, a player conducts an exploration phase consisting of placing newly explored tiles and drawing random monsters or encounters. Finally, the player conducts the villain phase in which monsters act or additional encounter cards are drawn. The turn is then passed to the next player, who selects their actions, repeating the cycle.

This brief explanation gives a template for the flow of the game and illustrates substantive differences between most TRPGs and the necessary concessions made for a board game conversion, including world/story generation, NPC control (particularly with monsters), and PC death. Instead of the DM or module writer constructing the environment, each player supports world-building by continuing to reveal newly explored dungeon tiles that can trigger events or traps. Also, each player is required to essentially take on the role of the DM by controlling enemy monsters and attacking other heroes, but this scripted procedure requires little to no role-playing. Additionally, the game is very unforgiving to the PCs since monster attacks provide limited flexibility when it comes to following the instructions. Having no DM creates a disadvantage in combat as there is no one to regulate the monsters by ensuring they distribute their attacks equitably. Some players may see it as an advantage knowing that the DM does not have subjective control over the battle; in any case, it is a marked departure from the typical TRPG model.

An additional modification in the format is shown in the indiscriminate manner in which PCs may be killed. In each board game scenario, the total party has two healing surge tokens. If no tokens remain when a player is reduced below zero HP and needs to heal, the entire party loses, even if the remaining PCs would have been able to continue the fight. This is in stark contrast to most TRPGs where some PCs may be rendered unconscious or dead but the rest of the party can still accomplish the objective and restore their comrades to health at a later point in time. If death is more haphazard in the board game, it is also less meaningful since players cannot progress their characters further than level two; therefore, there is generally less attachment to the PCs in the board game. TRPG players create, name, and impersonate their characters, often spending months or even years progressively leveling them; a final in-game death can be emotionally devastating. Board gamers—having invested a mere hour with their pre-fabricated characters—usually do not have as much at stake.

While the core mechanics of the three games are the same, the player interaction patterns differ as outlined in each game's adventure book. The first game in the series, *Castle Ravenloft*, embodies the typical collaborative spirit of TRPGs by providing cooperative game play. A solo adventure is given as a tutorial, but the majority of adventures are intended for a group of players. Players are able to retain the agency and open-world exploratory nature of TRPGs since the adventures may be played in any order. The second game, *Wrath of Ashardalon,* keeps the same format and even expands on the players' options by adding in the adventure book "two campaigns [to the standard rules for] longer, linked experiences."[47] As in traditional TRPGs, "You and your fellow Heroes must work as a team to succeed in the adventures that unfold…."

You either win together or lose together."[48] In addition to solo and cooperative play, *The Legend of Drizzt* creates new player interactions by adding player versus player (PvP) and team competition. Two of the thirteen adventures pit teams against each other: one adventure is PvP, and one adventure "combines features of both team and competitive adventures."[49] This adversarial gameplay is in contrast to the cooperative play experienced in most TRPGs. The divisiveness of the gameplay happens in one instance as a hero, Artemis Entreri, a human assassin, is revealed to be a villain that the remaining heroes must vanquish.

All three games retain the traditional party cooperation of the TRPG, but as each game is published, a new experience is added, whether it is a campaign or competitive play. Each game has similar gameplay, but each game presents new twists on the previously established mechanics in order to provide new experiences for players and distinguish the games from each other in additional ways besides setting. A fourth game in the series, *Temple of Elemental Evil*, has just been released in 2015, and it will be interesting to see what is unveiled as a new addition with that publication. But for now, the designers have created an RPG-lite experience based on *D&D* with familiar characters, classes, and items sans the DM and the focus on role-playing as a narrative element.

Descent

In most tabletop versions of *D&D*, PCs and NPCs have skills and special abilities, such as class abilities and feats, and players primarily use a d20 system for resolving conflict. Board games have co-opted many of the mechanics of TRPGs in order to broaden the variety of gameplay styles in hobby market games. The degree to which these games draw inspiration is often dependent on how closely the games align themselves with published TRPGs and the intellectual property to which they are linked. For example, specific aspects (such as the mechanics, characters, and items) of the previously discussed *D&D*-themed board games are going to be more closely aligned with traditional *D&D*, whereas an original board game may only pick select mechanics or settings based far more loosely on TRPGs, but still maintain the overall spirit and intent of a reductionist tabletop session confined within a board game. In this section we will analyze the semi-cooperative board game *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* second edition (2012).[50] The second edition game is a character-based, fantasy-themed dungeon crawl possessing the same RPG-lite board game attributes as the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series with a few additions. The most significant differences are the inclusion of a DM-like player assuming the role of overlord and the addition of custom dice.

To summarize *Descent*, “one player takes on the role of the treacherous overlord, and up to four other players take on the roles of courageous heroes. During each game, the heroes embark on quests and venture into dangerous caves, ancient ruins, dark dungeons, and cursed forests to battle monsters, earn riches, and attempt to stop the overlord from carrying out his vile plot.”[51] After each player selects their character, they then adventure through a preplanned dungeon while collecting treasure, defeating monsters, and attempting to accomplish one or more assigned tasks. The overlord attempts to win the game by thwarting the heroes or completing his or her own objective first.

For each adventure, the overlord is responsible for setting up the game, reading aloud flavor text, and directing the mission of the players. To do so, he or she is provided with a Quest Guide in order to configure the tiles, read the starting adventure text to establish atmosphere and motivation, and then play the role of the monsters. This is in contrast to the *D&D* board games where the players each reveal tiles and then take turns activating the monsters. Having one player in *Descent* who controls all monsters pits that player against the adventuring party, thus effecting a competitive unilateral player interaction pattern instead of the mainly cooperative gameplay of the previous three games. This unilateral competition is achieved via direct combat and through separate objectives given to both the overlord and the heroes. To complete their objectives, each group must play within the rules set forth in the scenario. Whoever accomplishes their mission first wins. Given the solitary position of power, the rules suggest that the most experienced player become the overlord. However, unlike a DM, the overlord is not required to be imaginative or inventive outside of strategy. In the base game, they do not create adventures nor do they have to role-play the actual monsters outside of reading scripted texts. Their primary position is to act as antagonist to the heroes and defeat them by completing the overlord objectives. By including the overlord role, *Descent* is more closely connected to a typical TRPG player configuration module than the previous games, but, given its board game constraint, the DM/overlord role is far more limited.

In addition to the overlord, *Descent* shines by using custom dice. The game features six different types of dice: blue for attack; red and yellow for power; brown, gray, and black for defense. Attack and power dice can have a variety of effects from increasing range to dealing damage to activating surges; they can also indicate an automatic miss. Defense dice have the potential to prevent a certain amount of damage based on their color. During the game, “players build their dice pools according to their character’s abilities and weapons, and each die in the pool contributes to an attack in different ways. Surges, special symbols that appear on most dice, also let you trigger special effects.”[52] In games like *D&D*, polyhedral dice are as ubiquitous as Crown

Royal bags and serve as the primary apparatus for gameplay. The *D&D* board games include a d20 for attack but use a static damage value as opposed to *Descent*, which rolls dice for damage. Given the central focus of dice in TRPGs, the inclusion of specialized dice (with their interacting mechanics) along with the position of overlord help align *Descent* more closely with typical TRPGs than the previous three games even though the latter were inspired specifically by *D&D*.

While *Descent* may have a few mechanics that tie more strongly back to TRPG roots, all four games are marketed as dungeon-crawling adventures even though *Descent* attempts a minor linguistic distinction by labeling the game as "an epic board game of dungeon-delving adventure for 2–5 players" on the back of the box.[53] Interestingly, it does include aboveground settings. In fact, each double-sided tile in the base set has an aboveground scene printed on one side and an underground scene on the other. For example, side A of tile #10 shows a well-tended flower garden and side B displays a crypt adorned with spider webs and sarcophagi. This is opposed to the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series where all tiles depict underground locations and are not reversible.

Yet even with these differences, *Descent* and the three *D&D* board games share traits derived from their TRPG heritage, including character classes and abilities, items, and effects. The four hero archetypes in *Descent* are warrior, healer, mage, and scout, and each category presents players with specific characters to choose from within that archetype. For instance, the warrior group includes characters that resemble paladins, fighters, and barbarians, but are never labeled as such. The healers most closely parallel clerics. Mages resemble wizards and sorcerers, while the scouts are portrayed as rangers and rogues. Every character, no matter their class, is represented with a character card that contains values for four characteristics and four attributes. The characteristics include speed, health, stamina, and defense. Just as in the *D&D* board games, speed represents the number of spaces one can move each turn. Health acts as hit points, and stamina is resistance to fatigue. Unlike the *D&D* board games where defense is based on armor class specific to each character, the base defense value in *Descent* is generated for all PCs by rolling one grey die that yields a number from zero to three. The attributes in *Descent* include might, knowledge, willpower, and awareness. The first three are essentially three of the six core *D&D* attributes: might is strength; knowledge mimics intelligence; and willpower represents wisdom. The last attribute, awareness, is most comparable to the 3rd edition spot and listen skills or the perception skill in the 4th and 5th editions.[54] By providing these statistics (as well as personal details), the character cards in *Descent* serve as the board game incarnation of TRPG character sheets with the notable distinction that the character cards are not modifiable nor do the characters level up. Thus even though the setting is not drawn from a specific TRPG, *Descent* is certainly RPG-lite via its mechanics.

Most items in *Descent* are available for all players to acquire as opposed to being archetype-specific. Some items have common fantasy names like "elven cloak" and "magic staff," while others are just historical equipment such as "leather armor" and "chainmail." Some conditions (such as "immobilized" and "poisoned") are also found in both *D&D* and the *D&D* board games. *Descent* also features a number of items that would not be considered out of place if one came across them in a *D&D* game, like "Dawnblade" or "Dwarven firebomb." These items and conditions are examples of fantasy RPG terminology appearing in *Descent*.

The manner in which the creators of *Descent* have drawn from elements of other games as well as contributed their own design ideas has helped cement the immense success of *Descent*, making it commercially viable to publish roughly thirty supplements. One expansion recently announced by Fantasy Flight is the campaign guide, *Heirs of Blood,* which will add thirty-two new encounters. In addition to providing more heroes to choose from and more campaigns and adventures, some expansions also explore alternative ways to play a dungeon crawler, including having one game where no one is an overlord. The *Forgotten Souls* expansion introduces cooperative play by substituting the overlord player with an overlord track and monster activation cards.[55] It attempts to simulate a one-off, mini-campaign. With this expansion to the game, *Descent* is able to provide similar gameplay to the *D&D* board games as well as its original gameplay, thus becoming a more versatile experience to accommodate a variety of gameplay styles and still remain an RPG-lite board game.

Munchkin

Descent and the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series all provide RPG-lite experiences with a serious tone. The expectation of these games is a grave, if short dungeon crawler where death ends the game and it is not to be laughed at. In contrast, the last two games we discuss, *Munchkin* (2001) and *Munchkin Quest* (2008),[56] provide lighthearted gameplay by parodying TRPGs. Like most parodies, *Munchkin* relies on the original content being well known and established. With over twenty years in publication, *D&D* had established an immense fan base, was rife with inside jokes, and had a plethora of material to mock. While *Descent* and the *D&D* games attempt to bring the TRPG experience to the table in board game format, *Munchkin* effectively turns the tables and pokes fun at TRPG culture via a card game.

In the introductory paragraph in the rules to the original *Munchkin*, it outlines what, in part, the designers hoped to achieve: “Munchkin brings you the essence of the dungeon-crawling experience … without all that messy roleplaying!”[57] The name derives from a particular type of player in a roleplaying game, which is defined in *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer’s Bible*, as “any gamer who comes at the hobby with a predilection for silliness, ‘minimaxing,’ metagaming or any number of other perceived offenses”[58] From its very title, the tone of silliness is set.

The rules for *Munchkin* are relatively simple, with the front cover of the box summing up gameplay quite nicely, “Kill the Monsters. Steal the Treasure. Stab Your Buddy.”[59] Each player begins the game as a level one human of the gender with which they identify and eight cards. Players knock down the dungeon door, fight monsters, loot rooms, and ultimately attempt to level up to ten. The first player to reach this level wins. Backstabbing, ganging up, and dirty play is the norm in this farcical romp through a comic dungeon. Players gain races, classes, items, and curses, each of which is represented by a playing card that is activated by being played face-up in front of the player as they claw their way to the top.

In order to effectively parody TRPGs, some elements in *Munchkin* closely parallel those found in *D&D*, such as races, classes, and item limits. For instance, halfling, elf, and dwarf (all staples in *D&D*) are the non-human races featured in *Munchkin*. Classes in the card game are cleric, warrior, wizard, and thief. And just as in *D&D*, players may normally only acquire items up to a certain limit, like having only one headgear, one armor, or two one-handed weapons. And while this may generically sound like a card game version of the previously discussed board games, it is the tone and the generally competitive nature of the game that sets it apart, in addition to being a card game versus a tile-based board game.

There are a myriad of ways that *Munchkin* undermines and pokes fun of TRPGs, including mocking gamer culture, renaming items, and making fun of monsters. As an obvious parody of TRPGs, it was not only the games that are being derided but gamers themselves and the culture that surrounds them. This includes specific references to the jargon of TRPGs, such as game master (GM). In order to go up a level, one may play the card “Bribe GM with food” or “Whine at the GM.” Others more directly deal with actual TRPG munchkins, such as “Convenient Addition Error: 2+2=22” and “Invoke Obscure Rules.” The latter includes an illustration of a cleric reading from a book titled “3rd edition,” the current *D&D* edition when *Munchkin* was published. The graphic is even more humorous now since the cleric is surrounded by over fifteen other books, each with a numbered edition written on their spine, such as Revised 5th edition, 99th edition, 666th edition, and 1975th edition. These types of cards help solidify the appeal of this game to many gamers that are willing to make fun of the culture of which they are a part.

