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Topologies of Invention:
An Anthropological Approach to the Rhetoric of Games

by

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Abstract

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A study of rhetorical practice in the design and interpretation of games, this dissertation draws on culture theory and ethnographic interviews to comprehend invention as a social act. Although only role-playing games written in English are considered, the approach taken to understand the structures of attention emergent in gaming is generalizable as a means of investigating the informal social and rhetorical aspects of other kinds of games. The textual and visual rhetorics of numerous games are examined as self-situating lessons for acquiring and focusing interest. The intrinsic gap between reading and following a rule is explored as a phenomenon mediated by rhetoric. Experienced players’ reflections on styles and motives are translated into ratios in a grammar of rhetorical invention. Finally, the game designers are interviewed for their professional life histories relative to the development of particular games, and the matters they emphasize are read as configurations of cultural knowledge animated by personal rhetorical resources and heuristics.
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Chapter One

Introduction

As rhetorical artifacts, games involve not simply reading, viewing, or rule-following, but invention: strategic, dialogic, and technical play. Production and consumption are blurred as computer gamers write their own mods, board gamers, war gamers, and card gamers develop variant rules, and (perhaps most of all) role-players design their own scenarios, settings, characters, and collections of rules. The social activity of gaming therefore makes sense as a rhetorical as well as an aesthetic and a hermeneutic practice.

A rhetoric of games would draw on and extend rhetorics of reading and invention with examples that might tend to counter assumptions rooted in the paradigmatic cases for reading and invention, which are the consumption of texts and the production of monologue. To that end, this dissertation undertakes an investigation of the rhetoric of games, focusing on the example of role-playing games because they unavoidably complicate traditional models of invention and interpretation with social, pragmatic, and stylistic questions observable not only in the margins of the
act but in the foreground in everything that the people involved have to say about it.

Although the role-playing game demographic is by many standards tiny and skewed in its composition, the issues arising in it may shed light on a number of other problems in cultural hermeneutics and the anthropology of popular culture. Re-imagined as a literary pursuit, the interpretation and play of a role-playing game makes more visible the common argument that reading entails appropriative and differential practices of engagement with the text. With respect to the contemporary problem of interactive or ergodic narratives and their relation to print literatures (Murray 1998; Aarseth 1997), role-playing games offer an important contrast. They were the models used to develop many computer games, so they might show the degree to which electronic technologies are a major force in narrative experimentation. And to focus on role-playing games is not to exclude the consideration of strategy, resource management, victory conditions, physical representation, spatial arrangement, auctions/bidding, genre/theme, cheating, risk, time limits, and rule-following that are relevant to board games, war games, and card games. All are issues also affecting role-playing to some extent.
What is a role-playing game?

Role-playing games (RPGs) must overcome an unusual problem in that, whereas most consumers who encounter them have already played board games and card games and possibly computer role-playing games (CRPGs), few have a clear notion of how to play a role-playing game. The brand recognition for the RPGs *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* is high, yet the popular understanding of these games offers no insight into how to play a game from the viewpoint of a character described only in writing, how to use well-defined rules to figure out what the character can do and what happens to the character, and why it is useful to yield authority over an imaginary world and ongoing narration to another person who runs the game.

To solve the problem, the rulebooks of most role-playing games open with an address to the novice player explaining the nature of the game, what it requires, what it entails, and how it will proceed. But most such explanations are proximally concerned only with defining the nature of the game in hand, so they do not usually comprehend the more general family of practices that may go into role-playing (though a common starting point for the explanation is an analogy with childhood games of "let's pretend").
A small random sample of "What is a role-playing game?"

explanations will show how the question quickly becomes complicated when taken out of the context of a particular game. First, there are exceptions in form, where some role-playing game or other breaks the definition in hand. More significantly, there are differences of opinion regarding appropriate metaphors and conceptions of role-playing. The game *Lost Souls* explains role-playing thus:

"Role-playing games are unique. Instead of moving tokens around a board, play takes place solely within the imaginations of the participants. Like all role-playing games, *Lost Souls* requires two or more players. One person takes on the role of the referee and the others play ghostly characters ... Using an adventure as a guideline, the referee directs the course of the game ... The players are impromptu actors within the scenes created by the referee" (Williams and Williams 1992: 8; boldface and italics in original).

The definition is not generically descriptive: quite a few RPGs presume that the players will move tokens or miniature figurines around on a table, if not a board; and a number of games offer rules and supplements for solo play. There is a contest of meanings hidden here too: the term referee (which will be used throughout this dissertation) is common, but to some players it is a deprecated usage because it connotes competitive games unrelated to role-playing and downplays the collaborative aspect of RPGs. A few gamers would resist the theatrical metaphor of being actors in a scene as well.
The game *Maelstrom Storytelling* muddies the waters with narrative metaphors (very common in RPGs):

"Role-playing games are like ongoing stories, in which the players have roles that they control as the story unfolds. The narrator plays the part of everyone else in the story, as well as guiding the outcome of anything the players choose to do. Really, it's like collaborative storytelling ... The goal of this game is to tell a great story. There is no real way to win a role-playing game. Because the game is open-ended, there is no clear victor and no clear loser." (Aldridge 1997: 3).

Again, there are exceptions: role-playing games such as *Pantheon*, *Rune*, and *Youdunnit* do have winners and losers. But of greater significance is the choice of storytelling as a metaphor for playing a game—some RPG players refuse to assimilate role-playing to storytelling, because they understand a story to be a unified discourse aimed at an end or climax and so only narratable after an understanding of the story events is in some sense finished. The moment to moment undecidedness of many role-playing games therefore makes the analogy with a story contentious (the few experimental writers and storytellers who decide the direction of a story randomly are evidently too unknown or too anomalous to count). The analogy with authorship is also problematic to some role-players, because it does not properly consider the ongoing exchange of authority in the game, where the referee defers to the players for some things, the players defer to the referee for some things, and both defer to the rules,
mechanics, or randomizers for other questions about how to resolve possible events under construction.

The game *FVLMINATA* touches on another common theme in the explanation of role-playing games:

“What is a role-playing game? If you’re reading this book, you probably already know. On the off chance that you don’t, think of a role-playing game as improvisational theater crossed with a board game. As in improvisational theater, you and your fellow players will be creating a story without a script. Each of you will be portraying a distinct character (which *FVLMINATA* refers to as your persona). One participant, somewhat like a director of a play, will be in charge of the game. Called the GameMaster (or GM), this person will shape the story for your personae and portray other personae who are not central to the story. Like a board game, you’ll be sitting down and imagining the action of the story, rather than acting it out. When your persona attempts to do something that might succeed or fail, you’ll roll dice (*FVLMINATA* uses special dice called tali) to determine whether or not you achieve your goal” (Roberts and Miller 2001: 2; boldface and italics in original).

However, players for whom role-playing feels nothing like performance or acting would consider an analogy with theater weak or inappropriate, and those who do identify strongly with their characters might quibble over the relative lack of character identification in improvisational theater.

And so on—nearly every RPG provides such basic instructions. The compelling point here is not that such instructions fail to comprehend the family of resemblances constituting role-playing games as a related set of features, but rather that they do imply that their metaphors will structure
and be structured in the *inventio* of the game. They presume that their metaphors will lead to a particular way of playing, and the rhetorical praxis of the game is partially determined in its rhetorical constitution as a metaphorical system. The game is necessarily played with and through rhetoric. The many ways players and designers talk about their games signal variations in how the game is played, irrespective of the rules (different participants in the same game may play the game differently). Contested metaphors for role-playing index differential attitudes, practices, and theorizations of role-playing games, and game players (especially referees and designers) take such social differences into account when planning and playing games.

**Inventions of ethnography**

This dissertation is not an ethnography of role-playing games. A rich ethnography of role-playing games as social worlds has already been written: Gary Alan Fine’s *Shared Fantasy* (1983). A sociologist who became involved in role-playing very early in its development, Fine was perfectly situated to document the emergence of role-playing as a subculture. Despite a few shifts in the make-up of the subculture, his portrayal of the everyday interactional dimensions of role-playing remains
both an impeccable example of subcultural ethnography and a relevant and engaging interpretation of role-playing as social interaction.

Fine investigates the interactions of role-players in a series of different gaming groups, each of which is involved in the ongoing play of a different game. Fine considers the premise of each game, and for several, he tries to understand the game designer’s intentions for the product. The bulk of the ethnography describes what players actually tend to do with the games. Fine also detects the variability of gaming groups. He shows how each group develops an “idioculture” of procedures, interests, and attitudes toward role-playing. But to understand the formation of idiocultures in role-playing, Fine looks primarily to the unique friendship interactions of the group—their shared knowledge of particular events that each has suffered—and also to the unique presentation of the game’s setting and adventures formulated in the work of the referee.

