A Critical History of Role-playing Games

by John Kim

Introduction

"Role-playing game" is a broad term which has been applied to a wide variety of activities, including interactive computer programs, locally-organized live-action events, online play-by-post or play-by-email forums, and more. Role-playing games are most certainly creative and artistic. However, they present a challenge for artistic criticism, because the creativity is scattered among many different pieces by different authors. Whereas a feature film is more-or-less the same every time it is projected, no two role-playing games are alike in play.

Yet it is exactly this same widespread creativity which makes them extremely important as artistic works, and worthy of critical attention. It is all too easy for criticism to be used to stifle individual creativity, by tearing apart amateur works for not living up to world-class standards. Such simplistic criticism suggests that everyone in the world should consume only the creativity of a handful of people judged as best, produced in massive quantities. Yet there is impeccable logic to this approach as well. As a critic, why should I recommend a random local amateur work compared to a polished masterpiece?

Tabletop role-playing games offer a type of compromise on this. There are professionally-written books for the game, but the action of the game as well as a fair amount of background are invented by the players. This is similar to the compromise found in fan fiction, which is based a central creative source but scattered authors create many new characters and plots. A key distinction is the role-playing games are designed with this individual creativity in mind, whereas fan fiction is a largely incidental byproduct of professional works.

Published tabletop role-playing game books should be examined for what sort of fiction they produce when played, not as works of fiction in themselves. However, what they produce is difficult to gauge. The semantic and psychological processes of role-playing are poorly understood at best. One can look at samples of play, but different groups may have quite different reactions.

There have been various attempts to evalute role-playing games by comparison with established fields, such as sociology and theater arts. In 1983, Gary Alan Fine published a sociological analysis, "Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds". Nearly two decades later, Daniel Mackay published his analysis "The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art". More recently, Michelle Nephew analyzed role-playing games as post-modern literature in her thesis "Playing With Power".

Ultimately, however, role-playing games must develop critical tools for understanding which are unique to the form. Robin Laws points to the history of film criticism in this regard. In his brief version, early critics evaluated film as literary criticism. As he describes it:

> *Films were compared to literature, and, at least at first, found severely wanting. Because they were a popular art form unapologetically tailored to the interests of the masses, serious critics treated them merely as a blot on the aesthetic landscape. Those films that were deemed acceptable were those that were most like literature. The search for serious films became a search for Great Themes, like those embodied in great literature*.

In later years, however, film criticism came to recognize the genius of film directors working in very non-literary genres: Hitchcock's suspense films, John Ford's westerns, and Howard Hawks variety of popular genres.

This same issue can easily be seen in role-playing games. Role-playing games are frequently derided as being empty of meaningful content because of the amateurish plots, characters, and themes. However, I think that this does not do justice to the interactive, creative, and personal nature of the game process. What I attempt in this essay is a comparative analysis, looking at tabletop role-playing games through comparison to each other, as informed by play and reports of play.

By analyzing the development of role-playing techniques over time, I would like to form a critical language for understanding these components. As Robin Laws comments:

> *One area of criticism that would-be RPG critics should similarly be looking hard at is the grammar of a gaming session. Films tell their stories through a variety of technical means, as do plays and prose stories. One fruitful avenue of exploration would be the issue of game mechanics, and how they hamper or hinder the narrative building process. Does a critical hit table or a skill resolution roll fulfil the same sort of purpose as a camera angle? A hard cut between scenes? A fade-out? Is there a useful distinction to be drawn between a scene that uses rules resolution and a scene that does not, as film critics distinguish between montage (effects produced through the use of the camera, editing consoles and so on) and mise en scene (effects produced in real time and space before the camera)?* (Laws 1994)

My goal here is to start on exactly this issue. I want to look at the effect of game methods through comparative analysis of different games in the history of role-playing games.

The Roots of Role-playing Games

To understand tabletop role-playing games, it is useful to understand their predecessors. The full history cannot be covered in detail here, but some grounding is vital to understand the cultural development of role-playing. While many believe that it has evolved to something different, the modern tabletop role-playing games developed out of the miniatures wargame.