Many of the items and monsters in *Munchkin* are likewise not-so-subtle lampooning of their *D&D* TRPG counterparts. For example, the card "Magic Missile" contains an illustration of a man in a tunic carrying what appears to be a nuclear warhead with a red button on it; "Boots of Running Really Fast" are essentially boots of speed from many editions of *D&D*; "Chainsaw of Bloody Dismemberment" is a tongue-and-cheek reference to weapons with the keen quality from *D&D* that can automatically dismember their victims with a critical hit. Some of these inside jokes are obvious jabs at monsters from as early as 1st edition *D&D* and others are inside jokes from tabletop campaigns. Chromatic, metallic, and gem dragons have been a staple of *D&D* for many years, but *Munchkin* introduces the "Plutonium Dragon," who is the highest level monster with the most treasure available for players to defeat in the game. Instead of facing a terrifying Beholder, a giant floating eye from *D&D*, *Munchkin* includes the "Floating Nose," which possesses the ability to sniff one out anywhere, thereby preventing one from fleeing. One last monster worth mention is the level eight "Gazebo." A legendary gamer story, "The Tale of Eric and the Dread Gazebo" by Richard Aronson details an encounter during a tabletop campaign between a member of the party and a gazebo that he mistook for a monster.[60] While *Munchkin* can be enjoyed by any player, its jokes are much more poignant to the veteran tabletop role-player.

In order to defeat these monsters, players engage in combat, usually with the help of items. Combat is the area that best demonstrates both the cooperative and competitive nature of *Munchkin*. To defeat a monster, players must exceed the numerical level value of a monster with a combined total of their own level and any items they have activated unless they are a warrior, who wins ties. For example, if a level two dwarf armed with "Boots of Butt-kicking," for a plus two bonus, encounters a level two "Gelatinous Octahedron," and no one plays any additional modifiers or monsters, then the dwarf defeats the monster four to two and gains one treasure. If a player cannot defeat a monster on their own, they may enlist the help of their party members. This can result in shrewd bargaining for the treasure or in potential backstabbing. Other party members may gang up on a player and add modifiers to help the monster, or even add additional monsters for the active player to fight via a "Wandering Monster" card. In this instance, players control the monsters in a similar manner as in the *D&D* board games. If a player cannot defeat a monster, then they may attempt to flee. Combat is stat based, but fleeing relies on the luck of the die. One escapes on a roll of five or better on a d6, and if a PC fails to escape, "Bad Stuff," including death, can occur. While death in the games we have previously discussed is handled in a variety of ways, it is a relatively simple mechanic in *Munchkin*. Characters that die in *Munchkin* keep their class(es), level, gender, and race(s), but lose all of their treasure. Items lost in this manner are divvied up among the other players, and players are able to continue play on the next turn, just without their previously acquired treasure.

Munchkin transitions the dungeon combat and character-building aspects of TRPGs to a relatively simple card game using in-your-face, over-the-top humor. It stays true to its name of a min-maxing, usually obnoxious, player focused on winning or being the most powerful. Its formula for retaining some elements of TRPGs, while at the same time mocking them, has made for a very successful franchise. According to the Steve Jackson Games' website, they have sold millions of copies worldwide with sixteen core sets, five deluxe editions, four themed games, twenty booster packs, plus numerous accessories and promotional items.[61] While most of the sequels can be interchanged and played with the base set, one standalone game attempts to model the adventuring experience more visually than the card games—*Munchkin Quest*: *The Munchkin Boardgame*. The rules to *Munchkin Quest* provide the comparison between the two games: "*Munchkin* is the shameless parody game which brings you the essence of the dungeon-crawling experience … without all that messy roleplaying! NOW, with added boardgameness."[62] *Munchkin Quest* is a dungeon crawling, tile-based board game that draws heavily on the base *Munchkin* set.

The mechanics for *Munchkin Quest* are very similar to those of *Munchkin* with the largest change being the addition of tiles to construct a map of an actual dungeon, similar to the *D&D* board games. PCs level up and fight monsters in much the same manner as in *Munchkin*, but *Munchkin Quest* includes health as well, a concept very similar to hit points in *D&D*. PCs move around the dungeon exploring and placing new tiles, many of which have unique effects. Monsters can appear and attack the PCs or simply roam the dungeon. In addition to reaching level ten, a PC must also escape the dungeon in order to win.

While there are many new features introduced, some elements are taken directly from the original *Munchkin*. For example, twenty-two of the same monsters, such as "3,879 Orcs" and "Lame Goblin" are in both games, while new monsters are created for humor in addition to *D&D* tie-ins. For example, the new monster "Misplacer Beast," is a jab at both the *D&D* monster "Displacer Beast" and a munchkin player because of its flavor text, "It lost the rulebook, so it has no special powers." For general humor the game introduces monsters just for their comedic effect, such as "Psycho Squirrel," who "ignores females and wearers of the Spiked Codpiece." For players that like the idea of *Munchkin* but enjoy a more physical representation of the environment in which their PC exists, *Munchkin Quest* provides a solid compromise between a tile-based dungeon crawling game, like the *D&D* Adventure System Cooperative Game series, and the original card game with its cartoonish humor.

Conclusion

As other scholars have argued, TRPGs have spawned a direct lineage to digital games through CRPGs[63] and MMOs[64] among others, but TRPGs can also be read as an antecedent genre to a specific category of analog games. We have identified three primary ways TRPGs have helped inspire board and card games, whether through setting and mechanics or by providing fodder for parody. These RPG-lite analog games, whether based on a specific TRPG franchise or not, provide a reductive RPG experience conducive to the board and card game medium. Given the seminal status of *D&D* as a founding title of the TPRG genre, we have focused primarily on *D&D*'s influences, but this transmedia phenomenon is not limited to *D&D* alone. The intellectual properties of Pathfinder, Deadlands, and Shadowrun also have analog games based to some degree on the settings represented in their respective TRPGs. For example, Pathfinder has produced the *Adventure Card Game: Rise of the Runelords* with several expansions.[65] Games based on the Deadlands TRPG include the board game *The Battle for Slaughter Gulch* (2009)[66] and the card game *Doomtown: Reloaded* (2014).[67] The *D&D Inn-Fighting Dice Game* (2007),[68] with all of its classes and monsters taken directly from *D&D*, involves adventurers simply participating in a bar fight, while *Red Dragon Inn* (2007),[69] a board game based solely on adventurers competing in a drinking game, nods to many campaign interludes with characters assembling in a tavern. Other than *Munchkin*, most of these games were published within the last four years, and all were released within the last eight years. Obviously, the hobby industry sees a market for these types of games. Additionally, the theoretical work on TRPGs has been produced in a similar time frame. The influence of TRPGs on analog games is a vast area worthy of additional exploration. Both the scholarly community and the commercial industry could benefit from further research.

NOTES

1. Michael Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

2. Greg Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the System," in *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 5.

3. Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 10. Cover is citing Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 98.

4. Cover, 191.

5. Adam Sadler, Corey Konieczka, and Daniel Lovat Clark, *Descent: Journeys in the Dark Second Edition* (Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight, 2012).

6. Steve Jackson, *Munchkin (*Austin, TX: Steve Jackson Games, 2001).

7. As we are referencing the influence of TRPGs on board games, we primarily compare to a typical TRPG, *D&D*. While several TRPGs do innovatively modify the genre by creating games that are structured purposefully not to require a DM or to use random number generators, our focus for comparison is on the traditional, established form of TRPG, that is, games that features a DM and has a party of players cooperatively working in a storytelling capacity to imaginatively further gameplay, which could be combat focused but could also be more exploratory in nature.

8. 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*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 25.

9. Bill Slavicsek, Mike Mearls, and Peter Lee, *Castle Ravenloft* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2010).

10. Peter Lee, *Wrath of Ashardalon* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2010).

11. Peter Lee, *The Legend of Drizzt* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2011).

12. Rodney Thomas and Peter Lee, *Lords of Waterdeep* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2012). Another board game of note that uses a *D&D* setting is *Lords of Waterdeep*, where players attempt to assert control over the city of Waterdeep, one of the most important cities in the Forgotten Realms setting. This game is not included in our essay because while the setting is *D&D* based, the game is not an RPG-lite board game but instead a worker placement, strategy game.

13. While our focus is on the spread of *D&D*'s intellectual property via board games, there have also been hundreds of novels based on the *D&D* franchise, cementing its ludic and literary connections.

14. "*Dungeons & Dragons: Castle Ravenloft* Board Game," *BoardGameGeek*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/59946/dungeons-dragons-castle-ravenloft-board-game.

15. Each game includes a rulebook and an adventure book along with tiles, miniatures, cards, etc.

16. Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Adventure Module Ravenloft* Silver Anniversary Ed. (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1983).

17. Slavicsek and Lee, *Castle Ravenloft*, 3.

18. Hickman and Hickman, 11.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Slavicsek and Lee, *Castle Ravenloft*, 13.

21. Hickman and Hickman, 2.

22. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook* (Lake Geneva: TSR Games, 1978).

23. David Cook, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 2nd Edition* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989).

24. Gygax, *AD&D,* 15. According to the 1st edition *AD&D Players Handbook*, "A character of the dwarven race can be a fighter (maximum of 9th level), a thief, or an assassin (maximum of 9th level)." Cleric, magic-user, and monk are not possible character classes for dwarves.

25. Rob Heinsoo, Andy Collins, and James Wyatt, *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 4th Edition* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2008).

26. Hickman and Hickman, 7.

27. Stuart Greenwell, "Wizards of the Coast Gen Con Interview: Part 1 of 2

(D&D Boardgames)," *Living Dice*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.livingdice.com/4977/wizards-of-the-coast-gen-con-interview-part-1-of-2-dd-boardgames/.

28. Greenwell.

29. Bruce Cordell, *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure The Sunless Citadel* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000).

30. *Ibid.*, 3.

31. *Ibid.*, 25.

32. Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams, *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 3rd Edition* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000).

33. Andy Collins, Skip Williams, and James Wyatt, *Draconomicon: The Book of Dragons* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2003), 87–89.

34. Bruce Cordell, *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure Bastion of Broken Souls* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2002).

35. Cordell, *Bastion of Broken Souls*, 2.

36. *Ibid.*, 10.

37. Cordell, *Bastion of Broken Souls*, 33.

38. Lee, *Wrath of Ashardalon*, 14.

39. R. A. Salvatore, *Servant of the Shard* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000).

40. R.A. Salvatore, *The Halfling's Gem* (Renton, WA: TSR Games, 1990).

41. R.A. Salvatore, *Passage to Dawn* (Renton, WA: TSR Games, 1996).

42. "5 Questions About Drizzt Do'Urden: An Interview with *New York Times* Bestselling Fantasy Author R.A. Salvatore About His Greatest Creation," *Dark Party Review*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://darkpartyreview.blogspot.com/2006/09/5-questions-about-drizzt-dourden.html.

43. Greenwell.

44. Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1979), 140.

45. Gygax, *Dungeon Masters Guide*, 136.

46. Greenwell.

47. Lee, *Wrath of Ashardalon*, 2.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Lee, *Drizzt*, 2.

50. *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* (Second Edition) is a game inspired by Kevin Wilson's 2005 first edition game of the same name, which is now out of print.

51. "Descent: Journeys in the Dark (Second Edition)," *BoardGameGeek*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/104162/descent-journeys-dark-second-edition.

52. "Descent," *BoardGameGeek*.

53. Adam Sadler, Corey Konieczka, and Daniel Lovat Clark, *Descent.*

54. Jeremy Crawford, *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 5th Edition* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014).

55. Jonathan Bove, *Descent: Journeys in the Dark Second Edition, Forgotten Souls* (Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight, 2014).

56. Steve Jackson, *Munchkin Quest* (Austin, TX: Steve Jackson Games, 2008).

57. Jackson, *Munchkin*, 1.

58. Sean Patrick Fannon, *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible*. 2d ed. (Jacksonville, FL: Obsidian Studios, Inc, 1999), 233.

59. Jackson, *Munchkin*, Box. The first two sentences evoke similarity with D&D while the third subverts it, making a joke that portrays *Munchkin*'s unique niche.

60. Richard Aronson, "The Tale of Eric and the Dread Gazebo," *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*. 1989, accessed June 26, 2015, http://web.archive.org/web/20080804140516/http://www.dreadgazebo.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8.

61. Steve Jackson Games, "The World of Munchkin," *The World of Munchkin*, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.worldofmunchkin.com.

62. Jackson, *Munchkin Quest,* 1.

63. Cover, 39.

64. Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling," 9.

65. Mike Selinker, *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game: Rise of the Runelords* (Redmond, WA: Paizo LLC, 2013).

66. Kerry Breitenstein and Todd Brietenstein, *The Battle for Slaughter Gulch* (Cold Spring, KY: Twilight Creations, 2009).

67. Dave Williams and Mark Wootton, *Doomtown: Reloaded* (Ontario, CA: Alderac Entertainment Group, 2014).

68. Rob Heinsoo, *Inn-Fighting: D&D Dice Game* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2007).

69. Geoff Bottone, Colleen Skadl, and Cliff Bohm, *The Red Dragon Inn* (Brentwood, CA: SlugFest Games, 2007).

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Aronson, Richard. "The Tale of Eric and the Dread Gazebo." *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*. 1989. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://web.archive.org/web/20080804140516/http://www.dreadgazebo.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8.

Collins, Andy, Skip Williams, and James Wyatt. *Draconomicon: The Book of Dragons.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2003.

Cook, David. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 2nd Edition.* Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1989.

Cook, Monte, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 3rd Edition.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000.

Cordell, Bruce R. *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure Bastion of Broken Souls*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2002.

______. *Dungeons & Dragons Adventure The Sunless Citadel*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000.

Costikyan, Greg. "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the System." In *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, 5–13.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

Crawford, Jeremy. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 5th Edition.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2014.