There remain a number of issues that Fine does not address. The differentiation of attitudes and strategies in role-playing are rhetorical and heuristic relations that players evolve along with the growing variety of role-playing techniques, themes, marketing phenomena, and vocabularies of introspection gradually emerging still. Of course, resources for rhetorical invention are spread thin—they are everywhere and nowhere in
the texts, idiocultures, and design idioms of role-playing. Where Fine was able to approach the problem of social worlds with a presumption of relative immediacy and portray his participation directly as ethnography, the problem of invention as a social act is connected more widely. Appropriation from other media, distributed international networks of freelance artisans, distributed decision-making in moderately large corporations, Internet discussion groups building up elaborate schemes for interpreting role-playing, formal aspects of role-playing texts, and pedagogies and practices hinted at in role-playing texts—all of these must be considered alongside the idiocultural formation of the gaming group as social potentials informing and reforming rhetorical strategies of invention in role-playing games.

This dissertation draws on the resources of ethnography, such as unstructured interviewing and long-term participation in relevant circumstances, but the focus of the study is on rhetoric. Some questions that will be addressed are how the text of a role-playing game situates itself as a collection of invention resources, how the gap between reading a rule and following a rule is bridged in the rhetorical invention of a particular way to run the game befitting both the themes of the game and the attitudes of the audience, how role-playing game audiences theorize their own use of
role-playing games as a matter of style (i.e. attitude as it impacts invention), and how role-playing game designers incorporate and strategize heuristics of play for their audiences. Inasmuch as the author builds on twenty years of role-playing experience with three years of observing and interacting with gamers and game designers specifically to understand the place of rhetorical invention in the uses of game materials, this study may be read as either a partially ethnographic account of a “thin” cultural phenomenon or simply as rhetorical criticism relayed through an ethnographic consciousness.

**Rhetoric culture**

Ivo Strecker, Christian Meyer, and Stephen Tyler have together proposed that an important theoretical direction for contemporary anthropology will have been to renew culture theory in a return to “the ancient insight that just as rhetoric is founded in culture, culture is founded in rhetoric” (2000). That is to say that each is shaped, purposed, deployed, and enacted in the other without a clear end or beginning. Tyler and Strecker coined the phrase “rhetoric culture” to evoke the possibility of an anthropology that explains cultural phenomena in their relation to rhetoric. Such is the point of entry for understanding the interplay of rhetorical
invention and the subcultural phenomenon of role-playing, as well as theroader connections of role-playing's culture-rhetorical formation to the
culture-rhetorical formation of reading, talking, and doing in general. One
implication of rhetoric culture is that

"There are then no pure discourse types. Every discourse is an open
possibility of multiple interpretations that unfold as we seek to
understand. Openness and multiplicity do not prevent us from
understanding one another, or from arriving at agreements,
understandings and interpretations, or even truths. They are, in fact,
the means that enable our closures, impermanent though they may
be. A discourse is a dynamic, inherently unstable process in which
we generate temporary finitudes of interpretation out of what may be
infinite possibilities. All of our closures are but possible openings"
(ibid.).

And that will be the thought that traces the movements and openings of
gaming discourses through their hermeneutic and rhetorical spirals to
locate in their dispositions, opportunities, and chance encounters the
invention of culture. It is also a thought that guides a study of role-playing
games through the most unusual examples and into the field of games in
general, following inductively the law of the impurity of genre.

Furthermore, in Rhetoric Culture Theory no priority is assigned
either to text, speaker, or hearer (nor, in the case of role-playing games, to
designer, referee, or player), although all may be said to have effectual
stylistic propensities and moments of grasping and release. No position
takes complete control over the game as agency, and none stands apart
from others within the game. Together, they are the play of invention. Their echoes of one another will sound throughout the chapters to come.

Other inventions

In *Invention as a Social Act* (1987), Karen Burke Lefevre examines the problem of sociality as it pertains to invention in composition theory. Traditionally, invention is constructed in composition theory as a private activity wherein the author recollects internal matters with the aim of reproducing them in textual form. Lefevre attributes this model to Plato and appreciates that it draws attention to the question of what resources are available to a writer. But following Weber’s definition of “social” as any act taking into account the character, habits, or attitudes of another person, Lefevre hauls into view the whole world of communicative ends, constraints, partnerships, collectives, and discursive economies affecting and constituting invention. She insists that invention is a dialectical process inter-relating internal dialogue, collaboration (“resonant relationships”), and social collectives.

Anthropologically, the argument is straightforward, and it was prefigured in Roy Wagner’s *The Invention of Culture* (revised and expanded in 1981). Wagner builds on his idea that all symbolic
activity—all language, whether it seems conventional or figurative—has the same force of innovation that metaphor has, because even conventional usage reflexively pushes against prior meanings to find its relevance to a new situation (1981: xiv). Wagner uses this insight first of all to critique anthropology and re-think anthropology as itself a cultural act of inventing “culture,” where culture is nonetheless meaningful precisely because it carries the force of having been invented. Wagner goes a step further: “Invention, then, is culture, and it might be helpful to think of all human beings, wherever they may be, as ‘fieldworkers’ of a sort, controlling the culture shock of daily experience through all kinds of imagined and constructed ‘rules,’ traditions, and facts” (ibid.: 35; italics in original).

That is to say, conventions too are constantly re-invented as conventions, compelled to stand as convention in a new situation. So invention is not only a social act—it is the guiding and unfolding root of social action.

The anthropologist Stephen Tyler takes up the question of invention in “In other words: The other as inventio, allegory, and symbol.” Specifically, he addresses the traditional philosophical model of the self and the symbol as inventions of the other, as arising in the world outside and below and as undergoing gradual phase transitions as they float up into the airy realm of the nous. Tyler lists many metaphorical equivalents for
the journey of the symbol (from icon to index to symbol) and the self (from I to you to we), such as person to society to culture, land/rent to profit/work to taxation/money, subjective to interactive to cognitive, id to ego to superego, and so on. He also gives a chain of “subject rhymes,” where each term implicates the other and every parallel term:

self/other <-> culture/nature <-> language/world <->
conscious/unconscious <-> signifier/signified, etc. (1993: 26). One point made in this way is that invention is stuck. Even the argument that invention comes in from without is old and tired. Apparently innovative shifts in meaning inevitably inherit from an inventory of allusions that long ago cannibalized one another to the point of thorough ambiguity.

Whether he means it to be or not, Tyler’s argument is a challenge to the notion that invention is intrinsically innovative. But classically, *inventio* is not a matter of striking upon a new thing to say—it is a matter of striking upon an appropriate thing to say, of being drawn rhetorically into a befitting relation that sets each matter into its place. In the case of games, this may take the form of finding (sometimes discussing) a style of play that anticipates and responds socially to the styles of play that others will have had. Or it may be a matter of developing a marketable game. Or it may be a matter of giving over one’s attention to someone else’s ordered
visual or textual arrangement, finding some befitting way to read it. Or it may be a matter of making up a “rule” or imperative for something in play. All of these kinds of invention will be dealt with in turn, and they are all shown as social pre-conditions for the act of role-playing.

**Retrospect and prospect**

The first role-playing game I ever played was the *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) basic set referenced in Chapter Two. I received it as a Christmas gift over 20 years ago, from a relative who may have been aware that I had been playing complex board games such as Avalon Hill’s *Starship Troopers*. I did not understand D&D at first. It turns out you have to skip to the end to find the sections that present the whole game as a dialogue, putting everything into a comprehensible situation. Anyway, an older friend of mine borrowed the game from me and then taught it to me.

Many role-players never buy a second game, because in some sense all RPGs are sufficient by themselves. That is, if you enjoy one, there is no special reason why you should buy a different one. You can return to the same game over and over again, and it will have changed substantially each time, because the setting and characters grow through each adventure. If those are the things you enjoy about gaming, then you’re all set. I never
developed a strong personal attachment to any D&D character or setting, myself, so I may have been less inclined to remain loyal to the product.

To make an already long and near-sightedly personal story short, what I happened to enjoy most was reading games and refereeing games that I had never played before. I've never stopped collecting them, and occasionally, I still get the chance to try a new one out on friends. My only public foray into the gaming industry has been to write a short article for a magazine. But privately, I provide some technical support for an industry mailing list, and that is how I became acquainted with freelance game designer Robin Laws.

Robin Laws is highly visible in the small world of role-playing, and he has tight connections throughout the industry. In the late 90s, while casting about for a research project, it occurred to me that I was well-situated to study some aspect of role-playing, not because I was a collector but because I could probably ask Robin for some of his time and insight. We arranged to meet at Gen Con (the big trade show for RPGs), and he arranged a series of interviews for me with game designers who were all personally connected to him in some way (making it easy to link them and compare them historically) but also in unrelated ways sharing center stage in the industry at the time. Some of the interviews might have been
possible without Robin's introduction, but they would not have been nearly so long or so candid.

I have returned to Gen Con several times since, each time buying dinner for my "key informant" and catching up on his latest projects. This year, I will go again and take in the show one last time before it moves away from Milwaukee. But I think I will spend most of my time at the convention playing board games, because playing RPGs with strangers is, to me, difficult. I would rather know someone in another way first, such as through playing board games where our mutual assumptions are more easily negotiated, and then play role-playing games. At any rate, here are the issues to look forward to in the remainder of this dissertation.