Contemporary wargames began as teaching tools for military tactics in 19th century Prussia. The game, Kriegspiel ("War Game"), introduced the ideas of arranging markers on a sculpted table, and using a dice to determine any random elements in the battle. They were introduced into popular culture during World War I by H.G. Wells. As Steven

Darlington describes it,

> *It was Wells, however, who first opened up the games for the amateur. In 1915, he published a set of amateur wargaming rules in a book entitled Little Wars, now seen as the "wargamers' bible". Wells was also the first to suggest that miniature figures be collected to represent respective forces, to add flavour, and a sense of involvement, to the game. Though the book was popular, wargames did not really take off until, in 1953, Charles Roberts released the first commercially available "board" war game. Though it was a slow starter, Roberts eventually went on to form the Avalon-Hill Game Company, now one of the world's biggest game companies.*

In a sense, historical wargames can be seen as a form of education or journalism -- informing the public about the nature of war. It would be interesting to note that Wells' game was published at a time when the devastation of modern war became a reality for England, while modern wargames came out of the post-WWII period. Wargames would continue to develop during the fifties and sixties, and they remained a largely realistic depiction of historical warfare, concentrating on WWII and the U.S. Civil War. There were, however, indirect ties to the fantasy genre. In addition to Wells' science fiction work, Fletcher Pratt was also both a notable wargame author and fantasy fiction author. However, most wargames were still rooted in historical reality.

The first tabletop role-playing games were published in the American Midwest, which since then has retained a strong community of both wargamers and role-players. Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, was the site of GenCon, which originated in 1968 as a small midwestern convention with connections to the International Federation of Wargaming (IFW). The game Dungeons & Dragons was created by members of a closely related wargaming society, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, in 1973.

The early role-playing games may reflect to a degree the Midwestern, small-town ethos. For the better part of two decades, role-playing games have come predominantly from Midwest or (later) the South.

The Seventies: Exploring the Labyrinth

The seminal role-playing game and still the single most popular design is Dungeons & Dragons. It was developed in the suburban American Midwest in the early 1970s, specifically Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. This was a center of the wargaming subculture, where the convention GenCon was founded in 1968. There the game was developed over a period of several years, starting from historical tabletop miniatures play on a known board and evolving into play of individual fantasy characters in an unknown dungeon setting.

> *On what was apparently a lark, Arneson decided to set one game around the idea of heroes being asked by the Elf King to rescue his daughter. She was being held beneath the abandoned Blackmoor castle in what would legitimately be called a dungeon. Instead of the usual tabletop gaming, the players were guided through the game more abstractly, using maps Arneson had drawn out to explore the imaginary labyrinths below.* (Fannon, p125)

This was an immediate hit with Arneson's group. A friend named Dave Meggary designed a boardgame based on the dungeon adventure. Really, though the structure broke away from traditional board concept. The game was controlled elegantly in a flowchart fashion that made sense, and brought an exploratory nature to the game. Players never quite knew what was behind a door or around a corner until they indicated that their characters went there. Later, Gary Gygax wrote the first edition of the game using a combination of his own mechanics and various ideas from Arneson.

The game D&D grew explosively in popularity during the mid to late 1970s, eclipsing previous wargaming. Some of its peak popularity turned out to be something of a fad which faded in later decades. However, D&D still has over 2 million regular players in the U.S. alone, and is popular in many other countries as well.

D&D in Play

There are several key features to D&D:

1) The dungeon format is an important collaborative structure. Dungeon format means that the game-master either purchases or draws a map with a set of keyed locations with absolute restrictions (i.e. walls) between them. As the characters reach each location, the game-master describes what is there. Note that if using a published dungeon module, the game-master function is a largely accounting and managerial.

This format reduces the possible space of imaginary events to an easily manageable level. The dungeon author creates the landscape and antagonists prior to play. The game-master during play then acts as referee and controller of the antagonists. The players control the order in which elements are explored as well as the pacing, via their characters' actions.

2) The game puts a strong emphasis on teamwork, by requiring the characters to divide into specialized classes. Whereas many games are competitive, D&D primarily focuses on cooperative teamwork among the players against predefined challenges. The dungeon author and game-master are not competing with the players directly. The dynamic is closer to puzzles (such as jigsaw puzzles or crossword puzzles) than to traditional board or card games.

The fantasy roles are highly important to the dynamic of teamwork. Because these are imaginary characters, the players are freed to experiment with different social dynamics. The device of a separate characters gives the player license to try out being a hotheaded rebel, a stern warrior, or other roles. This allows the group to more deeply explore possible group dynamics.