"Descent: Journeys in the Dark (Second Edition)." *BoardGameGeek*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/104162/descent-journeys-dark-second-edition.

"Dungeons & Dragons: Castle Ravenloft Board Game." *BoardGameGeek*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/59946/dungeons-dragons-castle-ravenloft-board-game.

Fannon, Sean Patrick. *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible*. 2d ed. Jacksonville, FL: Obsidian Studios, Inc, 1999.

"5 Questions About Drizzt Do'Urden: An Interview with *New York Times* Bestselling Fantasy Author R.A. Salvatore About His Greatest Creation." *Dark Party Review*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://darkpartyreview.blogspot.com/2006/09/5-questions-about-drizzt-dourden.html.

Greenwell, Stuart. "Wizards of the Coast Gen Con Interview: Part 1 of 2 (*D&D* Board - games)." *Living Dice*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.livingdice.com/4977/wizards-of-the-coast-gen-con-interview-part-1-of-2-dd-boardgames/.

Gygax, Gary. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1979.

_____. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1978.

Heinsoo, Rob, Andy Collins, and James Wyatt. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook. 4th Edition.* Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2008.

Hickman, Tracy, and Laura Hickman. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Adventure Module Ravenloft.* Silver Anniversary Ed. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1983.

Mona, Erik. "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, 2007, 25–30.

Salvatore, R. A. *The Halfling's Gem.* Renton, WA: TSR Games, 1990.

_____. *Passage to Dawn.* Renton, WA: TSR Games, 1996.

_____. *Servant of the Shard*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2000.

Steve Jackson Games. "The World of Munchkin." *The World of Munchkin*. Accessed June 26, 2015. http://www.worldofmunchkin.com.

Tresca, Michael. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Ludography

Bottone, Geoff, Colleen Skadl, and Cliff Bohm. *The Red Dragon Inn*. Brentwood, CA: SlugFest Games, 2007.

Bove, Jonathan E. *Descent: Journeys in the Dark Second Edition, Forgotten Souls.* Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight, 2014.

Breitenstein, Kerry, and Todd Brietenstein. *The Battle for Slaughter Gulch*. Cold Spring, KY: Twilight Creations, 2009.

Heinsoo, Rob. *Inn-Fighting: D&D Dice Game*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2007.

Jackson, Steve. *Munchkin.* Austin, TX: Steve Jackson Games, 2001.

_____. *Munchkin Quest.* Austin, TX: Steve Jackson Games, 2008.

Lee, Peter. *The Legend of Drizzt*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2011.

_____. *Wrath of Ashardalon*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2010.

Sadler, Adam, Corey Konieczka, and Daniel Lovat Clark. *Descent: Journeys in the Dark. Second Edition*. Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight, 2012.

Selinker, Mike. *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game: Rise of the Runelords*. Redmond, WA: Paizo LLC, 2013.

Slavicsek, Bill, Mike Mearls, and Peter Lee. *Castle Ravenloft*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2010.

Thomas, Rodney, and Peter Lee. *Lords of Waterdeep*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2012.

Williams, Dave, and Mark Wootton. *Doomtown: Reloaded*. Ontario, CA: Alderac Enter - tainment Group, 2014.

The RPG Classroom

Repurposing Game Mechanics for the Gamification of Education

Francesco Crocco

Introduction

What if education could be made into a role-playing game (RPG) in which students played characters, completed quests, and earned experience points? The idea of turning education into a game has received much attention in the last few years. This concept is different from traditional forms of game-based learning, which focus on the benefits of embedding commercial games or so-called "serious games"—games designed to teach specific content—into learning environments, a practice that boasts countless examples, hundreds of research studies, and at least a half-dozen meta-analyses.[1] Rather, it hinges upon the idea of turning the classroom itself—whether it be a traditional brick-and-mortar space or an online virtual space—into a game by revamping pedagogy and curricula to look and feel more like games. These efforts are part of a larger trend called "gamification."

Karl M. Kapp distinguishes gamification from both games and serious games. While a game is "a system in which players engage in an abstract challenge, defined by rules, interactivity, and feedback, that results in a quantifiable outcome often eliciting an emotional reaction,"[2] and a serious game is the construction of games "to educate individuals in a specific content domain,"[3] he defines gamification as "using game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems."[4] In other words, whereas games and serious games are stand-alone systems distinguished by their goals—entertainment vs. education, respectively—gamification operates by embedding aspects of game design into existing non-game activities. The explicit goal of gamification is typically to keep users engaged and motivated so that they achieve an outcome desired by the designers, whether that be learning, exercising, working, or shopping. Typically, gamification restructures these and other serious activities into engaging game-like activities through the targeted application of proven game mechanics, frequently involving experience points, badges, leaderboards, and challenges.

From primary school to post-secondary education, numerous educators have begun experimenting with gamification to keep students engaged and help them succeed. This essay will examine the gamification of education in order to demonstrate its indebtedness to the design of popular RPGs, particularly tabletop RPGs (TRPGs), computer RPGs (CRPGs), and massively multiplayer online RPGS (MMORPGs). After going into more detail about gamification and its reliance on core RPG mechanics, I will provide examples of different attempts to gamify education that utilize some of these mechanics, specifically Lee Sheldon's multiplayer classroom, the Quest to Learn schools, and Levelfly, a gamified learning management system (LMS) that I co-designed for use at an urban community college.

Gamification and Its Discontents: Separating Fact from Fiction

Gamification has had a short, but active history, with most of the attention initially coming from the business community. In 2002, Nick Pelling coined the term "gamification" to describe the application of a game-like user interface to electronic business transactions in order to make them more fun and engaging for customers. However, according to Google Trends, it was not until 2010 that gamification achieved broad popularity.[5] At a DICE talk delivered that year, game designer and academic Jesse Schell cited examples of gamification for education and imagined a near future in which the convergence of mobile technology, social media, and digital games enabled the transformation of mundane activities like brushing one's teeth, eating cornflakes, or riding public transportation into alluring gamified experiences in which people earn points and rewards in exchange for increased consumption or better civic engagement.[6] In 2011, gamification received a promotional boost from the technology forecasting company Gartner, which featured it in its feted "Hype Cycle" report on emerging technology: Gartner analysts predicted "more than 70% of Global 2000 businesses would manage at least one gamified application or system by 2014."[7] The first Gamification Summit was held that year; a year later, Professor Kevin Werbach of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business taught the first MOOC on gamification, which touted 76,000 registered students.[8] Businesses moved swiftly to adopt gamification not just to attract and retain customers—as the 2009 location-based social networking app Foursquare did when it implemented points, badges, and leaderboards—but also to redress the intractable problem of employee disengagement, an epidemic documented by a Gallup poll that finds 51 percent of employees are disengaged and 17.5 percent are actively disengaged.[9] In 2007, the startup company Bunchball introduced the first enterprise-level gamification solution for tackling employee boredom and boosting productivity, since adopted by corporate giants Ford, Comcast, T-Mobile, and Adobe. Despite a 2012 Gartner report that pronounced "80 percent of current gamified applications will fail to meet business objectives primarily because of poor design,"[10] forecasts for the industry remain strong, and it is projected to grow 67.1 percent and top $5.5 billion by 2018.[11]

Because of its touted ability to improve engagement, gamification has become the subject of both intense hype and scrutiny. Supporters have hailed gamification as the latest, greatest way to maximize engagement. For instance, in *The Gamification Revolution: How Leaders Leverage Game Mechanics to Crush the Competition* (2013) Gabe Zichermann and Joselin Linder write, "Gamification presents the best tools humanity has ever invented to create and sustain engagement in people."[12] While Zichermann and Linder focus on business applications, Jane McGonigal, author of the bestseller *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011), proposes a more ambitions agenda. She argues that reality should be entirely redesigned as a game because "reality, compared to games, is broken."[13] Entrepreneur Seth Priebatsch, designer of the location-based scavenger hunt app SCVNGR, has proposed achieving this by augmenting reality with a "game layer."[14]

Given the grandiose and utopian-sounding claims of gamification advocates, it is no wonder that critics have been equally extreme in their condemnation of the industry. They have criticized its reliance on a handful of overutilized and poorly implemented game mechanics (e.g., the holy trinity of points, badges, and leaderboards) and highlighted its slavish subservience to corporate interests.[15] Noted game scholar and designer Ian Bogost has gone so far as to dub gamification "exploitationware."[16]

A growing number of studies have tried to discern what advantages, if any, gamification has to offer. Their conclusions range from outright incredulity to cautious optimism. While some reject gamification as a facile marketing strategy that strip-mines and denigrates true games,[17] others argue that a player-centric approach to gamification design can avoid common pitfalls and deliver on promises to enhance user motivation and engagement.[18] A literature review of gamification in education finds that it is a "rapidly growing phenomenon" in education and professional training, with a prevalence at universities and in online settings involving the use of a gamified

LMS; the main reported driver for this growth is the desire to enhance motivation and engagement in learning tasks, though other desired goals include fostering collaboration, creativity, and self-guided study.[19] Recent case studies, most of which target higher education settings, demonstrate that gamification can impact decisions, foster playfulness, and increase engagement and flow, though too much in-game competition can negatively impact sociability.[20] One university case study found that even light framing devices used to make activities more game-like, such as the addition of game vernaculars and artifacts, can produce measurable gains in interest and enjoyment.[21] A meta-analysis of twenty-four peer-reviewed studies on gamification in various settings conducted by Juho Hamari, Jonna Koivisto, and Harri Sarsa found that gamification provides motivational affordances with measurable behavioral and psychological outcomes related to motivation, attitude, and enjoyment, but the results are dependent upon the context being gamified and the qualities of the users.[22]

From Games to Gamification: The Mechanics of Engagement

The rationale that gamifying serious activities like work, commerce, and learning can make them more engaging is rooted in research that links gaming to heightened levels of engagement, intrinsic motivation, and even happiness. Marshaling decades of research on human happiness, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has discovered that people are most happy when they are most engaged, a state of mind he calls "flow." Csikszentmihalyi explains that games produce the perfect conditions for flow because, as highly structured experiences with strict rules and clear goals, they generate the high levels of concentration and engagement necessary for flow.[23] Gaming has also been linked to greater intrinsic motivation. Self-Determination Theory, a concept developed by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan with decades of research, identifies three factors that produce intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competency, and relatedness.[24] In later research, Ryan concludes that what makes video games so engaging is precisely that they satisfy these three needs.[25]

Education, in particular, has received much scholarly attention as a potential site of game-based reform. In his groundbreaking study *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003, 2007), James Paul Gee identifies thirty-six learning principles embodied by successful commercial video games and suggests ways educators can adapt these principles to make learning more engaging and effective.[26] In the same vein, Michele D. Dickey suggests that key game elements such as narrative, role-playing, learner positioning, and interactive choice should be used to inform instructional design.[27] Furthermore, game designer Sebastian Deterding argues that games satisfy the innate need for intrinsic motivation and should be used to redesign schooling and workplace training.[28] These and other studies furnish a basis for re-imagining education as a game in which students are willing, engaged, and active participants.

Aware of the engaging properties of games, gamifiers essentially seek to bypass the lengthy and often expensive process of designing full-blown games in favor of identifying specific game mechanics that can be easily mass-produced and embedded in existing serious activities. Accordingly, many how-to books and articles for developing gamification solutions take a mechanics-based approach, and this is most evident in the literature that addresses a business audience.[29] For instance, in *Total Engagement: Using Games and Virtual Worlds to Change the Way people Work and Businesses Compete* (2009) Byron Reeves and J. Leighton Read propose to turn work into a fantasy RPG in order to increase employee productivity by "embedding easy work into story lines and quests that are part of an extended multilevel game."[30] In *The Gamification Revolution* (2013), a primer for business gamification, Zichermann and Linder identify points, badges, prizes, social reinforcement, onboarding (the embedding of just-in-time instructions), challenges, goals, and goal markers as the most important mechanics for gamification.[31] These items duplicate many of the mechanics that Zichermann and Christopher Cunningham discuss in *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps* (2011), which lists points, levels, leaderboards, badges, challenges, quests, social engagement, customization, dashboards, feedback, and reinforcement as key game mechanics.[32] Meanwhile, Rajat Paharia, founder of Bunchball and author of *Loyalty 3.0: How to Revolutionize Customer and Employee Engagement with Big Data and Gamification* (2013), identifies ten key game mechanics for gamification: fast feedback, transparency, goals, badges, leveling up, onboarding, competition, collaboration, community, and points.[33] *For the Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business* (2012) by business professors Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter shaves down the list of key game mechanics to the holy trinity: points, badges, and leaderboards.[34]

The gamification manuals for educators follow a similar pattern of approaching gamification using a checklist of ingredients. While they focus less on game mechanics and more on game properties or principles, many of the same game mechanics recur. The list of key "game elements" in Karl M. Kapp's *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction* (2012) blends general properties of games, such as goals, rules, conflict, feedback, and rewards, with specific game mechanics like levels, storytelling, and time constraints.[35] In a primer for pedagogical gamification, Kevin Yee lists five principles of gamification: display progress, maximize competition, calibrate difficulty, provide diversions, and employ narrative elements; Yee makes reference to several common gamification techniques to achieve these goals, such as using points, badges, and levels to display progress.[36] Providing a broader perspective, Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa, who surveyed two-dozen empirical studies in their meta-analysis of the literature on gamification, discovered that the examples of gamification in their study set shared ten key game mechanics: points, leaderboards, achievements/badges, levels, story/theme, clear goals, feedback, rewards, progress, and challenges.[37]

Something Borrowed, Something New: Gamifying with RPG Mechanics

Many of the mechanics repeated in the gamification manuals and studies cited above overlap with the core mechanics of RPGs. For instance, *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) introduced the concept of melding a game system with an immersive story-arc consisting of multiple quests and challenges, and invented experience points and levels as a way to quantify character development and progression across multiple episodes of play. These and other unique RPG mechanics, initially appreciated by only a small sub-culture of tabletop gamers, were eventually mainstreamed with the rise of commercially successful CRPGs and, later, MMORPGs, which also added new mechanics like digital achievement systems replete with badges and leaderboards to drive player communities. With the emergence of gamification, popular RPG mechanics have been borrowed and re-purposed for new and serious applications, constituting an unforeseen mutation of the genre. RPGs deserve closer inspection to elaborate their unique mechanics and explore why these mechanics lend themselves to gamification.