In Chapter Two, I consider games as texts, subjecting the major works of the game designers I've interviewed to rhetorical criticism. The goal in each case is to consider how the text situates itself relative to a specific practice of invention—how it echoes that practice in its own composition and teaches it through the example of its own themes and discursive arrangements.

In Chapter Three, there are three intertwined problems having to do with the movement from text to play. First, what does it mean to follow the rules of a role-playing game? Also, what does the text do to show how
the rules of the game work together in play? Finally, how does the referee assemble and manage a scenario for the rules of the game to work in? A unifying theme of the chapter is that the text and rules of the game often have little relation to play.

In Chapter Four, I use Kenneth Burke’s pentad to think through the way an Internet discussion group talks about the games they play. The group has developed a complicated vocabulary of interest in part because it puts labels to stylistic issues in gaming, rendering them more visible, and in part because it is an example of a burgeoning modern reflexivity in the consumption and use of texts—a sort of auto-ethnography of game-play being performed by game players suddenly in contact with so many other gamers willing to talk about their interests.

Burke’s pentad also informs my reading of how role-playing game designers talk about their games. Chapter Five is devoted to Greg Stafford and his world of Glorantha. Stafford is a fantasist comparable in some respects to Tolkien, and he has been publishing game materials set in the world of Glorantha for over 25 years. His comments on writing for games reveal the fascinations of setting (world design and myth-making) but also secret mysteries and higher purposes in gaming. I interviewed Stafford just as his new Gloranthan game, Hero Wars, was being released.
Chapter Six presents the life history in games of Jonathan Tweet, the lead designer for the *Dungeons and Dragons Third Edition Player’s Handbook*, the new basic rules of the game. I interviewed Tweet shortly after he had announced the new game to an enormous crowd at Gen Con, and he was very articulate about the design decisions (costs and benefits, trade-offs in choices among means, and so on) that were going into the project at the time.

Chapter Seven compares the many different strategies of game design used by Canadian game designer Robin Laws, but gives special attention to Laws’s extensive observations on the place of character in making, selling, and playing RPGs. On the occasion when I interviewed him formally, his most recent published work was the game *Hero Wars*, written for Greg Stafford’s company.

Chapter Eight features the English game designer/publisher James Wallis and his enchantment with stylistic experimentation. In answer to what he perceives as the stagnation of the role-playing industry, Wallis publishes the “New Style” line of RPGs. He also pays close attention to developments in gaming on the Continent. At the time I interviewed him, Wallis had just published the game *Violence: The Roleplaying Game of*
Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed, which was a “New Style” parody of violence in role-playing games.
Chapter Two
Games as Texts

Gaming materials attract a surprisingly large audience having no
definite intention to use the texts in play. Role-playing games (RPGs) are
read for their technical concepts, implications, inventive settings, and even
artwork and short fiction, all of which may be inspirational for other
games. Readers may wish to compare how a game handles some problem
with an unusual rule, but then again, game supplements do not necessarily
have any rules in them. Setting descriptions in particular have few rules
and can be appreciated in much the same way as the non-fiction they
resemble: almanacs, encyclopedias, histories, and even ethnographies.

The main rulebooks for RPGs tend to have the same organization: a
brief introduction to the general nature of role-playing; a brief introduction
to the specific qualities of the game in hand; a section telling how to
generate characters, which may include sub-sections on types of characters
and on their possible skills and powers (special powers may also be
described in a lengthy section elsewhere in the book); a section on how to
resolve character actions about which there is some uncertainty, e.g. the
successful use of a skill; a section on the combat system, which is often a much more detailed affair than the ordinary use of skills; a section on the setting of the game, i.e. the game-world or how to create one; a section on opponents and problems in the game-world (strange creatures, sample bad-guys, etc.); a section offering advice on running the game; and finally, a sample scenario. Most RPGs will deviate from this formula in some respect, omitting some sections and adding others, but any experienced gamer will recognize the pattern and anticipate that a new game will deal with most of the matters covered in the pattern. Games that seem conventional in their organization are easy to understand from a cursory inspection.

How does a formulaic text convey a specific style of play? Almost any popular game is regarded as having a characteristic feel or style. Many gamers would say the rules themselves tend to determine a style of play. But a more general answer is that, attributed intentionality, the text of the game both has and teaches a practical style: its own peculiar know-how implicitly allegorized in the relations among the game’s mechanics and descriptive text, which may also be explicitly articulated in sections on how to run the game. The text “self-situates” and makes itself more readerly as various portions of the text add perspective on other portions to bootstrap a
stylistic self-interpretation (Chambers 1984:18-35). Learning a new set of rules involves something like what Bateson called “deutero-learning”: not just memorizing new rules, but learning how to read the game’s presentation of the rules to understand the uses they might have (1979:13). Some examples will show the effects of a game text’s stylistic pedagogy.

The texts discussed in this chapter also happen to trace a network of influential game designers, each of whom has worked on games with or for at least one of the others: Jonathan Tweet, Robin Laws, Greg Stafford, and James Wallis. The four are among the most well-known figures in the RPG industry today. The individual perspective of each designer is given careful treatment in later chapters (Chapter Five through Chapter Eight). They were chosen for this research because they continue to be productive and influential at the time of writing and have strong visions of what role-playing is about. However, it is fair to say that any set of role-playing texts could be read critically to discern their rhetorical-hermeneutic effects hinting at alternative topologies of invention.

*Dungeons and Dragons, 3rd Edition*

The origins of *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) are well-documented. Basically, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, tabletop wargames that used
metal figures in heroic poses were heavily modified to allow greater
individuation of the heroes, who could then explore caverns and dungeons
in small, specialized teams. The practical understanding that the metal
figures could represent unique characters associated with individual players
was crucial—the rules of the wargame contributed relatively little to the

Reasons given for D&D's success remain largely speculative, but it
is not too much to suppose that the game articulated a congenial value—the
glorification of adventure—in an unusual but easily consumable form. In
his Ideology of Adventure, Michael Nerlich points out that adventure-
mentality and adventure-practice since the Middle Ages differ substantially
from the unlucky and duty-bound travels found in many classical epics.
Adventure-mentality involves a willing (that is, highly agentive)
acceptance of chance, risk, disorder, and the unknown, all taken as positive
values, and a concomitant development of "search systems" and risk-
assessment techniques (Nerlich 1987:xxi). D&D allows symbolic
engagement in adventure-mentality or adventure-practice while also
containing it indefinitely and rendering it harmless. That it also ties the
ideology of adventure to a daring search for treasure would not be lost on
Nerlich, who sees a link between the medieval glorification of the knight and the rise of adventurous merchant capitalism. In any case, the construal of players in the game as (generally fetishized) characters who have to face disorder and the unknown but who can also make decisions about their chances with the dice certainly distinguishes D&D from other 1970s medieval fantasies, which either lacked the element of the unknown (as in the Society for Creative Anachronism) or the element of chance (as in fantasy fiction, such as Tolkien’s).

Although it retains virtually all the basic elements of the game, D&D’s third edition (D&D3, released in 2000), underwent a much more radical revision than the second edition (released in 1989). The game’s new publishers charged a team of designers with the task of bringing flexibility and rationality to many rules unchanged in D&D since the beginning of role-playing. Led by Jonathan Tweet (see Chapter Six), the team introduced many new character options, new paths of character development, and new tactical considerations in combat. Most changes in the game make for more pointed decisions. There are trade-offs to every mechanical aspect of the game, and careful analysis is rewarded with insight into the costs of every evidently reasonable decision. So, in a way, D&D3 introduces a new economism—a separate trend from its ideology of
adventure and one that many players follow very carefully, giving attention to the internal economy of the rules (the core) over against the superficial flavoring of the adventure.

In that respect, D&D3 is comparable to a strategy board game: a large segment of the audience expresses an appreciation for tough decisions. In fact, D&D3's combat and spell-casting rules are illustrated with around ten different board game-like diagrams, where tokens represent the characters and show new readers how to envision the play of the game like a strategy board game or, more precisely, like a miniatures game such as Chainmail (the game involved in the development of D&D in the 1970s, and also the game that was revamped and re-released in the same timeframe as D&D3 in an effort to exploit synergistic market effects).

Another important visual cue to notice in D&D3 is the "d20" logo on the back cover. Inspired by the success of open source initiatives in computer software, d20 is a project to transform the RPG market through "open gaming." The economics are simple. The publishers of D&D3 make much more money selling the basic rules of the game than they do selling supplements for the game—supplements often lose money once the overhead of producing them at a large corporation is figured in—but the game needs supplements in order to ensure continued market interest and
cede no market share to other games. The d20 plan is to allow any other publisher to produce supplements based on the core rules of D&D3, including new settings and new genre material, so long as the publications are in accord with the terms of a liberal licensing agreement. The other publishers can use the d20 logo for free, creating a brand identity that transcends any one publisher. The effect has been to make D&D3’s rules system a lingua franca of role-playing, as many publishers convert their settings over to d20 games. That is another side-effect of d20 beneficial to D&D3: it increases the density of the social networks tied to D&D3 by folding in other market sectors. So D&D3 provides informed gamers with several important lessons in contemporary economics.