Early D&D had a tradition of designating one player as "caller" for the group. Only he would declare actions to the game-master. Essentially, he would be the only one able to speak to the game-master. The caller acted as final authority for what the player characters did, leading discussion amongst the players. The degree of clash expected highlights how vital the intra-party dynamic is.

3) Dungeons & Dragons draws on several fantasy themes -- in particular the sequences in mines of Moria from Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring. I would say that it

formed a distinct genre and ethos from its sources, but it is important to note the connection. Medieval fantasy as seen in Tolkien was relatively new to popular culture in the 1970s.

Early modern adventures stories typically involved real-world stereotypes, like African savages or inscrutable Chinese. The distinction of Tolkien and others was to create a world separate from our own, with its own stereotypes of dwarves, elves, and hobbits. The fantasy categories distanced the imaginary content from real-world politics and morals. By one view, this retained some of the mythic power of traditional conflicts while divorcing it from the imperialist assumptions. By another view, however, the fantasy was simply a thin mask to hide the face of the same imperialist assumptions.

4) The categories of class, race, and alignment make for a very structured visioin of the fantasy world. This is an ordered, hierarchical reality which many label "escapist" for its lack of moral depth. The same is often said of similar fantasy novels such as *Lord of the Rings*.

In Dungeons & Dragons, there is an interesting mix of categories. The classes are constructed social roles like fighter and thief, but different classes depend on each other. In contrast, race and alignment are always divisive. The original edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons included a chart of racial intolerance, such as elves disliking dwarves and vice-versa. Races had other mechanical clashes -- the racial ability to see in the dark (infravision) was spoiled by any light, and some races gained a bonus to surprise if they were separated from the party. The rules gave license for the players to clash via their fantasy roles. The result is an exercise of functioning in a social microcosm despite intractable moral, ethical, and racial differences.

Other Role-playing Games

There are a number of other notable games of the period, but they generally followed the lead of Dungeons & Dragons in one way or another. *Boot Hill* (1975) and *Gamma World* (1978) were TSR's attempts to branch out to different genres. However, they generally followed a similar pattern to D&D's pattern of a static location which is explored. Other notable games of the period include Tunnels & Trolls (1977), Traveller (1977), Melee (1977), RuneQuest (1978), and Villains & Vigilantes (1979). Ken St. Andre's *Tunnels & Trolls* was a less serious take on dungeon exploration to D&D with a more streamlined rule system, while Steve Jackson's *Melee* was a more tactical game on the same material. Neither featured as structured an environment of races, classes, and alignments; and neither were very successful.

In contrast, Steve Perrin and Greg Stafford's *RuneQuest* would be the start of a very influential opposed school of design. Designed in the San Francisco Bay Area, it had a more streamlined system which attempted to be more transparent and descriptive. There were no required classes or alignments, and while there were alternate races they were not the focus. Instead, there were cults which the characters could join and advance within as part of the game. If a character qualified and was admitted, he could gain powers as an Initiate, Rune Lord, or Rune Priest. This emphasized the construction of social roles, rather than social roles as inherent identity. Characters at base blend together, all with a mix of attributes and percentile skills.

Another influential game was Marc Miller's *Traveller.* Traveller founded the science fiction role-playing genre, and remained the dominant game for decades -- though this was always minor compared to the fantasy genre. It had a similar dynamic. There were two or three sets of maps: a star chart of the systems the player characters explored, a map of the world, and a map of the location the characters were to explore. Most of the early adventures concentrated on keyed floorplans similar to dungeons.

It is notable as a third approach to character design. In Dungeons & Dragons, classes are essential aspects of the character; while in RuneQuest cults are constructed roles which the characters pursue in game. In Traveller, characters are determined by their early choice of career. It presents a system where you roll your character's history after college, through a military or civilian career. For each tour of four years, the character gets a random set of skills and benefits depending on his service.