RPGs now comprise a broad and varied genre that spans several formats—tabletop, live-action, computer, console, and online. While there are important differences between these formats—and even within them—there are also key elements or mechanics shared in common that make them recognizable as part of the same family of games descended from the very first TRPG, Gary Gygax and David Arneson's 1974 classic, *Dungeons & Dragons*. *D&D* drew upon existing material—tabletop wargaming and fantasy literature, which were near and dear to its creators—but also added its own unique elements that would become iconic of RPGs. David Ewalt has boiled it down to three major innovations: "Every player at the table controls just one character. Those characters seek adventure in a fantasy landscape. By doing so, they gain experience and become more powerful."[38] In order to elucidate the influence of RPGs in the examples of gamification for education provided in the next section, I have created a more extensive rubric of seven core RPG mechanics: role-playing, narrative, quests, collaboration and specialization, statistics, experience points and levels, and the game master. I derive this rubric from classification systems devised by other scholars and my decades of experience as a player.[39]

Role-playing captures the element of playing pretend that is so central to the activity of RPGs. In RPGs, each player controls a "player character" (PC), while the game master controls "non-player characters" (NPCs). Narrative refers to the collective story-telling dimension of RPGs, a feature not found in popular commercial games prior to RPGs. The overall game narrative, which is sometimes referred to as a "campaign," normally takes multiple sessions of game-play to complete, lasting from several nights to several years. To make the campaign more manageable, it is often broken down into smaller units and side adventures called "quests," which have specific objectives that feed into the larger goals of the campaign. Players normally come together as an adventuring "party" or "guild" to complete quests, which places a premium on collaboration, but also on character specialization since successful collaboration often requires a balanced party. Each RPG relies on a statistical system to resolve outcomes in the game. This requires the quantification of environmental factors (like terrain and weather), as well as character traits (like attributes and skills). Players keep track of their character statistics on a physical or virtual "character sheet," and these values are used to modify dice-rolls (for tabletop games) or algorithms (for digital games) to determine the success or failure of any action taken. Characters develop over time by earning experience points (XP) after each session of play, which provides incentive to keep playing. Once enough XP are earned, characters level up, improving their abilities and gaining new powers. Finally, every RPG has a system for organizing and regulating play. For digital RPGs, that system is the software, which relies on pre-programmed narrative trees and statistical algorithms to compute the results of player choices. For tabletop and live-action RPGs, this function is performed by a special player called the game master (GM) (but sometimes referred to by other names, such as "dungeon master," "storyteller," or "referee"). The GM is a throwback to the umpires and referees of the tabletop wargaming systems from which *D&D* evolved. The GM writes or selects the over-arching game narrative, negotiates plot development with players, arbitrates outcomes, and awards XP. It's worth noting that some RPGs have multiple GMs, such as certain live-action games, while others have no GM or require the players to share the responsibilities of the GM.

That many gamification designs for education, as well as business, rely on one or more of these common RPG mechanics is not unusual given the fact that RPGs have been attributed with many of the same motivational, behavioral, and pedagogical affordances sought after by gamification enthusiasts. Indeed, observing how attached players would become to the characters they role-played, Gary Alan Fine, the earliest sociologist of RPG player communities, explains that "the *engrossment* of players in the game" is a "key concept" for understanding how the game works and is "one of the hobby's most distinctive features."[40] Recent studies demonstrate that MMORPGs enhance motivation,[41] foster collaboration,[42] and develop leadership skills.[43] Avatars in CRPGs have been linked to increased player identification and engagement,[44] and there is evidence that digital avatars impact memory, emotion, and behavior.[45] Moreover, educators have long exploited the pedagogical value of role-playing and simulation, particularly in subjects such as language learning, history, and business. Since the 1970s, various handbooks have been published to illustrate these techniques for primary, secondary, and post-secondary education both on- and off-line.[46] The educational potential of role-playing is indicated by the success of the Reacting to the Past series, which offers a role-playing-based curriculum for teaching history at the post-secondary level.[47] Furthermore, role-playing conceptually underlies many educational theories, such as situated learning, situated cognition, project-based learning, and goal-based learning.[48] In the next section, I describe examples of the gamification of education that utilize common RPG mechanics to engage students and improve learning.

RPG Design for the Gamification of Education

Many gamification projects for education are indebted to RPGs for their design. This includes the appropriation of RPG mechanics that translate well into an education setting, such as the substitution of XP for grades and the use of paper or online character sheets to track skills and learning outcomes. It also involves the explicit use of RPG jargon and aesthetics to make learning more game-like, for instance, by having students adopt avatars, labeling assignments "quests," and organizing collaborative work under the rubric of "party" or "guild" activities. Such experiments with the gamification of education are occurring in both traditional and online learning at many different levels—by individual instructors, by whole institutions, and across institutions through the use of gamified learning management systems. I address some prominent examples of this work in the case studies below. Lee Sheldon's multiplayer classroom exemplifies the work that individual teachers are doing to implement gamification in their classrooms. Alternatively, Quest to Learn demonstrates what can happen when gamification is implemented at the institutional level. Finally, Levelfly represents the growing popularity of gamification for learning management systems, which have the ability to impact learning at a national and international level. In aggregate, these examples demonstrate the diversity and popularity of gamification in education, but also the ways that RPGs are transforming the educational landscape through gamification.

The Multiplayer Classroom and the Gamification of Teaching

In his 2010 DICE talk on the growing pervasiveness of gamification, Schell cited a university class that replaced grades with experience points. That class was taught by Lee Sheldon, then a professor of game design at Indiana University. In the fall of 2009, Sheldon decided to transform his traditional Theory & Practice of Game Design course into a multiplayer game modeled after commercial MMORPGs like *Ultima Online* (1997) and *World of Warcraft* (2004). He called this style of teaching the "multiplayer classroom."[49] In a book he later wrote about this experience, *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (2012), Sheldon confesses that when he came up with the idea he was unaware that he was participating in "the gamification of society that had been going on underground for years."[50] His motivation for designing a multiplayer classroom had to do with re-engaging the "game-playing, social-networking students of today" who are disengaged by "decades-old teaching methods" that are based on lectures and exams.[51] In his book, Sheldon argues that almost any class can be turned into a game, and he provides tips for how to do so. He also models this process by describing four iterations of his multiplayer classroom and providing eight case studies of educators who have gamified courses at other institutions.

Sheldon's design for a gamified multiplayer classroom borrows many core mechanics from RPGs. He began by taking his rather conventional syllabus and re-skinning it using jargon borrowed from commercial MMORPGs. He replaced grades with XP so that students began the course at "Level 0" with no XP and gradually leveled up as they earned points for completing assignments. Course assignments consisted of "boss fights" (quizzes or exams), "quests" (solo or group presentations), and "crafting" (writing assignments). Students became "players" and chose avatars to represent themselves in the class with names like "Earthshaker" and "Princess Peach." Naturally, Sheldon played the role of "Game Master." He designed quests, awarded XP, and even simulated the random factor of RPG systems by rolling dice to determine presentation order. To capture the collaborative element of RPGs, he placed students into "guilds" and had each member specialize by choosing from among key game industry roles (e.g., Designer, Writer, Producer, Tech Lead, Art Lead, and Marketing). Guilds collaborated throughout the semester on "PvE" quests (i.e., "Player vs. Environment"), which included quizzes, midterms, and the final project—a presentation in which each guild had to pitch an idea for a game. They also competed with other guilds in "PvP" quests (i.e., "Player vs. Player"). To allocate XP more fairly for completed group quests, Sheldon introduced a gamified "Peer Review" process in which guild members voted on how much XP each member should receive based on degree of contribution. Following the design of virtual space in many MMORPGs, he also broke up the classroom space into distinct zones with unique rules and challenges, and periodically moved students through the zones to quest for XP. In later iterations of his multiplayer classroom, he refined the XP system, mapped professional roles to traditional fantasy roles, and even incorporated an online LMS component to add a virtual map and leaderboards.

Sheldon's book offers an extremely detailed and positive account of MMORPG-based gamification for education. Reflecting on his first experience with teaching a multiplayer course, he relates, "As the semester progressed, I began to see the fun of learning the students were experiencing *and how much more fun teaching* felt to me. When grades improved and class attendance headed toward a record high, I began to ask myself, 'Why haven't we been designing classes as games for a long time now?'"[52] At the end of the book, Sheldon refrains from predicting the future of gamification; however, he is certain that "As long as attendance is up, as long as grades are up, as long as students who skipped class are now coming early, the multiplayer classroom is not going away anytime soon."[53]

Quest to Learn and the Gamification of Schooling

In his book, Sheldon mentions another example of gamifying education that uses RPG elements, the gamified New York City public school Quest to Learn.[54] Developed in partnership with Katie Salen and the Institute of Play with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Quest to Learn is a project of the New York City Department of Education's small schools initiative. The school opened its doors to New York City sixth graders in Fall 2009, at the same time that Sheldon was teaching his first multiplayer course. Adding a new grade each year since then, it now serves grades 6–12. In Fall 2011, Salen and the Institute of Play secured additional grant funding to open up a charter school in Chicago. ChicagoQuest is based on the same model as its New York City counterpart and has adopted the same operating plan, beginning with only one grade (sixth) and adding another one each year until it spans grades 6–12.

The Quest schools emphasize a variety of innovative approaches to teaching, many of which overlap with Gee's list of key learning principles found in good video games. These include situated learning (embedding learning in real-world contexts that situate and embody meaning), design, inquiry and discovery, problem solving, systems thinking, scaffolding of assignments, embedded assessment, collaboration and sharing, feedback loops, and just-in-time delivery of information. Originally dubbed "the school for digital kids," the cultivation of digital literacy and other twenty-first-century skills is also a big part of the Quest schools' mission "To empower and engage all students by connecting rigorous learning through innovation to the increasing demands of the global society."[55] Consequently, students regularly work with digital tools to design new media, and even take a course that involves coding (e.g., "Codeworlds").

A defining feature of the Quest schools, however, is an emphasis on what Salen calls "gamelike learning." In a report to the MacArthur Foundation, *Quest to Learn: Developing the School for Digital Kids*, Salen et al. define gamelike learning as "an approach to learning that draws on the intrinsic qualities of games and their design to engage students in a deep exploration of subject matter, with twenty-first-century learning at its core."[56] Salen stresses that gamelike learning is not about dropping games into the classroom, but instead involves a more holistic approach in which the learning environment itself is redesigned with principles derived from games. She writes,

> Quest to Learn is not a school of video games or a school where students play video games all day. Games are one important tool in the school, most certainly, but they represent something more than a resource. They are the basis of a theory of learning that is both situated and gamelike. As a result, we have designed the school around an approach to learning that draws from what we know games do best: drop players into inquiry-based, complex problem spaces that are scaffolded to deliver just-in-time learning and to use data to help players understand how they are doing, what they need to work on, and where to go next.[57]

To make education gamelike in this manner, the Quest schools draw upon a team of game designers from the Institute of Play who work with teachers to develop learning games and curricula, which takes place in a special space inside the school called "Mission Lab."

While Salen is careful not to use the term gamification to describe the Quest model, her concept of gamelike learning can rightly be seen as consistent with the concomitant trend toward gamification in other areas, both in terms of its practice, which emphasizes the application of game design and mechanics to non-game activities instead of the adoption of standalone games, and its stated intention to address the problem of engagement, which is the most common rationale for gamification. Salen et al. attribute the problems with public education, particularly in urban areas, to an outdated and alienating curriculum and pedagogy that leaves students "unengaged and disconnected"[58] and fails to provide the "twenty-first-century learning environments that would respond to the needs of kids growing up in a digital, information-rich, globally complex era prizing creativity, innovation, and resourcefulness."[59] Accordingly, their solution—to develop a school based on the principles of gamelike learning—promises "to empower and engage students from all walks of life."[60]

Like other gamification schemes, many of the gamelike features of the Quest schools overlap with common RPG mechanics. For instance, one of the ways they do so is by using role-playing and narrative to situate learning. The ChicagoQuest website explains that students are immersed "in narratives where they 'take on' a role or identity."[61] Accordingly, Salen et al. list "Taking on Identities" as one of the "Ten Core Practices Defining Quest to Learn."[62] They explain that this practice is integral to the way that the Quest schools situate learning: "By 'situated,' we mean that students are asked to 'take on' the identities and behaviors of designers, inventors, writers, historians, mathematicians, and scientists in contexts that are real or meaningful to them or both."[63]

As the name implies, the most obvious way that the Quest schools utilize RPG mechanics is by adopting the quest conceit to structure activity. Schoolwork is organized into "Discovery Missions," often called "Missions" for short, which are defined as "questlike challenges that require students to plan, collect data, create theories, test their results, and document outcomes."[64] These Missions are further broken down into constitutive parts called "Quests"—"goal-oriented challenges that equip students with necessary data, knowledge, resources, and practices to solve the larger Mission."[65] Each Mission spans an entire 12-week school term and contains 4–10 Quests.[66] The final two weeks of each Mission are devoted to overcoming a final challenge called a "Boss Level," a capstone project that requires "research, theory building, hypothesis testing, evaluation, and critique—all followed by a public defense of results."[67] While this design is consistent with the Quest schools' inquiry-based approach to learning, it also consciously imitates the major/minor quest structure found in many RPGs. The "Boss Level" component in particular evokes the convention of a final epic battle against a hated foe prominently found in MMORPGs, but also present in many fantasy RPG adventures.