**Over the Edge**

Before Jonathan Tweet became the lead designer for D&D3’s *Player’s Handbook*, he was the author of a number of innovative role-playing games, including *Over the Edge*, the game of “psychosurreal roleplaying” released in 1992. *Over the Edge* (OtE) is loosely inspired by the works of William S. Burroughs, especially *Naked Lunch*, but also influenced by *Twin Peaks*, *Repo Man*, and stories by Jorge Luis Borges and Philip K. Dick. The rules of the game are famously light and simple, and
the bulk of the text details the setting and furnishes the referee with ideas and tips for running the game.

OtE takes place on Al Amarja, a fictional island in the Mediterranean southeast of Italy. The island is an anarchic mess of drug addicts, conspirators, artists, psychics, aliens, satanic gangs, mad scientists, grifters, mutants, ciphers, lowlifes, foreigners, and shady businessmen, nominally ruled by a presidential monarchy. The game lists Al Amarja’s inhabitants as types and offers story ideas centering on each type. Then, it describes locations all over the island: barrios, shops, bars, dance clubs, casinos, and places of worship. In each case, the locations are fleshed out with characters and story ideas the referee can use, matters which metonymically expand on the description of the location. Then, the game provides more specific descriptions of Al Amarja’s most notable and notorious residents.

The Cut-Ups Project is one example that may give some sense of the Over the Edge game-world and what happens in it:

“"The Cut-Ups Project is the Al Amarjan wing of the Chaos Boys’ organization. Dedicated to thwarting the plans of the sinister forces that seek to impose their will on all they see, the Cut-Ups don’t attack the various conspiracies, but instead strike out at the very fabric of reality all of them depend on for their insidious plans. Their motto: ‘Dada was the theory, we are the practice.’ Their alternate motto: ‘This is the weather the cuckoo likes, armored
division submissive to vernacular the world into a gambling birdhouse velocity.’

“The Cut-Ups Machine is an experimental reality-altering device that the Cut-Ups intend to activate whenever one of the groups gets too close to meeting its goal. It’s powered by words, torn or cut one by one from books, newspapers, and magazines. These scraps of paper are fed en masse into the Machine, and it emits waves that alter the very nature of reality, based on the words it plucks out of its hopper at random” (Tweet 1992:115-116).

The description of the Cut-Ups circumscribes the *mise en abyme* of *Over the Edge*—the little allegory in the middle of the text that emblematizes the whole by pointing outside, to the circumstances of its composition. Of course, the name Cut-Ups alludes to the “cut-up method” used by William Burroughs, and the first motto of the Cut-Ups explicitly brings the Dada heritage of the cut-up method into the fictional text. But more importantly, the allusion smuggles in the lesson of the cut-up method, which was that “All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read heard overheard. What else?” (Burroughs 1963). The allusion is therefore also to the game book itself: the collage of images and allusions written into Al Amarja is revealed as a self-conscious practice of decontextualization and recontextualization and, implicitly, a theory of game-writing as cut-up. Finally, then, the *mise en abyme* of the game turns out to be the Cut-Ups Machine: it is a collage device internal to the setting that reinvents the world as needed by the referee (Tweet 1992:182), while preserving the
Burroughs-logic of the game’s design. The clever conflation of compositional practice and the composed world shows the influence of Borges and Dick.

*Over the Edge* also includes a substantial dose of role-playing game theory and attaches the label “art” to role-playing in a sense that connotes a high versus low distinction, where role-playing is evidently presumed to be more serious than game-playing. Deep in the text of the game, Tweet incorporates a brief essay by Robin Laws, titled “The Literary Edge”:

“Role-playing changed forever the first time a player said, ‘I know it’s the best strategy, but my character wouldn’t do that.’ Suddenly, an aesthetic concern had been put ahead of a gaming one, i.e. establishing characterization over a scenario’s ‘victory conditions.’ At that unheralded moment, role-playing stopped being a game at all and began quietly evolving into a narrative art form, a junior cousin of drama, film, and literature.

“OTE is, among other things, an attempt to further the development of RPing as art. GMs [Game Masters, i.e. referees] will find it fruitful to approach decisions as an artist creating a collaborative work with players. The idea of collaboration is important; the GM is not a ‘storyteller’ with the players as audience, but merely a ‘first among equals’ given responsibility for the smooth progress of the developing story” (Laws 1992b:185).

Laws goes on to make an analogy with improvisational theater and exhorts referees to use literary conceits to advance the game, e.g. weather that reflects the mood of the characters or improbable climaxes that raise tension at an appropriate moment rather than just whenever tense events
happen to come up in the game. Tweet offers his own comments defining the nature of role-playing as a narrative art:

"Role-playing is unusual among art forms in that the artists are also the audience. When you run a game or a character, you are doing it for your own enjoyment and that of your friends, not for a separate audience. Depending on your style of play, you can emphasize the 'audience' aspect or the 'artist' aspect of role-playing. "As audience, the players are left in the dark as much as possible. They know little more than their characters. When their characters are surprised by something, the players are also surprised. Identification with the character allows the player to experience the character’s victories and set-backs vicariously.

"As artists, the players are above the concerns of power-gaming [egregious tactical exploitation of the rules] and attempt to use their relative omniscience to make the story more interesting. The player may very well know the dark secret of the other players’ characters, but he will always portray his own character as if he didn’t know. The artist player is more concerned with creating an interesting story than with identifying with the character" (1992:184).

The insertion of the "artist" and "audience" subject positions into role-playing on an analogy with other aesthetic production probably overstates the degree to which a game-player’s consciousness is split between those roles. It also overlooks the power of irony to imply multiple positions without settling into any (see Chapter Three). Still, the notion of role-playing as a self-consuming spectacle is tenable for some styles of play.

In any case, Tweet’s and Laws’s association of role-playing with a concept of art as high culture has met with only limited success, not because gamers are unwilling to accept a high versus low distinction, but
because they are aware that a relatively unpracticed and unpaid leisure
activity undertaken in the living room or around the dinner table
unambiguously connotes low or popular culture. Some gamers are also
scornful of high art and class-climbing. Nevertheless, many are willing to
accept that OtE is a thought-provoking work, and both Tweet and Laws are
greatly respected. The instructions to reflect on the artist-audience
relationship and the use of literary devices would be considered sound
advice, and they show a general tendency in role-playing to develop new
games through a rhetoric of theory-building with respect to how games
work—a rhetoric of criticism underwriting magazine articles and other
texts on how to run a game and justifying a great many re-inventions of the
basic vocabulary of role-playing (the many words for referee, character,
scenario, and so on).

Everway

After Over the Edge but before D&D3, Jonathan Tweet designed
Everway, a game of “visionary roleplaying.” Published in 1995 by
Wizards of the Coast (a company that had made millions on the first
collectible card game and that would later acquire the publisher of
Dungeons and Dragons), Everway was intended be a role-playing game
that would break into a new market, so it was designed to be easy to play and had unusually high production values. Unfortunately, even though the game was fairly successful compared to games published by very much smaller companies, it never reached its intended audience, because Wizards of the Coast canceled their RPG line too soon for that (see Chapter Six).

_Everway_ is in many respects an ordinary role-playing game (albeit a diceless one), simply carving out a market niche with a presentation suggestive of New Age spirituality and fairytale themes. Characters are defined mechanically in terms of four elements: Earth, representing health; Air, representing thought and speech; Fire, representing strength and speed; and Water, representing intuition and emotional sensitivity. The characters’ names are supposed to make sense in English, like “Chance,” “Nightsong,” or “Riverrun.” The characters travel among dozens of worlds conceived in simple, colorful terms:

“Alabaster, where men and women live separate lives, meeting only behind families’ closed doors …

“Bliss, where one’s dreams and memories intermingle until finally one’s identity seems just like a daydream …

“Canopy, an enormous, ancient tree whose interior houses a human civilization and among whose roots exist hundreds of miles of caves where fantastic creatures love …

“Diamond Isles, an archipelago where godlings, each commanding an island, use their worshipers as pawns in their endless conflicts” (Tweet 1995:24).
But Everway is radically different from all other role-playing games in its incorporation of a visual *heuresis*. The game comes with two decks of cards. One is a deck of 90 “vision cards,” which have fantasy art on one side and questions on the other side, such as “What is the creature with this woman?” and “What is the woman holding in her hand?” When designing characters, players choose five vision cards and work out some background story that links the images and questions on the cards through the life of the character being invented. The other deck, called the Fortune Deck, has 36 cards that are all the same on one side, but on the other side, each has a distinctive image, name (such as “The Fish” and “Law”), and pair of contrasting meanings (such as “The Soul Prevails” vs. “Shallowness” and “Order” vs. “Treachery”). The contrasting meanings appear opposite one another at the top and bottom of the card. The meaning that is intended to reflect that of the card is printed right side up, and the meaning that is intended to be the reverse of the card’s meaning is printed upside down. The Fortune Deck is shuffled and read somewhat like a Tarot deck.