The Eighties: Beyond the Dungeon

In 1980, role-playing had reached a peak of popularity. Gary Alan Fine conducted his sociological research around this time, and described tabletop role-playing as one of the fastest-growing hobbies, with the ultimate potential of changing the mainstream. However, as it turned out, the early growth slowed and the RPG industry contracted and consolidated within a few years. As Sean Patrick Fannon wrote,

> *Near the middle of the 1980s, the RPG industry hit a serious slump. The initial wave of excitement and fascination was well over, and many people just moved on to the next fad. What was left were the true hobbyists, and they were becoming increasingly more selective in what they were willing to spend money on. Many publishers just went away, while others diversified into other areas or else just sort of hung on, occaisionally reprinting something that a few people wanted, while their owners maintained "real lives" outside of game publishing. Still other companies either sold their games outright to rival publishers or got out of publishing and licensed their lines to other manufacturers.* (Fannon, p145-146)

This peak and slump, however, brought about a period of diverse experimentation in RPGs -- seeing a much wider variety of designs. A key goal of the period was moving beyond the dungeon to explore other formats and genres. Role-playing games diversified to new genres, new mechanics (both simpler and more complex), and to new source materials. There were several key trends.

Adapting New Media

The first was a literary trend started by Chaosium, the publishers of *RuneQuest*. In 1991, they released Sandy Petersen's *Call of Cthulhu* -- a horror game based on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. Whereas Dungeons & Dragons was only loosely based on several fantasy writings, Call of Cthulhu attempted to be a true adaptation which captured some of the ethos and feel of Lovecraft's work. A key innovation was the Sanity mechanic, which is a dynamic game stat which decreases as the character encounters horrors. It reflected Lovecraft's nihilistic vision by limiting sanity in proportion to how much a character knows of the Mythos (i.e. the horrific truth of the universe).

It also featured a different adventure model which was investigatory rather than explorational. Characters still explore locations, but rather than collecting treasure, their goal is to reveal a back-story. The published adventures include described locations with opponents and obstacles, but more importantly have clues which reveal the cause of the situation. Discovering the backstory quickly leads to the resolution of the adventure. Characters are relatively undifferentiated, with no outstanding categories like class or race. Instead, the focus is on what they find and how they overcome it.

This was not designed to reproduce Lovecraft's stories, but rather to be a game which reflected some of the ethos and themes of it. The structure of adventure plots themselves is still relatively flat -- investigation of different elements. The meat of it was more in the backstory which was revealed, and how the characters react to it. This makes the game more multi-sourced -- drawing on both the written backstory and Lovecraft's original stories as well as the gameplay itself.

Chaosium would go on to do several other well-regarded role-playing adaptations, including an adaptation of Michael Moorcock's work (*Stormbringer*, 1981), Larry Niven's Ringworld (*Ringworld*, 1983), and of Malory's Morte d'Arthur (*Pendragon*, 1985). Pendragon in particular advanced personality traits with a system of twelve opposed virtues and vices, which represented the erratic swings of Malory's characters. The mechanic distances the player emotionally from the character, since the character may have unexpected reactions -- but this may also draw the player to act out behavior she otherwise would not. To a degree, Pendragon encourages identification with family and nation rather than solely with the individual character. Other notable RPGs were influenced by this school, including *Skyrealms of Jorune* (1985), *Ars Magica* (1987), and *Space:1889* (1988).

The flip side of literary adaptations is spin-off fiction series -- i.e. novels which are based on RPGs. One of the most successful was 1984's *Dragonlance* series of adventures and novels for AD&D, which represented one of the first mass-market marriages of gaming and fiction publishing. The novels were a huge success, and the game product went on to become one of TSR's most popular game worlds for AD&D. However, this highlighted a contrast between the non-linear, flat-paced dungeon adventures of D&D, and structured literary plots of the novels. There were some experiments in bridging this -- notably the popular module *Ravenloft* (1983) which incorporated randomized fortunes and a mobile villain within the mapped location. This gave the adventure structured conflict and pacing to what happened in the game.

In other media adaptations, one of the most influential games of the decade was George MacDonald and Steve Peterson's comic-book superhero game *Champions* (1981). This was also created in the San Francisco Bay Area. There had been two prior superhero RPGs, but this was by far the most popular and influential. Champions was innovative on many fronts, in both mechanics and game structure. The centerpiece of the game is involved, dynamic fights between the superheroes and their foes. In contrast to D&D, the environment is generally known and passive -- i.e. the game-master lays out a map openly for the fight, and the focus is on the characters. The game also gave players an unprecedented degree of power and flexibility compared to earlier games. Characters are designed by spending points which can flexibly split between highly detailed attributes, skills, and superpowers. Player design allowed reliable and powerful abilities. Champions also introduced the concept of player-chosen "disadvantages" -- i.e.

weaknesses which give them greater points. This allowed players to choose their primary opponents and connections via the disadvantage options "Hunted" and "Dependent Non-Player Character".