Levelfly and the Gamification of E-Learning

While individuals and schools are experimenting with home-brewed varieties of gamification, gamified learning management systems (LMSs) are probably having the greatest impact in terms of sheer numbers of students served. LMSs drive the huge and quickly growing market for online, hybrid, and web enhanced learning, with online learning alone poised to net $107 billion in 2015.[68] As competition between LMSs grows, and platforms seek to distinguish themselves and attract more customers, the adoption of gamification is predicted to be one of the top ten trends in the industry,[69] and the gamification of e-learning is predicted to net $319 billion by 2020.[70] Current examples of gamified LMSs demonstrate that this technology significantly relies on the adoption of key RPG mechanics, particularly XP, quests, character statistics, and avatars. Consequently, as these systems make their way into the mainstream, they expose many more people to the conventions of RPGs.

Many established LMSs, such as Blackboard and Moodle, are developing gamification plugins like badges, leaderboards, and avatars to retain and attract customers. At the same time, many start-ups are offering integrated and robust gamification features that go far beyond these simple add-ons.

For instance, 3D GameLab, an LMS designed by faculty at Boise State University and in use from kindergarten to graduate school, has redesigned learning from the bottom up using the quest as a primary building block. Instead of following a standard curriculum with mandatory assignments along a single pathway, teachers who use 3D GameLab devise their courses as a collection of quests from which students can arrange their own pathways to course completion. Teachers can create their own quests or choose from over 20,000 pre-generated ones. As students complete quests, they earn XP, badges, and awards, and unlock new quests that open up different pathways to course completion. The more quests they complete, the more XP they earn and the more they level, which improves their final grade.[71] This system borrows staple character metrics like XP and levels from RPGs, and mimics the narrative agency that players have in RPGs, allowing for a high degree of autonomy and customization.

Another LMS startup that borrows common RPG mechanics is Classcraft. Designed by an 11th grade physics teacher and web developer, Classcraft targets the K–12 market with features that are recognizably RPG-based. The LMS operates as a game layer over the class in which students play fantasy characters—mages, warriors, and healers—and work in teams to complete quests (a.k.a. assignments). Each player can log in to view his or her avatar, statistics, notifications, and available quests. Statistics include Level, HP (health points), AP (action points—required to use powers in the game), XP, and GP (gold pieces—used to buy equipment for avatars). Players earn XP and GP for completing quests, and level up along the way, which unlocks new powers and increases their stats. Since the game world overlaps with the real world, players can use their powers to help each other in the class, for instance, by absorbing "damage" dealt to team members who miss class, and the game rewards such acts of cooperation. Additionally, XP are used as a key motivator in class and can be taken away for bad behavior.[72]

3D GameLab and Classcraft are clear examples of how RPG mechanics have bled into the design of LMSs, thereby reaching thousands of students.

In this section, however, I focus on another RPG-inspired LMS, Levelfly.[73] I helped design Levelfly for Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) of The City University of New York as part of a college initiative to address problems with retention and success in remedial courses, but it was later adopted for non-remedial courses, as well. Since its debut in Spring 2013, Levelfly has been used by more than 1000 community college students in over fifty courses across half a dozen disciplines. These courses include everything from remedial to elective courses in web-enhanced, hybrid, and fully online formats. Yet, despite its hi-tech design, Levelfly, like Sheldon's multiplayer classroom, traces its origins to a humble pen-and-paper prototype.

In late 2008, I began to design an RPG-based gamification system to improve engagement in my remedial writing course at BMCC. I designed an XP system for the class in which each assignment was a "quest" worth a designated number of XP, and students could choose which quests to tackle in order to earn enough XP to level up and qualify for the final exam, a writing test that determined whether they passed or failed the course. To help students track their points, I designed a paper "character sheet" modeled after *D&D* character sheets. The character sheet also included a section for adding an avatar, which added a light role-playing dimension to the "game."

I implemented this gamified system for the first time in Spring 2009. The results were amazing: student absences went down, student participation went up, and, as a result, my pass rate on the final exam improved significantly. Over the next three years, I gradually improved the design, for instance, by adding a "skills" section to the character sheet to track student performance in each learning outcome. The final product exhibited many of the hallmark features of RPGs: an XP and level system, quest-based assignments, character sheets with statistics on points and skills, and an avatar-based role-playing component. I functioned as the de facto GM for the game, awarding points and arbitrating outcomes. Eventually, this pen-and-paper RPG system would become the basis for Levelfly.

I began work on Levelfly in 2011 as part of a BMCC initiative to explore game-based solutions to the problems of retention and success in remedial courses. Levelfly (initially called College Quest during the pilot stage) is a gamified LMS that incorporates the key elements from my pen-and-paper design—an XP system, character statistics, quest-based assignments, and avatars—along with basic LMS components and social media tools. With Levelfly, users can create courses with discussion forums, file storage, notifications, and individualized learning analytics; keep track of course assignments on a personalized to-do list; track grades in an easy-to-use online grade book; design personal profiles with custom avatars; create social groups; friend and message each other; and evaluate their performance on a system-wide leaderboard.

At the heart of Levelfly is an "achievement system" that incorporates common RPG mechanics to improve engagement and provide helpful feedback. Achievement systems became commonplace among video games in 2005, when Microsoft debuted one for its Xbox live and console games to keep track of players' points, badges, and rank. Shortly thereafter, popular MMORPGs like *Star Trek Online* and *World of Warcraft* began offering similar achievement systems to engage players and drive fan communities. Levelfly's achievement system consists of three basic parts—XP, badges, and statistics on student learning outcomes—each of which is inspired by RPGs.

The idea of incorporating an XP system into the everyday practice of teaching a college course actually parallels the established practice of using college credits and degrees to measure and reward student progress. In RPG terms, when students complete a course they earn experience points (i.e., credits) and eventually level up (i.e., graduate with a degree). This information is tracked in an academic transcript, which functions like a character sheet in *D&D*. Levelfly expands upon the traditional credit system by offering XP throughout a course, not just at the end, and by allowing students to level up multiple times en route to a degree, thereby multiplying the motivational benefits of the traditional credit system.

Each Levelfly course consists of individual tasks worth 0–100 XP, and the entire course is worth up to 1000 XP. If a student completes a task, he or she is awarded all of the XP for that task in recognition of their effort, which motivates them to keep completing assignments. As students earn XP, they gradually level up, earning new artwork for their avatars, which they can dress up on their personal profile page. While this reward confers no economic value or privilege, it nonetheless functions as a kind of social status similar to that conferred by special loot in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*. In addition to motivating students, XP allow students to track their progress in the course; students can track their course XP on an individualized course statistics page, their total XP on their profile page, and their XP rank on a system-wide leaderboard.

Levelfly's XP system is perhaps the most striking indicator of the degree to which the design of the software is indebted to common RPG mechanics. Earning XP for completing tasks and leveling up at specific thresholds mirrors the way that RPGs mete out XP for completing quests and level up characters as they progress, allowing them to access new powers and perks. Furthermore, a student's profile page functions like a character sheet, replete with XP meter, level count, and an avatar image that represents the "character" the student is playing. Finally, behind all of this is the teacher, who serves as the course's GM, preparing quests (i.e., tasks) and awarding experience points to those who complete them.

Digital badges are another part of Levelfly's achievement system. They serve as a public mark of competency, rank, or distinction in the skills important to the course. While badges are commonly associated with the military, youth groups (such as the Cub Scouts), and competitions, more recently they have become popularized as a core element of achievement systems for video games and MMORPGs. In practice, a high school diploma or college degree also functions like a badge; it publicly confers rank and distinction. A novel "open badges" initiative by Mozilla with funding from the MacArthur Foundation seeks to promote digital badges as a new standard for lifelong learning, using Mozilla's web browser as a kind of virtual "backpack" to store and display them for prospective employers or schools.[74]

Levelfly also marries the badge systems commonly found in the latest video games and MMORPGs with traditional educational content. Levelfly's badging system is a flexible tool that allows teachers to design customized badges for any purpose and award them to students at any time. Some badges may be focused on marking competency in core course skills, while other badges may be more about appreciating desirable conduct, such as perfect attendance, strong participation, or a willingness to help others. Still other badges might be reserved for rewarding distinction, such as writing the best paper or coming up with the best proof. Just like with achievement systems for video games and MMORPGs, badges in Levelfly are social: they are prominently displayed on a student's public profile page to mark accomplishment.

The third leg of Levelfly's achievement system involves the gamification of learning outcomes by adapting the mechanics of RPG character statistics. Each assignment can be evaluated by the individual learning outcomes for the course using a simple rating system. This provides students with real-time feedback on how they are doing in each learning outcome for the course, information that they can view on their individualized course statistics page. Students can assess their strengths and weaknesses, and also view a list of the top five students for each learning outcome in order to facilitate peer-mentoring opportunities. When the course is over, students automatically receive a gold medal for each high-performing outcome, which is publicly displayed alongside their badges and distinguished by a golden hue.

This system thus converts otherwise bland and often under-utilized learning outcomes into a dynamic means for providing valuable, real-time learning analytics to help students succeed. Furthermore, it is directly inspired by the character statistics that are so integral to tabletop and digital RPGs. The course statistics page serves as a de facto online character sheet for each student, and the outcomes section mimics the breakdown of abilities and skills that define and distinguish each character. With this information, the student, like the RPG player, can determine his or her strengths and weaknesses and decide how best to build his or her "character."

Conclusion: From Questing to Learning

Only forty years ago, David Arneson—with the aid of a fantasy rules supplement from Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren's medieval wargame *Chainmail* (1971)—began running his now legendary Blackmoor adventure in his basement for a group of friends, a fateful dungeon-crawl that would inaugurate the RPG genre. A few years later, TRPGs were exploding in the gamer community; a decade later, they were spawning dozens of CRPGs; and three decades later, they were morphing into MMORPGs that reached millions of players worldwide.

Yet, perhaps the most surprising development in the brief history of the RPG is its seminal influence on the new technology of gamification, a curious blend of seriousness and play that is bringing the hallmark features of RPGs to a much wider audience. Through gamification, RPGs have made the transition from entertainment to serious activity, from fantasy worlds to everyday life. It is hard to believe that the seminal mechanics of RPGs invented long ago by Arneson and Gygax to govern the vagaries of fantasy role-play—XP systems, quests, player characters—now drive innovations in such remote and unrelated areas as education and business. Questing is no longer an activity restricted to the wild imaginations of fantasy gamers; it is now a regular part of instruction and learning in a growing number of schools. Similarly, XP and levels are no longer concepts reserved for the esoteric jargon of gamer geeks; university students are now measuring their educational progress in XP rather than grades—and benefitting from it. As one student who used Levelfly for her course put it, "The points and levels helped me. It made me notice I was doing better, that I could keep getting ahead in my schoolwork."

To a large extent, RPG mechanics have played a key role in gamification's success as a technology for engaging and motivating people. At the same time, through gamification RPGs are making the transition from questing systems to learning systems, human resource systems, and beyond. Arneson and Gygax could never have foreseen that a gaming system designed to level up players would one day be used to level up students and employees. It's hard to predict what the future holds. But, if the past is any indication, RPGs will continue to inform the evolution of gamification, as well as other emerging game-based technologies, leveling up new and unexpected dimensions of life along the way.

NOTES

1. For a review of most of the meta-analyses of research on game-based learning, see Chapter 2 of Nicola Whitton, *Digital Games & Learning: Research and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Chapter 4 of Karl M. Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-Based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2012).

2. Kapp, 7.

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

4. *Ibid.*, 10.

5. "Gamification," *Google Trends*, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=gamification.

6. Jesse Schell, "Design Outside the Box" (paper presented at the D.I.C.E. Summit, February 16–19, 2010, Las Vegas, Nevada). Video accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.dicesummit.org/video_gallery/video_gallery_2010.asp.

7. "Gartner Predicts Over 70 Percent of Global 2000 Organisations Will Have at Least One Gamified Application by 2014," *Gartner*, November 9, 2011, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/1844115.

8. Harry McCracken, "MOOC Brigade: Back to School 26 Years Later," *Time*, September 24, 2012, accessed February 27, 2015, http://nation.time.com/2012/09/24/mooc-brigade-back-to-school-26-years-later/.

9. Amy Adkins, "Majority of U.S. Employees Not Engaged Despite Gains in 2014," *Gallup*, January 28, 2015, accessed May 30, 2015, http://www.gallup.com/poll/181289/majority-employees-not-engaged-despite-gains-2014.aspx.

10. Brian Burke, "Gartner Says by 2014, 80 Percent of Current Gamified Applications Will Fail to Meet Business Objectives Primarily Due to Poor Design," *Gartner*, November 27, 2012, accessed February 27, 2012, http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2251015.

11. "Gamification Market Worth $5.5 Billion by 2018," *MarketsandMarkets*, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.marketsandmarkets.com/PressReleases/gamification.asp. See also "Global Gamification Market 2014–2018," *TechNavio*, October 1, 2014, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.technavio.com/report/global-gamification-market-2014–2018.

12. Gabe Zichermann and Joselin Linder, *The Gamification Revolution: How Leaders Leverage Game Mechanics to Crush the Competition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013), xvii.

13. Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 3.

14. Seth Priebatsch, "The Game Layer on Top of the World" (paper presented at TEDxBoston, July 29, 2010). Video accessed February 27, 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/seth_priebatsch_the_game_layer_on_top_of_the_world.

15. See Margaret Robertson, "Can't Play, Won't Play," *Hide&Seek*, October 6, 2010, accessed February 27, 2015, http://hideandseek.net/2010/10/06/cant-play-wont-play/; Sarah Smith-Robbins, "'This Game Sucks': How to Improve the Gamification of Education," *EDUCAUSE Review* 46, no. 1 (2011): 58–59; Sebastian Deterding, "Meaningful Play: Getting Gamification Right," *Google Tech Talk*, January 24, 2011, accessed February 27, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZGCPap7GkY; and Heather Chaplin, "I Don't Want to Be a Superhero: Ditching Reality for a Game Isn't as Fun as It Sounds," *Slate*, March 29, 2011, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2011/03/i_dont_want_to_be_a_superhero.html.