Characters in the game are also represented with three readings from the Fortune Deck. The readings suggest the character’s special Virtue, Fault, and Fate. But the Fortune Deck is also used to inspire the course of the game’s events. In the manner of Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Man in the*
*High Castle*, the fictional events of which were constructed step by step in consultation with the I Ching, or Italo Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, which was composed with the Tarot, an *Everway* referee is supposed to use the Fortune Deck to inspire judgments about the direction of the game when the possibilities are in doubt.

The Fortune Deck is not a divinatory artifact, but rather a rhetorical one. The imagery of the Fortune Deck sets out the basic *topoi* of the game, the issues that may beset any circumstance that comes up in the game, and its use requires a special *inventio*. The referee is advised to read the deck for many reasons: to get simple yes/no answers (positive/negative side up); or to decide the outcome of complex multi-variable problems; or to improvise details when the plan for the game has run out. The deck can be read from any point of view. The referee can keep the reading secret, and so on. Unlike mnemonic imagery, which has a long history in rhetoric, the Fortune Deck does not aid in the accumulation of possible inventions. Instead, it supplies an extemporaneous transit through a randomized set of terms that the referee can re-function as criteria of judgment for an otherwise undecidable problem in the game.


Feng Shui

Despite having a title evocative of interior decoration, Feng Shui is a role-playing game inspired by Hong Kong action movies. The author, Robin Laws (see also Chapter Seven), is an aficionado of the genre. The game appeared in 1996, before any Hong Kong action film had a wide release in the U.S. The game blends elements from many kung fu, wuxia, and gunplay-oriented Hong Kong movies, otherwise united only in their hyperbole, but from a North American viewpoint where they form a single genre.

The text begins with 24 pages of artwork and short fiction introducing the setting and genre conventions. Many readers would already be familiar with the setting from the collectible card game, Shadowfist, and many others would already have seen at least a few Hong Kong films on video. Still, the setting is quite baroque, assembling elements from so many films that the game is a simulation of no film in particular, and the prefatory material helps to get a handle on what sort of things might happen specifically in the RPG. Incidentally, some fans of Hong Kong cinema rejected the game precisely because the setting was so strangely unlike any one film or sub-genre.
The premise of the game is that there are at least six factions involved in a secret time-traveling war for control of the world’s feng shui sites, with which the course of history can be manipulated. But time travel is limited; there are only four accessible time periods: the current year, plus 69 AD, 1850 AD, and 2056 AD. There is also a Netherworld from which all four time periods can be reached, giving a total of five radically different backdrops with which to simulate the most common settings of Hong Kong action movies. Time can also shift to produce alternate histories suitable for simulating less common settings from the movies.

Characters in Feng Shui are based on prototypes distilled from Hong Kong movies. The player chooses a type from among the Everyman Hero, the Karate Cop, the Ghost, the Killer, the Martial Artist, the Scrappy Kid, the Maverick Cop, the Old Master, and so on. The character types are intentional clichés. One point of the game is to parody the Hong Kong genre and enjoy the identification of its clichés, but at the same time to parody the movies so well that the game can be enjoyed for the same reasons as the movie. Players are supposed to personalize their characters, but even then, they are to parody film in that each character must have a “melodramatic hook,” such as having sworn vengeance against someone or
having fallen in love with someone whose position makes a romance impossible.

There happen to be many role-playing games that are intended to simulate (or parody) a set of exemplary works selected from another medium and presumed to constitute a genre. The first RPG, *Dungeons and Dragons*, may have set a strong example in this regard. D&D borrowed recognizably from dozens of well-known fantasy sources (Tolkien, but also Ariosto, Poul Anderson, Jack Vance, Michael Moorcock, and many others) to make a game that was ostensibly generic and potentially descriptive of additional fantasy possibilities. One of the first and most successful science fiction RPGs, *Traveller*, did the same for space opera, but like *Feng Shui*, it cobbled together a specific setting in which the familiar storylines of its parent genre would be possible. Also like *Feng Shui*, what it actually accomplished was the generation of a new text for the referee’s inventions to work and re-work with and against the imagination of a genre.

As Fredric Jameson has said, “Genres are essentially literary institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a cultural artifact” (1981:106). So, many role-playing games are in a sense attempts to reify
the literary institutions or social contracts of a genre (fantasy, space opera, Hong Kong action, and so on) as a specific practice of rule-following, intended to produce a game governed by the genre. Feng Shui is explicit about its rule-oriented relationship to genre conventions. Where most games assess cumulative penalties for attempting more difficult actions, Feng Shui assesses a standard penalty for difficult actions and only adds more penalties for moves that are boring or repetitious, the goal being to encourage unexpected and over-the-top moves. Genre in this sense has the character of an order: watch this way; read this way; play this way; etc.

But is it ever a form delimiting something in the world?

In “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida writes:

“I shall attempt to formulate, in a manner as elliptical, economical, and formal as possible, what I shall call the law of the law of genre. It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. In the code of set theories, if I may use it at least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. The trait that marks membership inevitably divides, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole; and the outcome of this division and of this abounding remains as singular as it is limitless” (1980:206).

That is to say that the intersection establishing membership in a genre also reveals a degree of non-membership, contamination, and impurity; formally, speaking, genres are always already mixed. The heterogeneity of
each and every example of the genre makes possible the emergence of alternative constructions of genre out of the example. Role-players will be familiar with the way in which D&D does not so much model other fantasy sources as it constitutes a new genre out of which many new games (all tabletop RPGs and many Computer RPGs) and many new texts (such as D&D-brand fiction) have come. Its contamination of the fantasy genre with arbitrary rules became the ground for at least two new genres. *Feng Shui* shows this potential as well, having built up a setting totally unlike that in any specific Hong Kong movie and having introduced several new kinds of rules to gaming, such as the rule to penalize moves for being boring.

*Feng Shui* concludes with a brief guide to Hong Kong action movies: John Woo’s *Bullet in the Head*, Jackie Chan’s *Drunken Master II*, Tsui Hark’s *Chinese Ghost Story* series, and dozens more. The guide supplies a few tips on how to find these movies, but even more pedagogically, it suggests what there is to appreciate in them. For the *Chinese Ghost Story* series, it says “Tree demons! Walking corpses! A 100 foot tongue! And, best of all, the gorgeous Joey Wang, who specializes in playing seductive ghosts. What more could you ask?” (Laws 1996:268). The guide to Hong Kong action movies is supposed to be tantalizing and advisory, like any
review, but it is also didactic. Any gamer who reads Feng Shui will learn the institutions of interpretation and evaluation for North American viewers of Hong Kong action—learn to expect and enjoy the melodramatic hooks, unhappy endings, and confusing plot-lines.

**Hero Wars**

The fantasy world called Glorantha, designed by Greg Stafford (see Chapter Five), pre-dates role-playing games and continues to have a parallel existence alongside role-playing. It was first published in 1975 as the setting of a board game, White Bear & Red Moon. In 1978, it supplied the background for the fantasy role-playing game, Runequest. In the 70s and 80s, it was the setting for two more board games and two more editions of Runequest. In the 1990s, Stafford began to publish myths and legends of Glorantha separately from any game products. First there was King of Sartar and then a series of myth texts written “as Gloranthan books, by Gloranthans, in Glorantha, for Gloranthans,” and not intended “for any audience whatsoever ... I wrote them all because they are key ... mythological works to which I shall refer in my novels” (Stafford 1999). And Glorantha has always had a devoted community of fans reflecting on the world and adding to it apart from its presentation in game material.
But in the late 90s, Glorantha was re-issued in the role-playing game Hero Wars (designed by Robin Laws with additional development by Greg Stafford and others). Hero Wars brings Glorantha into the foreground as an integral feature of character generation. The text begins with an introduction to the recent history of the world, and character generation begins with the player writing 100 words of back-story fitting the character into the world. To write 100 words detailing a Gloranthan character requires considerable knowledge of Glorantha and, most importantly, of the character’s particular “culture”:

“Every Hero Wars character is rooted in one of the many cultures of Glorantha … Before creating your character, read the culture description. Your character doesn’t have to embody all of these attitudes, but he will be considered unusual if he doesn’t. Your narrator [i.e. referee] may stipulate that all characters in the group belong to the same culture” (Laws 2000:21, boldface in original).

The portion of the rulebook covering character generation includes about 70 pages of information on just four cultures of Glorantha: the Heortlings, the Lunar Empire, the people of Black Horse County, and the Grazers. The cultural information comes in the form of short descriptions comparable to encyclopedia entries, plus lists of culturally-appropriate occupations (or castes in the case of Black Horse County) and elaborate lists of cults, religions, or spiritual traditions having followers in that culture. The cults receive special attention because their gods and myths have definite and
indisputable effects in the world, from the characters’ perspectives. Characters learn magical abilities from their cults, and it is possible for characters to enter a sort of dream-time and interact with the myths of the world directly (a phenomenon known as “heroquesting”).

Glorantha’s “cultures” are heavily disguised pastiches of historical groups. The Heortlings vaguely call to mind the Vikings and pagan Germania. The Lunar Empire is based on ancient Persia, though Stafford has begun to incorporate elements of Hinduism into the Lunar religions. Black Horse County is like a little lost fragment of medieval Europe. The Grazers are horse nomads like the ancient nomads of the Eurasian steppes. However, the groups’ adaptations to the game-world are extensive, so the resemblance to historical peoples becomes remote on a closer reading.