While it is about teamwork to a degree, *Champions* emphasized individual expression much moreso than prior games. As in the comic book genre it is based on, *Champions* games outline a story by using the contrast of the heroes and the villains -- where their powers symbolize their personalities. The usual opponents are supervillains built using the same detailed point system that player characters are. A combination of factors gives players a large degree of power relative to the game-master: frequently known environment and opponents, using the same rules for both sides, and player selection of opponents and plot hooks. The game-master specifies the map and situation, and designs and plays the villain(s).

Champions adapted many features from superhero comic books, but it also forms a distinct genre of its own. It has far more detailed characters and action than a comic-book. In a fight played out on a map, you know where each character is at all times, and can see their choices between options. This is distinctly unlike the small frames of comic books, but it also plays to the strengths of the tabletop medium -- just as, say, comic books use colorful, symbolic costumes to compensate for the limitations of the medium.

Champions' influence was not primarily on comic-book adaptations, but rather on adaptations and design in general. It spawned a series of other genre adaptations using the same basic system, and was an enormous influence on Steve Jackson's *GURPS* (1986).

The third trend was cinematic role-playing. The first and most influential licensed film adaptation was Gerard Christopher Klug's *James Bond 007* RPG (1983), created for Victory Games in New York -- the successor to New York-based SPI which had been taken over by rival TSR. The game used a flexible point-buy system with disadvantages similar to Champions. What it added was a strong focus on quality of success (as opposed to binary success/failure), a hero point system, mechanics for social interaction, and an innovative system for chases.

The central mechanic splits results into failure and four categories of success (from Quality Rating 4 to 1). The hero point mechanic allows the players an added degree of control over the flow of the game. A player gains a hero every time they roll a natural Quality Rating 1 success, and can spend them to improve other rolls. As a result, the dynamic of the game is that players look for excuses to roll on their character's highest skill -- i.e. showing off. These rolls help them succeed at more critical times.

The model it suggests for adventure is for the game-master to work out the Major Villain's plan along with a timetable of events. The player characters must work their way through a trail of clues and locations to defeat the villain before the plan is completed. This is a technique known as "time-tabling", and it can be difficult to make the plot challenging. The game's product line included adaptations of many of the specific James Bond films into adventures for the game. These try to carefully balance reflecting the plot of the film and making a fair challenge.

Simplification

In the mid-eighties, a trend began for simpler role-playing games aimed at younger audiences. This began with David Cook's *The Adventures of Indiana Jones* (1984). The same year also saw Jeff Grubb's *Marvel Superheroes Role-Playing Game*, and Greg Costikyan and Warren Spector's cartoon role-playing game *Toon*. The next year, West End Games released a *Ghostbusters* role-playing game by Sandy Petersen, Lynn Willis, and Greg Stafford; while Mayfair Games released the more complex *DC Heroes* by Greg Gorden and Sam Lewis. These all advanced concepts from previous adaptations, adapted to simpler mechanics. For example, Marvel Superheroes included color cardboard figures and stands in the game, illustrated character cards, maps without a grid or hexboard, and a brightly-colored universal chart for actions. Its mechanics included hero points and three levels of success (green, yellow, and red).

While it retained some popularity to the end of the decade, the trend was not very successful overall. In the process of simplifying the mechanics, the interesting dynamics of game play were often lost. However, there were some notable developmenets beyond simplifying rules and adding colorful components.

Paranoia (1984) was a darkly humorous science fiction game by Daniel Seth Gelber with Greg Costikyan and Eric Goldberg. It simplified primarily by emphasizing absolute game-master control, which reflected the dystopian control society it was mocking. The central game dynamic, however, comes from the players who all scheme against each other. The gimmick of the game is that the player characters are all troubleshooters assigned to root out mutants and traitors. However, every player character is secretly both a mutant and a member of an often-traitorous secret society.

Paranoia parodies a dystopian world which is exactly matched by the group dynamic of the game. The game-master presents an unfair, perhaps impossible, challenge to the players -- and the players may struggle to overcome it but more importantly put the blame on each other. This is an extremely effective use of the medium, I feel. Mike Pondsmith's *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1987) involves similar content by emphasizing rivalries amongst the unusual high school students.