16. Ian Bogost, "Persuasive Games: Exploitationware," *Gamasutra*, May 3, 2011, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134735/persuasive_games_exploitationware.php?page=1.

17. John Ferrara, "Games for Persuasion: Argumentation, Procedurality, and the Lie of Gamification," *Games and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2013): 289–304.

18. Brian Burke proposes that a "player-centric" approach to design can avoid the three common pitfalls that lead to failed gamification designs: poorly defined

outcomes, inattention to player goals, or a lack of emotional engagement. Brian Burke, *Gamify: How Gamification Motivates People to do Extraordinary Things* (Brookline, MA: Bibliomotion, 2014), 127. Steve Dale suggests that gamification can deliver on its promise to enhance motivation and engagement if player needs are prioritized over organizational goals and technological approaches that emphasize common game mechanics. Steve Dale, "Gamification: Making Work Fun, or Making Fun of Work?," *Business Information Review* 31, no. 2 (2014): 82–90. Matthew Jensen agrees that successful gamification requires the prioritization of the player experience. Matthew Jensen, "Engaging the Learner: Gamification Strives to Keep the User's Interest," *Training + Development*, January 2012, 42.

19. Ilaria Caponetto, Jeffrey Earp, and Michela Ott, "Gamification and Education: A Literature Review," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*, University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014 (Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014), 50–57.

20. See Jordan Frith, "Turning Life into a Game: Foursquare, Gamification, and Personal Mobility," *Mobile Media & Communication* 1, no. 2 (2013): 248–62; Martin Sillaots, "Achieving Flow Through Gamification: A Study on Re-Designing Research Methods Courses," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*, University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014 (Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014), 538–45; Martin Sillaots, "Achieving Flow Through Gamification in the Course of Computer Games," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*, University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014 (Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014), 470–77; Ong Chao Xiang, Teh Tuan Ann, Chan Ying Hui, and Lee Tse Yew, "Effectiveness of Gamification in Vocational Technical Education," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*, University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014 (Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014), 636–44; and Stine Ejsing-Duun and Helle Skovbjerg Karoff, "Gamification of a Higher Education Course: What's the Fun in That?," in *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*, University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014 (Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014), 92–98.

21. A study by Andreas Lieberoth distinguishes between "deep" gamification, which relies on game mechanics, such as those listed above, and "shallow" gamification, or what he calls "framification," which uses light game-like framing devices, such as game vernacular and artifacts. Andreas Lieberoth, "Shallow Gamification: Testing Psychological Effects of Framing an Activity as a Game," *Games and Culture* (2014): 1–20.

22. Juho Hamari, Jonna Koivisto, and Harri Sarsa. "Does Gamification Work?: A Literature Review of Empirical Studies on Gamification," in *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Hawaii, USA, January 6–9, 2014 (Hawaii: International Conference on System Sciences, 2014), 5.

23. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 72.

24. See Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).

25. Scott Rigby and Richard M. Ryan, *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us in and Hold Us Spellbound* (Denver: Praeger, 2011), 11–12.

26. James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Rev. ed. (2003; Rev. ed., New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

27. Michele D. Dickey, "Engaging by Design: How Engagement Strategies in Popular Computer and Video Games Can Inform Instructional Design," *Educational Technology Research & Development* 53, no. 2 (2005): 67–83.

28. Sebastian Deterding, "Gameful Design for Learning," *Training + Development*, July 2013, 60–63.

29. A notable exception is Brian Burke's *Gamify*, which takes a player-centric approach that rejects the industry's over-reliance on a fixed set of game mechanics.

30. Byron Reeves and J. Leighton Read, *Total Engagement: Using Games and Virtual Worlds to Change the Way People Work and Businesses Compete* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 8.

31. Zichermann and Linder, *The Gamification Revolution*, 223.

32. Gabe Zichermann and Christopher Cunningham, *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2011).

33. Rajat Paharia, *Loyalty 3.0: How to Revolutionize Customer and Employee Engagement with Big Data and Gamification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 73–84.

34. Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter, *For the Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business* (Philadelphia: Wharton Digital Press, 2012), 72–77.

35. Kapp, 25–50.

36. Kevin Yee, "Pedagogical Gamification: Principles of Video Games That Can Enhance Teaching," in *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional, and Organizational Development*, ed. James E. Groccia and Laura Cruz, vol. 32 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 335–49.

37. Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa, 3–4.

38. David M. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 65.

39. Since these mechanics and the scholarship on RPG history and design are discussed at length in the introduction to this volume, I provide only a brief description of each mechanic here.

40. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5, 11.

41. R. F. Kenny and G. A. Gunter, "Endogenous Fantasy-Based Serious Games: Intrinsic Motivation and Learning," *Digital Media* 2, no. 1 (2007): 8–13; and Michele D. Dickey, "Game Design and Learning: A Conjectural Analysis of How Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) Foster Intrinsic Motivation," *Educational Technology Research & Development* 55, no. 3 (2007): 253–73.

42. Mark G. Chen, "Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2009): 47–73; S. De Freitas and M. Griffiths, "Online Gaming as an Educational Tool in Learning and Training," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 38, no. 3 (2007): 535–37; and B. Choi, I. Lee, and J. Kim, "Collaborate and Share: An Experimental Study of the Effects of Task and Reward Interdependencies in Online Games," *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 10, no. 4 (2007): 591–95.

43. Timothy C. Lisk, Ugur T. Kaplancali, and Ronald E. Riggio, "Leadership in Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments," *Simulation & Gaming* 43, no. 1 (2012): 133–49.

44. Zach Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

45. S. Murphy, "Your Avatar, Your Guide," *Scientific American Mind* 22, no. 1 (2011): 58–63.

46. John Taylor and Rex Walford, *Simulations in the Classroom: An Introduction to Role-Play, Games and Simulations in Education, with Six Established Games Described in Detail and a Directory of Published Material* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1972); Pauline Furness, *Role Play in the Elementary School* (New York: Hart, 1976); Morry van Ments, *The Effective Use of Role-Play: Practical Techniques for Improvising Learning* (1983; 2d ed., London: Kogan Page, 1999); John P. Hertel and Barbara J. Millis, *Using Simulations to Promote Learning in Higher Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2002); David Gibson, Clark Aldrich, and Marc Prensky, *Games and Simulations in Online Learning: Research and Development Frameworks* (Hershey, PA: Information Science, 2007); Clark Aldrich, *Learning Online with Games, Simulations, and Virtual Worlds: Strategies for Online Instruction* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

47. Mark C. Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). See also the Reacting to the Past website: https://reacting.barnard.edu/.

48. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, "Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social Life," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games*, ed. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 10.

49. Lee Sheldon, *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* (Boston: Cengage, 2012), xiv.

50. *Ibid.*, 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 10.

52. *Ibid.*, xvi.

53. *Ibid.*, 268.

54. *Ibid.*, 17.

55. "Mission, Vision, Purpose & Values," *Quest to Learn*, accessed February 27, 2015, http://middleschool.q2l.org/about-us/mission/.

56. Katie Salen, Robert Torres, Loretta Wolozin, Rebecca Rufo-Tepper, and Arana Shapiro, *Quest to Learn: Developing the School for Digital Kids*, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 10.

57. *Ibid.*, x–xi.

58. *Ibid.*, 3.

59. *Ibid.*, 1.

60. *Ibid.*, 1.

61. "Game-Like Learning," *ChicagoQuest Schools*, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.chicagoquest.org/#!game-like-learning/crzq.

62. Salen et al., *Quest to Learn*, xvii.

63. *Ibid.*, 10.

64. *Ibid.*, 16.

65. *Ibid.*, 75.

66. *Ibid.*, 73–76.

67. *Ibid.*, 74.

68. T. J. McCue, "Online Learning Industry Poised for $107 Billion in 2015," *Forbes*, August 27, 2014, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2014/08/27/online-learning-industry-poised-for-107-billion-in-2015/.

69. "Learning Is Evolving: 10 Key E-Learning Trends for 2015," *Aurion Learning*,

December 10, 2014, accessed February 27, 2015, http://blog.aurionlearning.com/learning-is-evolving-10-key-e-learning-trends-for-2015/.

70. "Gamification in E-Learning Marketplace," *ResearchandMarkets*, April 2015, accessed May 30, 2015, http://www.researchandmarkets.com/research/5kzsps/gamification_in.

71. "What Is 3D GameLab?," *3D GameLab*, accessed February 27, 2015, http://3dgamelab.com.

72. "Classcraft Introductory Webinar," *Vimeo*, January 21, 2015, accessed February 27, 2015, http://vimeo.com/117431751. See also the Classcraft website: http://www.classcraft.com.

73. Levelfly was developed with funding from a U.S. Department of Education Title V grant. For more information about Levelfly, visit http://www.levelflylearning.com.

74. See http://openbadges.org.

Bibliography

Adkins, Amy. "Majority of U.S. Employees Not Engaged Despite Gains in 2014." *Gallup*. January 28, 2015. Accessed May 30, 2015. http://www.gallup.com/poll/181289/majority-employees-not-engaged-despite-gains-2014.aspx.

Aldrich, Clark. *Learning Online with Games, Simulations, and Virtual Worlds: Strategies for Online Instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Bogost, Ian. "Persuasive Games: Exploitationware." *Gamasutra*. May 3, 2011. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134735/persuasive_games_exploitationware.php?page=1.

Burke, Brian. "Gartner Says by 2014, 80 Percent of Current Gamified Applications Will Fail to Meet Business Objectives Primarily Due to Poor Design." *Gartner*. November 27, 2012. Accessed February 27, 2012. http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2251015.

_____. *Gamify: How Gamification Motivates People to do Extraordinary Things*. Brookline, MA: Bibliomotion, 2014.

Caponetto, Ilaria, Jeffrey Earp, and Michela Ott. "Gamification and Education: A Literature Review." In *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*. University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014. Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014. 50–57.

Carnes, Mark C. *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Chaplin, Heather. "I Don't Want to Be a Superhero: Ditching Reality for a Game Isn't as Fun as It Sounds." *Slate*. March 29, 2011. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2011/03/i_dont_want_to_be_a_superhero.html.

Chen, Mark G. "Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2009): 47–73.

Choi, B., I. Lee, and J. Kim. "Collaborate and Share: An Experimental Study of the Effects of Task and Reward Interdependencies in Online Games." *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 10, no. 4 (2007): 591–95.

"Classcraft Introductory Webinar." *Vimeo*. January 21, 2015. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://vimeo.com/117431751.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Dale, Steve. "Gamification: Making Work Fun, or Making Fun of Work?" *Business Information Review* 31, no. 2 (2014): 82–90.

De Freitas, S., and M. Griffiths. "Online Gaming as an Educational Tool in Learning and Training." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 38, no. 3 (2007): 535–37.

Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum Press, 1985.

Deterding, Sebastian. "Gameful Design for Learning." *Training + Development*, July 2013, 60–63.

_____. "Meaningful Play: Getting Gamification Right." *Google Tech Talk*. January 24, 2011. Accessed February 27, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZGCPap7GkY.

Dickey, Michele D. "Engaging by Design: How Engagement Strategies in Popular Computer and Video Games Can Inform Instructional Design." *Educational Technology Research & Development* 53, no. 2 (2005): 67–83.

_____. "Game Design and Learning: A Conjectural Analysis of How Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) Foster Intrinsic Motivation." *Educational Technology Research & Development* 55, no. 3 (2007): 253–73.

Ejsing-Duun, Stine, and Helle Skovbjerg Karoff. "Gamification of a Higher Education Course: What's the Fun in That?" In *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*. University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014. Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014. 92–98.

Ewalt, David M. *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It*. New York: Scribner, 2013.

Ferrara, John. "Games for Persuasion: Argumentation, Procedurality, and the Lie of Gamification." *Games and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2013): 289–304.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Frith, Jordan. "Turning Life into a Game: Foursquare, Gamification, and Personal Mobility." *Mobile Media & Communication* 1, no. 2 (2013): 248–62.

Furness, Pauline. *Role Play in the Elementary School*. New York: Hart, 1976.

"Game-Like Learning." *ChicagoQuest Schools*. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.chicagoquest.org/#!game-like-learning/crzq.

"Gamification." *Google Trends*. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=gamification.

"Gamification in E-Learning Marketplace." *ResearchandMarkets*. April 2015. Accessed May 30, 2015. http://www.researchandmarkets.com/research/5kzsps/gamification_in.

"Gamification Market Worth $5.5 Billion by 2018." *MarketsandMarkets*. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.marketsandmarkets.com/PressReleases/gamification.asp.

"Gartner Predicts Over 70 Percent of Global 2000 Organisations Will Have at Least One Gamified Application by 2014." *Gartner*. November 9, 2011. Accessed February 27. 2015, http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/1844115.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. 2003. Revised and updated. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

Gibson, David, Clark Aldrich, and Marc Prensky. *Games and Simulations in Online Learning: Research and Development Frameworks*. Hershey, PA: Information Science, 2007.

"Global Gamification Market 2014–2018." *TechNavio*. October 1, 2014. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.technavio.com/report/global-gamification-market-2014–2018.

Hamari, Juho, Jonna Koivisto, and Harri Sarsa. "Does Gamification Work?: A Literature Review of Empirical Studies on Gamification." In *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*. Hawaii, USA, January 6–9, 2014. Hawaii: HICSS, 2014. 1–10.

Hertel, John P., and Barbara J. Millis. *Using Simulations to Promote Learning in Higher Education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2002.

Jensen, Matthew. "Engaging the Learner: Gamification Strives to Keep the User's Interest." *Training + Development*, January 2012, 40–44.

Kapp, Karl M. *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-Based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2012.