One effect of the players paying attention to the details of their culture, right from the start, is that they must understand the central conflict of the game as a clash of civilizations: the Lunar Empire is in the process of invading the homeland of the Heortlings. To play the game is to choose sides in the conflict and develop a concern for its outcome. In *Runequest*, the players’ characters were almost inevitably opposed to the Lunar Empire (little information was published giving the Lunar viewpoint on the conflict), but a significant change in *Hero Wars* is that the Lunar Empire is
a readily available option. Players must employ a sort of rudimentary cultural relativism to sort out the basic premise of the game.

*Hero Wars* and all the Gloranthan materials implicitly appeal to a popular understanding of ethnology and folklore studies. Stafford's more esoteric myth texts, previously mentioned, are far from being the only instances of mythography about Glorantha: dozens and dozens of shorter myths have been published elsewhere. There are also several short instances of travel-writing set in Glorantha, as well as some cultural and racial descriptions that could pass for amateur ethnography in a long out-dated style. The game clearly encourages referees, at least, to become armchair ethnologists and mythologists of a fantasy world, speculating on the interrelationships and subtle variations in Gloranthan myths, on the exotic practices of various cults and species, but also on the mundane intricacies of village life (e.g. when all the players' characters come from the same village, a circumstance evoked in the game's example of play).

*Hero Wars* thereby introduces readers to the ongoing game-outside-the-game, where fans contemplate and debate the nature of the game-world and its inhabitants.

Greg Stafford's thoughts on myths and role-playing are discussed in Chapter Five, but the ethnological component in reading about some game-
worlds is not very complicated. Imaginary culture is extremely consumable: not very difficult to comprehend, relatively constant in its definition, maximally memorable and exotic, and amenable to invention and adaptation (though some referees worry about being “Gregged” by new revelations from Greg Stafford that contradict their inventions or even previously published material). And play-ethnology means to consume imaginary culture in the manner of a specialist and to invest it with speculative inventions, either brought in from outside the game, or linked to possibilities hinted at in the game, or simply made to explain your one character. But the example of ethnology-play shows yet another way that games can indoctrinate attitudes toward role-playing without consistently requiring them in the rules. Mythology-play is similar, but the authors and fan-authors working on Glorantha put so much more effort into the myths that mythology-play is given greater significance (especially by Greg Stafford; cf. Chapter Five).

*The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*

“I shall begin to describe the game presently, but first I must remind my readers of one important fact. This is a game of telling stories, and each of those stories will be based on the astonishing adventures I have had—in their style, if not their content. But, while the stories you tell are fictions, my adventures are all true in every detail. To say otherwise is to call me a liar, and to pretend your
fancies happened to me is to call me a charlatan, and sirrah, if you do
either I shall take you outside and give you such a show of
swordsmanship that will dazzle you so greatly that you will be
blinded by its sparks for a month. I am a nobleman, sir, and I am not
to be trifled with.

"Now pass the cognac" (Baron Munchausen [James Wallis]

Hogshead Publishing, meaning its owner and operator James Wallis
(see also Chapter Eight), inaugurated its "New Style" series of role-playing
games in 1998 with The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen,
a parody role-playing game that is, according to the publisher, nonetheless
an actual role-playing game. The game is based on the famous collection
of tall-tales featuring Baron Munchausen, which was published in the late
1700s. The game is beautifully illustrated with Gustave Doré’s artwork
from a 19th Century edition of the stories. But the text of the game
nevertheless purports to be from the 1700s, and its construction of author,
narrator, and reader is complex.

James Wallis is the empirical author who displaces himself in a
series of fictional authors and narrators. The title page of the book gives
the author as Baron Munchausen but lists James Wallis as the editor and
transcriber of the text. James Wallis, a publisher living in 1798, is the
fictional author of the game’s preface. He claims to have commissioned
the text of the game from Baron Munchausen himself. The text of the
game was supposedly written by Munchausen under the careless and faulty editorship of Edward Wallis, the son of James Wallis (ca. 1798). Baron Munchausen narrates the main text, and both he and Edward Wallis appear as characters in his narration. James Wallis (ca. 1798) found the game unpublishable and left the manuscript to his descendents. At the conclusion of the preface, James Wallis, the fictionalized descendent and publisher circa 1998, offers a note of agreement to all this, ironically indicating disjuncture between the empirical and fictional authors.

Page four begins with the heading “INTRODUCTION: In which the Baron explains the reasons for his game,” establishing yet another frame for the Baron’s narration. Finally, the Baron begins to narrate the game in direct address to the reader. He frequently interrupts himself with tall-tales about his own exploits, extended digressions on aspects of nobility and proper gamesmanship, and insulting comments directed at, for example, the ruder nations of Europe (including the English).

The complex narration of the game’s text is important as an allegory for the play of the game itself. Baron Munchausen instructs the reader that she and her fellow players will take on the roles of fictional noblemen and ladies gathered at a country manor, an inn, or any other place capable of supplying wine and spirits. As characters in a frame story, the fictionalized
nobles engage in a parlor game where they invite one another to invent a story, perhaps one inspired by the 200 exploits of Baron Munchausen listed in the back of the gamebook. For example, one noble might ask another, "So, my dear Baroness, tell us how you started the French Revolution for a bet, and who won." The player of the Baroness should improvise a story for about five minutes from the perspective of the Baroness. There are some rules governing how the nobles interact and interrupt one another—dueling is encouraged to resolve disputes, or rock-paper-scissors if bloodshed is not an option—and eventually the nobles elect a winner who buys a round of drinks, an available stock of fine wines being part of the game’s required equipment.

The presentation of the game’s rules very consciously parodies that of other games. Baron Munchausen only writes a section on “character generation” under duress from his publisher, and it is an extended joke itself. Munchausen refuses to call the section on dueling a “combat system,” because it is such an ugly phrase. Asked to write a section on the “background,” Munchausen fails to understand why his background should be at issue, but following some discussion with his publisher, he starts again with the obligatory description of the historical setting or game-world.
The play of the game is also in some sense a parody of the ordinary play of role-playing games. The characterization is supposed to be shallow (as opposed to ordinary role-playing games where it just happens to be shallow). Interruptions are supposed to be common (as opposed to ordinary role-playing games where it just happens to be common). Food and drink are supposed to be common. Competition and extravagant lies are supposed to be common, and so on. The play of the game is in effect a caricature of ordinary role-playing, exaggerating all of its unspoken conventions and reveling in them, even while the game borrows on jokes, themes, and narrative conventions from 18th Century Europe.
Chapter Three

The Example of Play

The rules of a role-playing game are difficult to understand without practical experience of both the concepts involved and the variety of situations that can come up in the game (Fine 1983:110). Accordingly, the games that are designed for beginners typically include lengthy examples of play in the form of a fictional dialogue representing an ideal game. Ordinarily, the dialogue exemplifies not the meaning of a particular rule but rather the social process of drawing on separate rules in sequence, showing how situations that give the rules sense arise in the game. The dialogue can be quite elaborate—one recent game called Nobilis (from Hogshead Publishing) includes a seventeen-page example of play.

Examples of play raise a number of important issues for the rhetoric of games in general. They show that rule-following is grounded in rhetorical induction, the mediation of the particular and the general accomplished through example. They bring into view the place of dialogue in envisioning the rules and negotiating their meaning and relevance. They demonstrate an intimate relationship between pedagogy and rule-following.
And they indicate that rule-following is exclusively a social practice, meaning the rules themselves have no special ontological status outside the social gathering of their sense, which gathering is not an interpretation of rules through more rules but rather an appropriation of the rules into ongoing activities and evaluations for which there are no rules.

**Plus two**

In all these ways, examples of play parallel Wittgenstein's famous discussion of rule-following in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). Wittgenstein wonders first of all what it means to understand a rule, what knowledge of it and its apparent application consists in (1958: 56e-58e). He is concerned with rules that are followed intentionally, rather than rules that supposedly necessitate specific behaviors unconsciously, and it is enough that the person following the rule would explain his actions with reference to the rule; the rule-follower does not need to consider the rule at every step.

Wittgenstein considers the example of learning the series of even natural numbers, which is described by the rule \( n+2 \) where \( n \) is zero or an even natural number. At what point, when shown the series 0, 2, 4, \..., might a student be said to understand the rule? Does a student understand
the rule if he correctly generates the answer 1002 when asked to continue
the series 0, 2, ..., 1000?

Wittgenstein debates whether understanding the rule might be simply
a disposition or state of mind, a mental mechanism that when given
circumstantial inputs tends to generates the correct product of the rule. The
disposition would not have to be "unconscious," but it would introduce a
problem in that there would then be two kinds of understanding. First, the
understanding that enabled the construction of the disposition, and second,
the understanding having a tendency to generate products of the rule that
will be judged correct (1958: 59e). Both "understandings" involve
deferred engagements with the phenomenal world that are left unspecified
(learning and judgment), side-stepping the questions of when and by whom
the disposition and its construction would be judged understanding. In
fact, a private disposition to perform the rule can have no understanding
and depends on a phenomenological encounter apart from the disposition to
ensure its proper function. It is in the worldly encounter that understanding
is reviewed—understanding of a rule is never simply an interior
mechanism.