Role Reversals

A vital game of the eighties was *Ars Magica*, by Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein*Hagen. Rein*Hagen went on to design the most successful game of the nineties (*Vampire: The Masquerade*), while Tweet went on to design the most successful system of the naughts (*Dungeons & Dragons* third edition and the D20 System). While developing it, however, they were unknowns going to a small college in Northfield, Minnesota. Ars Magica is an intriguing game because it reversed many of the traditions of prior games. Rather than wandering adventurers, the player characters are a small community of mages in a secret stronghold within medieval Europe.

At its heart was exploring the dynamics of the hierarchical community, which was lead by the mages, aided by their companions, and served by the expendable soldiers known as "grogs". Each player creates both a mage and a companion, as well as some grogs for the pool. Each session, the players rotate who is playing their mage, their

companion, or a grog. Further, the person who is game-mastering may also rotate. This is straightforward role reversal, an old tool of psychological exploration.

Ars Magica also had many mechanical innovations. It introduced player control over plotlines via Whimsy Cards. Each player got a number of cards which could be used to change the in-game situation. For example, the "Change of Heart" card allows the player to dictate how a non-player character changes their decision. It also more simply emphasized degree of success by introducing additive rolls. Most prior games suggested than rolling under a target number, which emphasized a single threshold for success or failure. Ars Magica introduced adding an ability number to a die roll, which allowed.

Templates and Archetypes

Two of the most successful games of the latter half of the decade were the *Star Wars* roleplaying game by Greg Costikyan, Greg Gorden, and Bill Slavicsek; and *Shadowrun* by Bob Charrette, Paul Hume, and Tom Dowd.

Star Wars continued the cinematic trend started several years earlier by *James Bond 007*. However, whereas *James Bond 007* suggests basing adventures on the villain's timetable, *Star Wars* advises the game-master to plot a linear sequence of episodes that the player characters will go through. This would set an unfortunate trend for games of the following decade. Cinematic games would tend to emphasize linear plotlines, and use hero points to help remove unpredictable randomness.

Its mechanics include a hero point system similar to *James Bond 007*, where "Force Points" are gained by doing heroic actions at dramatically appropriate times, and may be spent to double the number of dice rolled. It also popularized the technique of using a variable number of dice in resolution, known as a "dice pool". Rather than adding a larger number to the roll, the player rolls more dice. This gives a more tactile feel to game play, and would become the standard during the nineties.

Its key innovation, however, was the introduction of character "templates". While prior games had pregenerated characters, Star Wars promoted the use of almost-completed character designs for character types such as "Brash Pilot" and "Cynical Scout". These greatly speeded up character creation and gave quick handles for the players to connect the character with.

Shadowrun took these ideas and advanced them further. It mixed the genres of traditional fantasy and cyberpunk, set in near future where magic and monsters had returned to Earth. It featured much higher production values than most prior games, including many full-color illustrations within the core hardbound book. For characters, it presented a series of "archetypes" which each had a half-page full-color illustration and a characteristic quote as well as a character sheet and description.

In its supplements, it also developed the practice of a "metaplot" -- an ongoing story taking place in a game world, told in installments via the supplements for the game. Whereas the *Dragonlance* series simultaneous published novels and adventures, a metaplot is told in game adventures and other supplements. A common criticism of this is that it shifts focus from the players and game play itself to the published fiction. However, this was adopted by many if not most of the games in the nineties.

The Nineties: A New Standard

By the end of the eighties, the industry had stabilized to a degree, and a new standard was to emerge. The early success of *Shadowrun* was a precursor, but the seminal game of the nineties was Mark Rein*Hagen's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1990), produced for White Wolf Games in Stone Mountain, Georgia. It drew in many new players to the hobby, and set a standard which was followed fairly closely for the rest of the decade. While there had been a handful of previous games where the player characters were monsters of a sort, this was the defining game of the type. It spawned many spin-off tabletop games as well as thriving live-action variants of the games. A cover story of Swing magazine cited Vampire as the "The New 20-Something Singles Scene", which described the phenomenon as follows:

> *The isolation of a computer-driven lifestyle and an ever-present fear of AIDS have spawned a new generation of vampires. They're part of a live-action role-playing game that may be the fastest growing social scene since the rave.* (Rushkoff)