Kenny, R. F., and G. A. Gunter. "Endogenous Fantasy-Based Serious Games: Intrinsic Motivation and Learning." *Digital Media* 2, no. 1 (2007): 8–13.

"Learning Is Evolving: 10 Key E-Learning Trends for 2015." *Aurion Learning*. December 10, 2014. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://blog.aurionlearning.com/learning-is-evolving-10-key-e-learning-trends-for-2015/.

Lieberoth, Andreas. "Shallow Gamification: Testing Psychological Effects of Framing an Activity as a Game." *Games and Culture* (2014): 1–20.

Lisk, Timothy C., Ugur T. Kaplancali, and Ronald E. Riggio. "Leadership in Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments." *Simulation & Gaming* 43, no. 1 (2012): 133–49.

McCracken, Harry. "MOOC Brigade: Back to School 26 Years Later." *Time*. September 24, 2012. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://nation.time.com/2012/09/24/mooc-brigade-back-to-school-26-years-later/.

McCue, T. J. "Online Learning Industry Poised for $107 Billion in 2015." *Forbes*. August 27, 2014. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2014/08/27/online-learning-industry-poised-for-107-billion-in-2015/.

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

Murphy, S. "Your Avatar, Your Guide." *Scientific American Mind* 22, no. 1 (2011): 58–63.

Paharia, Rajat. *Loyalty 3.0: How to Revolutionize Customer and Employee Engagement with Big Data and Gamification*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013.

Priebatsch, Seth. "The Game Layer on Top of the World." Paper presented at TEDx-Boston. Boston. July 29, 2010.

Reeves, Byron, and J. Leighton Read. *Total Engagement: Using Games and Virtual Worlds to Change the Way People Work and Businesses Compete*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009.

Rigby, Scott, and Richard M. Ryan. *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us in and Hold Us Spellbound*. Denver: Praeger, 2011.

Robertson, Margaret. "Can't Play, Won't Play." *Hide&Seek*. October 6, 2010. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://hideandseek.net/2010/10/06/cant-play-wont-play/.

Salen, Katie, Robert Torres, Loretta Wolozin, Rebecca Rufo-Tepper, and Arana Shapiro. *Quest to Learn: Developing the School for Digital Kids*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

Schell, Jesse. "Design Outside the Box." Paper presented at the D.I.C.E. Summit. Las Vegas, Nevada, February 16–19, 2010.

Sheldon, Lee. *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game*. Boston: Cengage, 2012.

Sillaots, Martin. "Achieving Flow Through Gamification: A Study on Re-Designing Research Methods Courses." In *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*. University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014. Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014. 538–45.

_____. "Achieving Flow Through Gamification in the Course of Computer Games." In *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*. University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014. Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014. 470–77.

Smith-Robbins, Sarah. "'This Game Sucks': How to Improve the Gamification of Education." *EDUCAUSE Review* 46, no. 1 (2011): 58–59.

Taylor, John, and Rex Walford. *Simulations in the Classroom: An Introduction to Role-Play, Games and Simulations in Education, with Six Established Games Described in Detail and a Directory of Published Material*. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1972.

van Ments, Morry. *The Effective Use of Role-play: Practical Techniques for Improvising Learning*. 1983. 2nd ed. London: Kogan Page, 1999.

Waggoner, Zach. *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009.

Werbach, Kevin, and Dan Hunter. *For the Win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business*. Philadelphia: Wharton Digital Press, 2012.

"What Is 3D GameLab?" *3D GameLab*. Accessed February 27, 2015. http://3dgamelab.com.

Whitton, Nicola. *Digital Games & Learning: Research and Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Williams, J. Patrick, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler. "Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social 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. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. 1–18.

Xiang, Ong Chao, Teh Tuan Ann, Chan Ying Hui, and Lee Tse Yew. "Effectiveness of Gamification in Vocational Technical Education." In *Proceedings of the 8th European Conference on Games Based Learning*. University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany, October 9–10, 2014. Berlin: Academic Conferences & Publishing International Ltd., 2014. 636–44.

Yee, Kevin. "Pedagogical Gamification: Principles of Video Games that Can Enhance Teaching." In *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional, and Organizational Development*. Edited by James E. Groccia and Laura Cruz. Vol. 32. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013. 335–49.

Zichermann, Gabe, and Christopher Cunningham. *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2011.

Zichermann, Gabe, and Joselin Linder. *The Gamification Revolution: How Leaders Leverage Game Mechanics to Crush the Competition*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2013.

About the Contributors

Jonathan M. **Bradley** is the web learning environments application developer for the Newman Library at Virginia Tech. He earned a Ph.D. in English from Middle Tennessee State University, and his research focuses on the intersection of pedagogy and technology. He designs educational technology resources, and his publications vary in topic from pedagogy to creative writing.

Tim **Bryant** is an assistant professor at SUNY Buffalo State. He received a Ph.D. in English and a certificate in Cultural Studies from SUNY University at Buffalo. His research examines literature and film of the fantastic, meta-fiction, and apocalypse narratives. He has published articles on Alan Moore, Edgar Allan Poe, and Melissa Scott.

Andrew **Byers** is a visiting assistant professor of history at Duke University. He received a Ph.D. in history from Duke University. His research interests include popular culture, biopolitics, and the history of geek culture. In addition to his academic interests in social and cultural responses to role-playing games, he has written for several RPG publishers, including Atlas Games and Steve Jackson Games.

Candido **Cabo** is a professor at New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York. He received a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering from Duke University. His research interests and publications include the use of computational models to understand and solve problems in biology and the development of pedagogies to improve computer science education.

Francesco **Crocco** is the associate director of the Online Writing Lab at Excelsior College. He received a Ph.D. in English from the CUNY Graduate Center. His research interests include game-based learning, gamification, and utopian studies. He is the author of several articles on teaching composition and literature with games and simulations, and has designed game-based instructional technology.

Tamrah D. **Cunningham** is an adjunct instructor at New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York. She is completing an M.F.A. in game design at New York University. Her research interests include narrative studies and world-building in role-playing games, particularly Japanese RPGs. She has designed several games, most recently *Everlasting Unemployment.*

Antero **Garcia** is an assistant professor in the English department at Colorado State University. He received a Ph.D. in education from the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research focuses on critical literacies, youth civic identity, and the use of participatory media in schools.

Reneta D. **Lansiquot** is an associate professor and program director, Professional and Technical Writing, at New York City College of Technology of CUNY. She received a Ph.D. in educational communication and technology from New York University. Her mixed-methodology research focuses on interdisciplinary studies. Her publications include *Cases on Interdisciplinary Research Trends in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*.

Troy **Leaman** is a time-based media technician at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario). He received a B.A.H. (Medial) in film and psychology from Queen's, and his research addresses the tailored use of science fiction TRPGs as a tool for exploring cultural immersion and fostering adaptability skills. He has worked extensively with game designer David Pulver.

Andreas **Lieberoth** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Interacting Minds Centre and Centre for Community Driven Research, Aarhus University, where he received a Ph.D. in psychology. He has co-designed several games, both digital and analog. His research centers on the social and cognitive psychology of gaming, with a focus on dissociating the individual psychologically functional elements in game designs.

Cathlena **Martin** is an assistant professor and coordinator of Game Studies and Design at the University of Montevallo. She received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida. Her research interests include children's literature and games, game-based learning, and the history of games. Her publications cover *Peter Pan* and video games, play in *Ender's Game*, and game adaptations of children's texts.

Joseph B. **Meyer** is a doctoral student in American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. His research interests include digital studies, emerging media, identity and community formation, and trauma studies. His work focuses on social networking and shifting conceptions of power and privilege and the material consequences of these shifts.

Jonas **Trier-Knudsen** is a game designer and cultural historian. He works with educational games and Nordic LARP, and has helped bring role-playing games to Danish schools, museums, and boardrooms. He writes about games for the Danish national science website Videnskab.dk and the Danish national role-playing magazine *ROLLE|SPIL*.

Benton **Tyler** is an associate professor of mathematics at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama. He received a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Mississippi. His research interests and publications lie primarily in the fields of combinatorics and game theory.

Kai-Uwe **Werbeck** is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He received a Ph.D. in German literature from UNC–Chapel Hill. His research interests include twentieth-century German literature, media theory, and film studies. He is the author of several articles on the German avant-garde poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and researches German horror movies after 1945.

Timm **Woods** is an adjunct professor with St. Johns University in Queens, where he is working toward a D.A. in English. His research interests include game-based learning, role-playing games as a narrative medium, and language learning. He works at the Brooklyn Strategist in New York organizing the tabletop RPG program and teaching games to young and adult players.

This page intentionally left blank

Index

achievement system 283, 292–293
adaptive choice 73–74, 77, 80, 82, 84, 89–90, 91
adolescence 60
Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (*AD&D*) 213–214, 216, 242, 251*n*23, 274*n*24
affinity spaces 108, 110
Aftermath 87
Alice 144, 148, 150
Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) 177
alternative assignments 131
America's Army 10, 17*n*49
Anthropy, Anna 190, 193
anti-cult movement 24, 25, 26–31, 48–50, 61
anti-persuasion stance 187–188
Applecline, Shanon 178
Arcanum 9
archetypes 268–269
Aristotle 2
Arneson, Dave 2, 5, 104, 283, 294
as-if truths 194–195, 197
Astrópía 12
attributes 257, 264, 266, 268
augmented realities 235–237, 239–241, 244, 247–250
authentic activities 104
Avalon Hill 3
avatars 285, 286, 290, 291, 292

badges 279, 280, 282, 283, 290, 292, 293
Badgeville 9
Baenre, Jarlaxle 262, 263
Bard's Tale 8
Barrowcliffe, Mark 3
Barton, Matt 2, 4, 6
Bastion of Broken Souls 261
Bateman, Chris 7
The Battle for Slaughter Gulch 273
Battlehammer, Bruenor 262
Baudrillard, Jean 244–245, 247–249
Bender's Game 12
The Big Bang Theory 12
Blackboard 290
Blackmoor 294
Bloom's taxonomy 143, 146, 147, 149–150, 155, 158
board game 256–273, 274*n*7, 274*n*12, 274*n*13
Bodies in Code 244, 247, 248
Bogost, Ian 189–190, 192, 194, 280
Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (BADD) 28–29, 38, 48, 50
Bowman, Sarah Lynne 1
Brackin, Adam 5
Brooklyn Strategist 116
Brown, John Seely 104
Bryant, William H. 111
Buffy the Vampire Slayer 11
Bunchball 9, 280, 282
business 279, 280, 282, 284, 285, 294

Call of Duty 217, 219
campaign 261, 265, 269, 271, 273
Campbell, Joseph 6
Capes 8
card game 256–258, 269–273
Cardwell, Paul 104
Carnes, Mark C. 101, 114, 115
Carr, Mike 213
Castle Ravenloft 258, 259, 260, 263, 265
Catti-brie 262–263
The Cave of Time 80
CBS 11
Chainmail 294
character analysis 129–130, 134, 136, 137
character class 260, 261, 263, 264, 266, 268, 270, 271, 273, 274*n*24
character sheet 130–132, 137, 284, 291–293
ChicagoQuest 287, 289
Chick, Jack 37, 48
Chinese ideograms 100
Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) 73, 74, 79–81, 85–86, 88–89, 90, 91
Christianity 24, 25–26, 32, 33, 34, 37, 40
City of Bits 243, 236
civil defense 75–76, 79
Classcraft 290

clinical issues 51, 52, 53, 54–56, 59, 61, 62
A Closed World 10
cognitive estrangement 195–196
Cohen, Stanley 23
Cold War 72, 73, 74, 77, 80–82, 84, 85, 86–87, 88–89, 91
Colegio San Marcos 116
collaboration 281, 284, 285, 288
Collins, Allan 104
combat 258, 260, 263, 265, 267, 271, 272, 274*n*7
communities of fun 101
communities of practice 108
Community 12
computer game 53, 55, 59, 235–242, 247
computer programming 144, 148, 149, 150, 155, 157, 158
computer role-playing game (CRPG) 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 279, 283, 285, 294
connected learning 165, 168–169, 173, 177
contextualization 106
contingency 73–74, 76–77, 78, 80, 81, 82, 83–84, 86, 88, 90, 91
cooperative play 259, 265, 266, 267, 269, 271, 274*n*7
Corner Gas 12
Cosmic Patrol 8
Costikyan, Greg 5, 257
Count Strahd Von Zarovich 259
Cover, Jennifer Grouling 2, 257
Crane, Luke 197, 201
creative writing 144, 147, 148, 150, 155, 157
creativity 129
crime 52, 53, 54–56, 59, 60
criminality *see* crime
critical play method 191, 204
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly 281
Cub Scouts 293