Moving on, Wittgenstein attacks several other incomplete or
misconceived positions on rule-following. He rejects the notion that the
rule obtains apart from its concrete applications in the world, because that
would imply that every rule generates a virtual space of true forms such as
the space of all even natural numbers that might be generated by the +2
rule (1958: 76e). He rejects the notion that rule-following involves
guessing what another person meant by stating the rule, because that begs
the question of how one would know what was meant without having
understood the rule (1958: 77e). He rejects the notion that rule-following
is interpretive, on the grounds that the concept of interpretation should be
limited to the substitution of the old statement of the rule for a new
statement of the rule, which is again to beg the question (1958: 81e).

Rule-following, Wittgenstein says, is a social practice; its examples
must be public and rooted in a world of evaluations that can confirm,
refute, ask for more products, or appropriate the examples to another
practice (1958: 81e-83e). Rules do not generate social practices. Instead,
social practices, habits, customs, and interests take up statements and
examples (such as “+2” and the series 1000, 1002, 1004, …) and put them
to work in a contested world of counter-statements and counter-examples
(such as “+2” and the pupil’s series 1000, 1004, 1006, …), where many
such statements and examples will routinely be judged inappropriate or
ineffective given some set of assumptions and motives. An obvious
ramification is that different assumptions and motives will result in different applications of the rule. Also, any product of rule-following can, with a different set of assumptions and motives, be re-evaluated as belonging to an alternative rule and be appropriated into an alternative social practice (e.g. naming some rather than all even numbers in a range). There can be no rule that guarantees a rule will be followed, else there would need to be a rule for that rule as well, so there must be something other than rules to fit the rules with situations.

**The basic chronotope**

In 1977, the first role-playing game publisher, TSR, put together the first introductory role-playing game, an edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) targeted at the mass market. The first edition of D&D (published in 1974) had proven incomprehensible to many who would have liked to play the game. One new reader found the concepts in D&D so intriguing but the rules so impenetrable that he instantly sat down to write his own role-playing game, which he published as *Tunnels and Trolls* (Schick 1991:223-225; Fannon 1996: 128). But the later *Basic Dungeons and Dragons* product would eventually bring in a much wider audience and serve as a

Basic D&D was published as a boxed set containing a 48-page rulebook and a 32-page scenario book. The rulebook had six pages of example material to show what a rudimentary scenario would feel like and how it would be played out. Probably a major factor in D&D’s success was its very limited chronotope, which was illustrated perfectly in this material. Bakhtin defines chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed artistically in literature” (1981:84). He suggested that the chronotope defined and determined genre distinctions in literature, and it is arguably an important aspect of genre distinctions in role-playing games as well.

As its name suggests, *Dungeons and Dragons* was designed around the idea that characters would descend into deep, dark holes in the ground and fight imaginary creatures (Fine 1983:14). The rules of the game call for every fight scene to be played out, blow by blow, in rounds; the characters’ non-combat activities are generally measured in 10-minute turn intervals. So the space of a dungeon scenario is well-delimited by the walls and doors and tight spaces that constrain movement choices, and the time of the game inevitably slows down to capture the action details of every
combat encounter. This chronotope is extremely easy to program, which is exactly what the sample dungeon and the example of play teach a new reader of the game to do. One player is supposed to take on the role of referee for the game (or, in the vocabulary of the game, serve as Dungeon Master or “D.M.”). It is the referee’s job to program an adventure, and for a dungeon scenario, it is as simple as making a map and writing up notes on the contents of each room. As long as the players agree that their characters have a reason to be in the dungeon, the game requires little improvisation of settings and encounters on the part of the referee.

By contrast, the chronotope of an epic journey is much more difficult to prepare and guide, because the players’ movements in time and space are much less restricted by the situation in the game-world. Their responses to any given encounter are only constrained by their willingness and ability to constrain their actions to what the referee can handle. If they find it rewarding to take actions that they have guessed might fit the referee’s plans, then there is a problem when they guess incorrectly. If they find it rewarding to take actions that they regard as realistic, then there is a problem when the referee has not anticipated what the players will believe to be realistic. Moreover, there is an intrinsic spatio-temporal problem of scale. What time-scale will the players accept for a 1000-mile
journey? What amount of detail will they require for incidents of travel? Should the entire journey be made available for incremental decision-making processes? Other scenarios are plagued by similar issues: adventures in a city, wherein too many potential encounters are crowded together without clear boundaries; any adventure that requires the characters to split into smaller groups, dividing the referee’s attention to create nearly separate games running in alternation; and so on. An experienced referee can improvise solutions to these problems, but more often, a narrower chronotope meets the need.

The basic chronotope for role-playing games remains the “dungeon crawl”: blow by blow combats in enclosed areas, broken up by room to room searches and occasional dialogue with characters played by the referee. It is a chronotope that translates into almost any setting familiar from adventure novels: historical castles, high-tech spy bases, alien worlds, and fantasy dungeons. However, it is not clear that this basic chronotope is fundamentally easier to co-ordinate or more attractive to play out for any reason other than the fact that it came first and was sufficient for running a satisfying game. If the first satisfying example of a role-playing game had included concepts used in film and literature to abbreviate time and space (techniques such as cut scenes or in media res beginnings), then perhaps
something more open, like an epic journey, would be the most common
chronotope and be regarded as the most playable kind of scenario.

In any case, the examples of play in the early D&D books set the
tone for many years to come. The one from the Basic D&D boxed set was
probably the most widely read. That particular example of play is at
variance with standard gaming practice in at least one major respect. It
presumes that the discourse of the game will be concentrated into two
subject positions, that of the referee and that of the “caller” who speaks for
the remaining players. Extremely few gaming groups make use of a caller.
It has happened, and some groups do nominate leaders; but insofar as the
caller is supposed to speak for others who are capable of speech, the
position is superfluous. Also, having the caller speak instead of another
player would preclude a great deal of role-playing on the part of the non-
speaking player. Still, an examination of the pseudo-dialogue will show
how beginning role-players were taught to imagine their game dialogues.

Example of play

This dialogue is taken from Gygax and Arneson (1979: 40-41), the
seventh printing of Basic D&D:

D.M.    “You’re in a stone corridor, ten feet wide by fifteen feet high,
running north-south.”
“We’re walking north.”

“Fifty feet up along the corridor there’s a door in the east wall. It’s five feet wide.”

“Halfling will listen at the door.”

(He knows there is nothing they can hear, but he carefully rolls a concealed die.) “He doesn’t hear anything.”

“The fighting man will open the door. He’s got his sword out, ready to strike. The Halfling and the thief are right behind him.”

(Rolls) “A 2, the door bursts open. You see a room, L-shaped, 20 feet wide. From the door it runs due east 30 or so feet and then the other leg of the L runs north. (They must enter and carefully examine to map a room.) You don’t see anyone in the room in front of you.”

“Anything else in the room?”

“Some trash along the walls. A small wooden chest on the floor in the middle of the room.”

“Aha! The fighting man and the halfling will enter the room. The dwarf will hold the door. The others will watch the corridor.”

“O.K.”

“The halfling says, ‘Careful, it may be booby-trapped!’”

“The fighter kicked the chest open with his boot.”

“It is knocked over. The lid comes open. A thousand gold pieces spill out!”

“Good! The fighter …”

“Around the corner come four orcs. ‘Surface dwellers! Kill them, cut them to mincemeat! Pound them to hamburger!’”

“The fighting man is ready. He swings (rolls die). An 18!”

“It’s a hit. Roll your damage.”

(Rolls a six-sided die.) “A four.”

“He’s dead. You cut him in half. The second orc is on you. He swings …” (the fight continues until all four orcs lie dead.)

“We search the other half of the room. Everybody fill your packs and pockets with the gold.”

“Other half of the room is the same dimensions as the first one, 40 feet. You find four bunks, a table and benches.”

“We search for more treasure.”

“Nope. Nothing of value.”
Caller: "How about doors?"

D.M.: "No doors in either part of the room."

Caller: "The elf and the dwarf will search for secret doors. The rest of the party comes into the room and we shut the door. The halfling will stay at the door and listen."

D.M.: (After determining which part of the room is being searched he rolls a secret die) "The elf finds a secret door in the northernmost 10 foot wall section in the eastern half of the L."

Caller: "Does he hear anything?"

D.M.: (Carefully rolling a secret die for end-of-turn wandering monster) "No. But the halfling guarding the door reports hearing slithering noises outside."

Player: "Hey, everybody, I hear slithering noises!"

Caller: "Let the elf try to open his secret door. Halfling, spike that door of yours shut!"

D.M.: "The elf opens the secret door. It's a dark passage, only three feet wide, running straight north."

Caller: "See anything?"

D.M.: "Passage is empty as far as he can see."