Many other companies followed Rein*Hagen's lead here. Nearly all of them continued the cinematic trend started by Star Wars, constructing adventures as a linear series of episodes or scenes. Even the new edition of Dungeons & Dragons released in 1989 began publishing adventures which increasingly followed this model, as opposed to the keyed locations. Ultimately, however, this standard became stale. In 1997, the market leader TSR ceased production completely. West End Games went into bankruptcy, and many smaller companies were bought out or merged. Role-playing in general was overshadowed by the success of other gaming trends, notably the success of *Magic: The Gathering* and other collectible card games as well as *Settlers of Catan* and other new German-style boardgames. This would pave the way for the revival the next decade, when TSR and its properties were acquired by collectible card giant Wizards of the Coast.

Vampires and Other Monsters

Vampire: The Masquerade stood out as for its emphatic advice on drama and its atmospheric layout and graphic design. The core story of *Vampire: The Masquerade* is the political and sometimes physical fights between different factions of vampires. The vampires are divided into pseudo-racial "clans" that mechanically functioned similarly to classes. However, they are also strong senses of cultural, social, and personal identity. In the main rulebook, each clan is given a full-page illustration and facing description, similar to *Shadowrun*'s archetypes.

The original game also focused on character relationships to a degree. For example, the sample adventure in the first edition rulebook was a social gathering where the characters were all described but the house was not. This was an early use of a technique known as relationship mapping. Locations are not particularly detailed, but instead non-player characters are. The player characters then move between one character encounter and another, collecting information and interactions. Some later adventures for the game had graphical diagrams showing the relationships between characters.

However, these maps are generally static. The dynamic of the game play itself tends to follow a linear sequence of scenes, as demonstrated in most of the later adventure modules. The game advises game-master to adjust or ignore the mechanics in play, and instead follow the dramatic progression of the plot. The mechanics are more for feel than to produce important game interactions. Dice pools gave a tactile feel to the game, while hero points (here "Willpower") generally served to reduce the effect of randomness.

It was followed by five other games in White Wolf's "World of Darkness" series: *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, *Mage: The Ascension*, *Changeling: The Dreaming*, *Wraith: The Oblivion*, and *Hunter: The Reckoning*. In addition, there was a series of historical game lines, and a host of similar games from other publishers. These games had a darker edge to them which appealed primarily to adults and older teenagers. Fittingly, they were generally published starting with a single core book, abandoning the approach of having a boxed set with components and separate books. The later games slowly shifted away from *Vampire*'s emphasis on relationships and politics, favoring more straightforward action against an opponent -- though *Wraith* was a notable exception. All of these use atmospheric archetypes or similar groupings for player characters, who would go through adventures designed as linear sequences of scenes.

Cinematic Action

Simultaneous with *Vampire*'s success, other games were also moving forwards with an emphasis on cinematic action. Greg Gorden's *Torg* (1990) was the first of these. Two other influential games came later in the decade: Shane Lacy Hensley's *Deadlands* and Robin D. Laws' *Feng Shui*, both published in 1996.

These follow a similar trend to *Vampire* with varied emphases. They have very explicitly linear plots, broken down into explicit scenes and advising the game-master to push the players to quickly move to the next scene. However, they had greater emphasis on the mechanics of play, particularly for combat.

Diceless Experiments

The nineties also saw several notable experiments in diceless tabletop role-playing. These began with Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1991), followed by *Theatrix* (1993) by David Berkman, Travis Eneix, and Brett Hackett; Jonathan Tweet's *Everway* (1995); and Rebecca Sean Borgstrom's *Nobilis* (1999).

All of these focused on the dramatic storyline, and concentrated on adult audiences. They represent a shift to a more rules-light, GM-moderated approach. Game stats are reduced to just a handful, like Amber's four attributes. The trend also includes a shift towards a more dream-like fantasy quality of stories, which seems suited to the less mechanical approach -- like the shifting realities of Zelazny's Amber, the interdimensional visionary worlds of *Everway*, or the abstract concept-reality of *Nobilis*.