D&D Adventure System Cooperative Game 257, 258–266
D&D Inn-Fighting Dice Game 273
Davison, Ann 115
Dayan, Daniel 109
Dead Gentleman Productions 12
Deadlands 273
death 265, 269, 271
Debord, Guy 244–246
Deci, Edward L. 281
Deleuze, Gilles 208, 223, 226
demons 32–33, 36–37, 39
de Peuter, Greg 188–189, 190–191
depression 47, 54–55, 60
dérive 244–245
Descent 257, 266–269
Deterding, Sebastian 282
Deus Ex 9
devils *see* demons
Dewey, John 170–173, 178
Dexter's Laboratory 11
Diablo 8
dice 266, 267, 268
Dickey, Michele D. 281
digital badges 292–293
digital natives and digital immigrants 9
digital tabletop software 125, 135
Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple 112
Dog Eat Dog 186, 192, 204
Doomtown: Reloaded 273
Draconomicon 261
Dragon 32–37
Duck and Cover 76
Duguid, Paul 104
dungeon crawl 258, 260, 266, 268–270, 272
Dungeon Master (DM) 164–165, 167, 168, 169, 171, 173–178, 257, 258, 259, 260, 264, 265, 266, 267, 274*n*7
The Dungeon Masters 12
Dungeon Master's Guide 84, 166, 169, 175, 177
Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*) 22–23, 24, 27–31, 32–38, 39–40, 73, 77, 78–79, 83, 85, 91, 99, 123–130, 132–133, 164, 165, 166, 169, 174–175, 178, 209, 213–214, 216–217, 224, 237, 238, 239, 240, 250, 256–273, 274*n*7, 274*n*12, 274*n*13, 275*n*59, 283, 284, 291, 292
Dungeons & Dragons: The Book of Vile Darkness 11
Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God 11
Durance 192, 204
Dyer-Witheford, Nick 188–189, 190–191
dynamic immersion 100

education 278–294
Egbert, James Dallas, III 11, 28
Elder Scrolls 9
emergence 107
empathy 122, 124, 130, 134, 137
Endgame 249–250
engagement 101, 109, 110, 111, 115, 116, 279, 280, 281, 282, 285, 287, 291, 292, 296*n*18
English 125, 126, 129, 132, 138
English as a Second Language (ESL) 98, 99, 107, 111
engrossment 285
Entreri, Artemis 262, 266
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial 10
Everquest 9
Ewalt, David M. 3, 4, 7, 283
experience points (XP) 278–280, 282–292, 294
Exploitationware 280

Facebook 101
Fallout 8
Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do About Nuclear Attack 75
fan fiction 167
fantasy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12
The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer's Bible 256, 270

Fear of Girls 12
feats 264, 266
fellowship 4, 6
Fernandez, Joe 220
Fiasco 8
Fighting Fantasy 85–86, 90
financialization 221, 223, 226
Fine, Gary Alan 1, 4, 5, 6, 14–15*n*1, 235, 238, 240, 244, 285
Finkelhor, David 27
Fiorella, Sam 208–209, 224, 226
Flanagan, Mary 191, 204
flow 112, 281
Flying Buffalo, Inc. 77, 86
Foldit 104–105
folk theory/hypothesis 47, 51
Forgotten Souls 269
frame 235, 236, 238, 240, 241, 242, 247, 249, 250
Frankenstein 130
Freaks and Geeks 11–12
Freemarket 186, 197–204
Freire, Paulo 170–171, 173
Friedmann, Ted 190
Frye, Northrop 6
Futurama 12

game: definition of 5; elements 281, 282; mechanics 279, 280, 282, 283, 296*n*18, 297*n*29; mobile 101
game-based learning 148, 278, 294*n*1
game master (GM) 98, 106, 107, 284, 291, 292
gamers: academic achievement 57, 59; empathy and social skills 58–59; intelligence 56, 57–58; personality 49, 53–54, 56–57; self-efficacy 55, 57, 61, 62
The Gamers 12
Games of Empire 188–189
gamification 9–10, 14, 100, 101, 104, 106, 114, 208–211, 220, 226, 278–294, 295–296*n*18, 296*n*21
Gamification Summit 279
Gartner 279–280
Gee, James Paul 9, 108, 110, 281, 287
Ghostbusters RPG 111
Gilsdorf, Ethan 3
GM-less 8
Goldhaber, Susan Lantz 115
Gombach, Barbara 115
Google 10, 14, 234, 235, 236, 244–246, 249–250
Gothic 9
grammar 106, 107, 109, 113
Greenwood, Ed 33–34
Grimtooth's Traps 83
guilds 284, 285, 286–287
Gygax, Gary 3, 5, 11, 12, 32, 33, 40, 83, 103, 213–214, 216, 283, 294

"Hacking Chinese" 109
The Halfling's Gem 262
Hamari, Juho 281, 283
Hanke, John 234–236, 241, 244
Hanks, Tom 11
Hansen, Mark 244–245, 247
Happy Birthday Robot 112–113
Harpoon 103
Hayes, Elisabeth 108, 110
Heirs of Blood 269
Holmes, Eric. J. 50–51
Homo Ludens 76
House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) 77
Howard, Jeff 6, 176
Hsueh, ShaoLan 100
Huizinga, Johan 76–77, 80, 172

idioculture 214, 217
immersion 103, 105, 115, 188, 193, 194, 196, 197, 199
Ingress 10, 14, 234–250, 251*n*13, 251*n*14, *251n16*, 253*n*61
Inside UFO 54-40 88–89
Institute of Play 287, 288
Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDS) 194
interdisciplinary studies 144, 145, 147, 148, 150, 157, 158
International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling 194
The IT Crowd 12

Jackson, Steve 85, 90
James Bond 007: Role-Playing in Her Majesty's Secret Service 82
Japanese RPGs 10
Jenkins, Henry 165, 166, 168
Journey Under the Sea 85, 90

Kapp, Karl M. 101, 278, 282
Kelly 2, R.V. 2
Khan Academy 100
Kindred: The Embraced 11
Klimmt, Christoph 187–188, 195
Klout 10, 14, 208–212, 220–227; definition 209; and gamification 210–211; score 209–211, 222–225
Koivisto, Jonna 281, 283
Koster, Raph 101
Kriegsspiel 10, 103

Ladousse, Gillian 110
language 98–100, 102, 104, 106–109, 112–116
leaderboard 279–280, 282, 283, 287, 290–292
learning ecology 167, 168
learning management system (LMS) 279, 281, 287, 289–291
learning outcomes 285, 292, 293
Left Behind 39
The Legend of Drizzt 258, 262–263, 266
level 208–209, 212–217, 218, 219–220, 222–

224, 226–227, 282–286, 290–292, 294; definitions of 212–215, 216–217
Levelfly 279, 285, 289–293, 294, 299*n*73
LGBTQ 10
Linge, Olle 109
literary studies 136, 137
literature 124–127, 130, 132–133, 135–138
Little Wars 10
live-action role-playing (LARP) 8, 47, 52, 53, 56, 57, 60, 62, 234, 238, 243, 251*n*20
living fiction 234, 235, 241, 249
Livingstone, Ian 85, 90
Lovecraft, H.P. 6
ludic turn 211, 212, 220, 223, 227
ludoliteracy 211–212, 220, 223, 226
ludological/narratological distinction 194

MacArthur Foundation 287, 288, 293
Mackay, Daniel 1, 4, 5, 7
Madam Eva 259, 260
magic circle 76–77, 78, 79, 80, 84, 88, 89, 90, 172
Magicians 113–114
Martin, George R.R. 13
massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) 2, 7, 8, 91, 235, 239, 242, 243, 244, 252*n*28, 279, 283, 285, 286, 287, 289, 292, 293, 294
Mazes and Monsters 11
Mazzanoble, Shelly 3
McGonigal, Jane 101, 280
Mearls, Mike 91, 260–261, 263, 264
media 48–50
Mena of Alnel 144, 150–156
Mentzer, Frank 8
Microscope 186, 204
Microsoft Xbox 292
Might and Magic 8
military 293; simulations 103
Minds on Fire 101, 114
mobile apps 10, 14
Modern Prometheus 105–106
Mohan, Kim 34
Molitor, Darren 29–30
Moodle 290
Moore, Roger E. 34–37
moral panic 23–26, 39
The Morrow Project 87
motivation 280, 281, 284, 285, 286, 292, 296*n*18; intrinsic 281–282
Mozilla 293
Munchkin 258, 269–273
Munchkin Quest 269, 272
mythology, Korean 113–114

narrative 124, 135–137, 144, 148, 149, 150, 151, 154, 155, 157, 281, 283, 284, 289, 290; play 73, 89; transportation 188, 193, 194, 196; *see also* immersion
Nestel, Debra 108–109
NewsRadio 11
Niantic 236, 246
non-player character (NPC) 133, 136, 259, 260, 261, 262, 265, 266
Nordic LARP 47, 52, 60
novum 195–198, 204
Nudelmann, Jerold 9

occult 24, 25, 26–31, 39, 47, 48–50, 51
The Odyssey 6
online learning 280, 285, 289, 291
OpenSimulator 144, 145, 146
Orr, Scott 111

Packard, Edward 80
Paharia, Rajat 282
Paranoia 88
participatory culture 165, 166–168, 169, 173
Pathfinder 273
pedagogy 126, 127, 130
Peterson, Jon 3, 4, 5, 7
Phillips, Brian 108, 111
Pietro, J. Di 110
player character (PC) 78, 78, 259, 260–266, 268, 271, 272
player versus player (PvP) 266
Player's Handbook 216
power 208, 209, 212, 214, 215–216, 217, 220, 223, 224, 225, 226–227
Prensky, Marc 9
Priebatsch, Seth 280
Prisoner's Dilemma 88
problem-solving 144, 148, 149, 150, 155, 158
procedural rhetoric 197, 200–201, 203, 204
psychiatry 53, 54–56, 59
psychodrama 51, 56
Pulling, Irving 28
Pulling, Patricia 28–30, 38, 48–50, 51

Queens College 115
Quest to Learn 279, 285, 287–289
quests 278, 282–287, 289–293

races 256, 260, 263, 264, 270
Radecki, Thomas E. 29–30, 38–39
Raessens, Joost 211–212, 220
"Reacting to the Past" 114–115, 285
Read, J. Leighton 282
Reagan, Ronald 72, 73
realism 108–109
Red Dragon Inn 273
Red Scare 77, 88
Reeves, Byron 282
Richard, Jack 102
Rise of the Videogame Zinesters 190
Risk 234
Robie, Joan 48
Rodgers, Theodore 102
role-playing 98, 101–104, 108–110, 114–115, 278, 281, 284–285, 289, 291, 294; courtroom

133–134; literature 123, 126, 130, 132, 133, 135, 136, 137; and pedagogy 130
role-playing games (RPG): benefits 51–54, 62; and the corporate sector 9–10; culture 1–2; and digital games 2, 8–9; and education 9; game mechanics 3–8, 283–285; histories and personal memoirs 2–3; and military 1, 9, 10, 12, 17*n*48, 17*n*49; and narrative construction 2; and NGOs 10; and television and film 10–12, 13
Rolston, Ken 111
Rosetta Stone 99, 100
RPG-lite 256, 257, 258, 261, 264, 266, 269, 273, 274*n*12
Rules of Play 102
Ryan, Richard 281

St. Gabriel's College 116
Salen, Katie 287–289
Salvatore, R.A. 262, 263
Sansing, Chad 174–177
The Sarah Silverman Program 11
Sarsa, Harri 281, 283
Satan 25, 32–34
Satanic panic 24–27, 28, 29, 30–31, 37–40
Satanic ritual abuse 24, 26–27
Satanism 11, 13, 15*n*1, 17*n*51, 25, 32–34, 48–49, 52, 53, 56, 61
Schell, Jesse 279, 286
Schick, Lawrence 3, 4
Schwartz, Dan 110
Das Schwarze Auge 240–242
scripted dialogues 109
Second Life 144–147
self-branding 222
self-determination theory 281
serious game 9, 185–187, 197–199, 203, 204, 278
Servant of the Shard 262
That '70s Show 11
Shadowrun 240, 273
Shaffer, David 108
Sheldon, Lee 9, 279, 285, 286–287, 291
Shock 186, 204
Simons, Kyle 113
The Simpsons 11
simulacrum 244, 248, 249
simulation 3, 7, 9, 10, 102, 103, 108, 125, 127, 132
situated cognition 104–105, 106
situated learning 285, 287–289
Smith, Michelle 26
social influence 209, 223, 227
social level 223–227
social media 279, 291
social networks 209, 210, 211, 222–225, 227
society of control 208, 223, 226
Solis, Daniel 112
Sorensen, Jared 197, 200, 201
space 236, 250*n*5, 251*n*14; Euclidean 246, 249; in-game 242; story 240; Third Space 249; urban 234, 235, 243–249
specialization 284
specific imaginings 195
Spielberg, Steven 10
spoil-sport 76–77, 88, 90
Star Trek Online 292
Star Wars: The Role-Playing Game 240
statistics 261, 263, 264, 268, 284, 290–293
Steal Away Jordan 186, 204
stealth persuasion 188–189
Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) 72, 73
subculture 50, 59
suicide 48, 52, 53, 54, 61, 62
The Sunless Citadel 261
Survival Under Atomic Attack 75
Suvin, Darko 195–197
System Shock 2 9

tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) 3, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 98–116, 125, 131, 134, 235, 237, 238, 239, 242, 243, 247, 252*n*41, 256–273, 274*n*7, 279, 283, 294
Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) 1, 5, 11, 79, 85, 91
technical writing 144, 145, 146, 150, 155, 157, 158
theme-based literature 132
therapy 51, 56
3D GameLab 290
Tolkien, J.R.R. 3, 6
Tomb of Horrors 83
transgressive behavior 111
transhumanism 186, 187, 198, 202
transmedia 166–167
Traveller 77, 78, 79, 83, 87
Tresca, Michael J. 3, 4, 6, 256
Troyka, Lynn Q. 9
TSR *see* Tactical Studies Rules
Tunnels and Trolls (T&T) 77, 79, 83, 86
Twilight: 2000 87

Ultima 8
Ultima Online 286
unilateral competition 267

Vampire: The Masquerade 11, 240–241
Van Ments, Morry 102
videogames *see* computer games
Virilio, Paul 248–249, 253*n*62
virtual worlds 144, 145–148, 157–158
von Thorn, Alexander 32–34
Vygotsky, Lev 115

Walton, Kendal 195
Ward, James M. 36
wargaming 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 103, 256
Warnke, Mike 26, 38
Wells, H.G. 10
Werbach, Kevin 279, 282
West End Games 111

Whedon, Joss 13
Whitton, Nicola 104, 105, 107
Wizardry 8
Wolf, Mark J.P. 195
World of Warcraft (*WoW*) 6, 9, 101, 218, 239, 242, 286, 292
Wrath of Ashardalon 258, 261–263, 265
Yee, Kevin 282–283

Zero Charisma 12
zero world 196
Zichermann, Gabe 280, 282
Zone of Proximal Development 115