The Naughts: Revival and Revolution

The unquestionable revolution of the next decade was the release in 2000 of Third

Edition *Dungeons & Dragons*. The game was thoroughly remade by veteran designer Jonathan Tweet for its new owners, Wizards of the Coast of Renton, Washington. This was first and foremost a revival of the earlier format of interactive dungeon exploration -- a mapped location with scattered challenges and rewards. It completely redesigned most of the basic mechanics of play, however, incorporating many of the developments of the prior two decades.

Furthermore, it released its core mechanics using a free license (the "D20 Trademark License"), encouraging other companies to publish independent supplements for Dungeons & Dragons or use its core mechanics for their own games. This has proven to be enormously popular. Dozens of small D20 companies immediately sprang up, and many of the major companies have been publishing using this system or new variants.

The core of this is a backlash against the linear drama that became standard in the nineties. Beyond the D20 system, multiple companies have published revivals of the original Dungeons & Dragons system and approach. There has been renewed interest in mechanics in general. Two of the major companies releasing extensively revised editions of their core games -- the World of Darkness system and GURPS 4th edition. As of 2005, however, the industry is going through another slump.

The Dungeon Revisited

Third edition Dungeons & Dragons retains most of the features of the original game, with different emphases. It has de-emphasized but retained the categories of the original -- class as unifier and identity, with race and alignment as potential dividers. It has greatly expanded the tactical aspects of play, making position on the map much more important. However, class is still key to this, as fighters form a defensive barrier to protect the vulnerable spellcasters.

Interestingly, lead designer Jonathan Tweet cited *RuneQuest* as one of his primarily influences on the third edition. He created "prestige classes" adapted from *RuneQuest*'s cults, which are stacked over a player character's initially-chosen class. This still projects a very structured ethos but with more flexibility and change possible within the structure. Similarly, alignment is more easily changed within the new edition. In terms of message, I would say the flexibility makes the structure more believable and acceptable -- while not changing the fundamental view of a world divided into good and evil, humans and dwarves, fighters and rogues, and so forth.

Computer Crossover

Tabletop games have always had interactions with computer role-playing games, even during the seventies. Many of the leading tabletop designers went into computer game design, which had greater exposure and presumably salaries. In the new millenium, the gap has been growing smaller. Many more games have gone from tabletop to online computers game, or the reverse, adapting a tabletop game from original computer game designs such as *Rune*, *EverQuest*, and *World of Warcraft*.

However, the topic of computer-based role-playing game design and its influence on tabletop is much too large to go into here. In online games, there is a much greater

degree of anonymity. This allows much wider exploration of roles for the players, notably in gender roles since a player can play a character of another gender without other players realizing. The influence on tabletop games, however, is unclear. It is interesting to note, though, and may play a greater role in the future.

Indie Games

Another trend has been the release of independently-produced games, sold primarily over the Internet direct from the author. Many of the new D20 games have been selling primarily as PDF format files downloaded via the Internet. Of greater interest, though, is the rise of more experimental games which push the nature of the games. These include Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer* (1998), Paul Czege's *My Life With Master* (2003), Vincent Baker's *Dogs in the Vineyard* (2004), and Matt Wilson's *Primetime Adventures* (2004).

These games are quite different from prior games on many fronts. The key change is having the system providing only abstract results, but encouraging specific narration from the players to describe the result in greater detail. Most prior games were generally representational -- i.e. the game stats usually represented concrete physical or mental qualities involved in the task. In contrast, the horror game *My Life With Master* rates the player characters in "Self-Loathing" and "Weariness". A roll in the game may only specify that the character succeeded in villainy.

In play, then, these focus on individual expression by the player -- with the game-master acting to challenge and draw out statements by the player. This is explicit in the case of *Dogs in the Vineyard*, where the game-master creates a sin-ridden town in the old west which the player characters come in to judge. The game itself guides and comments on that expression.

Conclusion

Like any creative field, tabletop role-playing games have gone through a variety of trends, slumps, and booms. As they became more of an established field, there was more tendency to follow the known leaders both in detail and in spirit. However, success for the hobby as a whole comes from innovation. The general pattern has been one of following a leader, followed by slump, followed by the rise of a new leader. The cycle may be getting faster as the market matures. Starting in the mid-seventies the dominant game was *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was followed by a slump in the mid-eighties. Starting in the nineties, the dominant game was *Vampire: The Masquerade*, followed by a slump towards the end of the decade. In the naughts, the dominant game has thus far been the revised third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is vital that both critics and designers look analytically at the past and learn on these trends.