Caller: "With his infravision?"

D.M.: "Right, with his infravision."

Caller: "O.K., everybody, into the secret passage."

D.M.: "In what order?"

Caller: "Elf in front. Fighter behind him. Dwarf will close the door and bring up the rear."

D.M.: "You've proceeded north 100 feet when the elf comes to a stop."

Caller: "What's the matter?"

D.M.: "He sees a gelatinous cube filling the passage 60 feet ahead."

Caller: "Crom's devils! Somebody get a torch alight. Dwarf, go back to the door and listen for noises in the room we just left!"

D.M.: "Dwarf says, 'There's a hollow space under the floor here somewhere.'"

Caller: "O.K., Elf, you squeeze back down the corridor and see if you can find a trap door. Where's that torch?"

Somebody: "Here it is."

D.M.: "The gelatinous cube begins to slide slowly down the passage toward you ..."
A map and a detailed key of programmed encounters accompanied this dialogue, so the reader could follow the events of the dialogue through the dungeon and contemplate the fact that the events might have gone otherwise while still falling within the design of the scenario.

The dialogue illustrates four major features of the game. First, it shows how the referee guides the application of the rules: one complete combat action, a check for secret doors, a check to hear sounds through a door, a check to see if a door can be forced open, a check for random encounters, and so on. Second, it shows the referee how much of the game falls outside the rules: his characterization of non-player characters, the declaration that the chest is knocked over when someone kicks it, the declaration that a monster has been cut in half when the rules only say that it is dead, managing the actions of the monsters, and so on. Third, it demonstrates how the chronotope of the game is to unfold: deliberate and methodical exploration of the confined geometric spaces of the scenario, eliding some time when moving through areas pre-defined as empty, but pausing at length to handle situations for which there may be a rule. Fourth, it provides an imaginary scene of dialogue and social practice, showing that the moment to moment routine of the game follows no rule at all but requires a common effort to work through the planned scenario in its
intended chronotope and to appropriate some rules to whatever encounters
develop. In short, it illustrates the sociality of the game and shows that
sociality at work in the use and interpretation of the rules. However,
several important features of the game’s sociality are omitted from the
example of play.

Fudge

In his ethnography of the social world of RPGs, Gary Alan Fine
documents how role-players may not be rule-followers at all. Although the
rules of most RPGs call for the results of many actions to be arbitrated
according to some kind of die roll, it happens to be true that many rolls of
the dice are “fudged” or cheated:

Perhaps surprisingly, cheating in fantasy role-playing games is
extremely common—almost everyone cheats and this dishonesty is
implicitly condoned in most situation [sic]. The large majority of
interviewees admitted to cheating, and in the games I played, I
cheated as well (Fine 1983:99).

Fine attributes the high frequency of fudged die rolls to the co-operative
nature of role-playing and the resulting disincentive to call into question
the success of a fellow player. That is undoubtedly one reason why
occasional cheating is secretly acceptable to so many role-players. Fine
also points out that cheating is especially common in “must situations,” when a roll of the dice may decide the fate of a character (Fine 1983:101).

But these explanations and even the description of the phenomenon as cheating come from the standpoint of ordinary games in which the point of the game is to achieve an objective through rule-following. Role-playing games often have poorly-defined objectives or no explicit objective at all, so rule-following is motivated in other intentional practices (see Chapter 4). Cheating, then, is generally a matter of differing criteria of satisfaction, and from the standpoint of the referee, it is simply a means of satisfying players who are not always concerned with rule-following as such. As role-players become more familiar with different rule sets and, in particular, with diceless and freeform role-playing styles, they tend to become very aware of both the pleasures and the limitations of rule-following in RPGs—some go so far as to understand that the negotiation of assumptions is all that actually sustains the play of the game and that the rules do not matter as such.

The boredom and the laughter

Fine also documents the degree to which gamers have affective investments in role-playing: how ordinarily shy people may become
relatively effusive, how referees show compassion toward players and try to please them, and how players show emotional attachments to their characters (1983: 60, 112-113). A pseudo-dialogue introducing a game rarely succeeds in evoking these qualities of role-playing, though they are among the most compelling features of gaming. RPGs frequently require that a small group of players, who need not know each other at first, gather for many hours week after week to interact both imaginatively and with respect for one another’s feelings. Regardless of the degree to which they mask their own personalities through role-playing (because actually only a small percentage of gamers immerse themselves in their roles), many gamers believe that the social requirements of role-playing inevitably lead to stronger associations with more people than they would otherwise have known.

Yet another aspect of the game that a phony dialogue might tend to omit, in this case probably by design, is the inevitable tedium that goes along with the more pleasant forms of game socialization. The game itself will typically run for four to six hours on one night a week—there are of course many variations in scheduling, but a weekly meeting is the most common. Even if a player finds it pleasurable to map endless imaginary caverns and roll dice to change some numbers on different sheets of paper,
she still has to expect lengthy rules discussions, debates over the "realism" or "fairness" of a particular outcome, digressions on the special interests of a few players, and periods of downtime when everyone waits while the referee or another player pursues some need away from the game. A gaming group will often evolve social conventions to abbreviate these periods of boredom and conflict, or just as often cultivate interests in the social circumstance of gaming itself (joking about it, intentionally ignoring the play of the game, discussing gaming in general or the effects of particular rules on the feel of the game, etc.). And boredom also spurs the invention of new chronotopes and techniques of play. So the prevalence of boredom, pointless stories, and divided attentions in gaming often leads to discovery of the "jouissance of digression," and role-playing is in effect a sort of enacted "loiterature" (Chambers 1999).

Eine permanente Parekbase

The following transcript covers approximately three minutes of a typical session of D&D. It was recorded with permission by C. J. Ganier (2001) as an exercise in discourse analysis, but it presents a useful contrast to the idealized example of play and will show social practices of rule-following in the wild. The names of the participants have been changed as
a matter of confidentiality. They are all college students, and all have
several years of experience playing D&D. They are situated, as the
transcript begins, in the living room of an apartment off-campus. The
game has been underway for several hours, and Dave is the referee for the
"campaign," or series of adventures:

1 John: Yo
2 John: Game
3 Warren: Ah
4 John: Alright
5 Dave: Yeah, I believe we spent 2 hours
6 Dave: Not my fault
7 John: (laughter)
8 Dave: I don't believe any sort of stalling on my part can be-
9 Warren: My goodness Dave, it's already 2
10 Warren: This has been the most boring campaign I've ever been in
11 Dave: Yeah,
12 Dave: That's what I said
13 John: I'm saying we only argued about Saminga for about an hour
14 John: (laughter)
15 Dave: What time did thehehe any time
16 Dave: Don't blame me
17 John: No no
18 Dave: (clear throat) What's the hand?
19 John: That means
20 John: Don't look over here
21 John: But
22 John: I'm pointing here
23 John: I'm eh poi-
24 John: This is he can't see me pointing at him
25 John: That's what that means
26 Mike: (laughter)
27 John: (laughter)
28 Dave: (laughter)
29 Warren: (laughter)
30 John: No I'm-
31 Mike: (laughter)
32 John: (laughter)
33 Dave: (laughter)
34 Warren: (laughter)
35 John: Is what that means
36 Dave: Very subtle
37 Dave: Anyway
38 Mike: (laughter)
39 John: (laughter)
40 Dave: (laughter)
41 Warren: (laughter)
42 John: He can't see me poking him
43 John: Yes exactly
44 John: That's what that means
45 John: But we always used to say that
46 John: It was -
47 John: It's irony
48 John: It's not supposed to be-
49 John: It is supposed to be something you can see
50 John: It's supposed to be, like mmhhmmmm
51 John: You know
52 Warren: Well
53 Warren: If I wasted half the time, I know who wasted the other
54 John: Yes, I agree
55 John: [I wasted] at least half the time
56 Mike: [The game]
57 John: Yeah, but we're all about the game
58 John: Dave?
59 Mike: I'm going to look around for any signs of the
60 Mike: [The Twisted Claw]
61 Warren: [cough]
62 John: [He smells]
63 Dave: [Around the] room?
64 John: Oh yeah [2he can't2]
65 Mike: [2Yeah2]
66 Mike: Like any sign of that like-
67 Dave: Like some sort of forensic-
68 Dave: Ah
69 Dave: Search check would be most appropriate
70 Warren: [cough]
71 John:   [Here]
72 Mike:   [Uhh]
73 John:   Oh you got the gray one?
74 John:   I'll take the gray one
75 Mike:   Uhh what's it modified by?
76 John:   Uhh don't know
77 Warren: Wisdom probably
78 Dave:   What's that?
79 Dave:   No, I think its intellect for search
80 Dave:   It's wisdom for spot, intellect for search
81 Mike:   I don't have anything in
82 John:   My int sucks
83 Mike:   Uhh I .. got .. eleven
84 Dave:   Uhhh naaah you're not gonna find anything
85 Mike:   Alright
86 Mike:   Hmm
87 Mike:   Hmm
88 John:   Well
89 John:   Uh so we take all his papers and stuff
90 Dave:   You will
91 John:   Uh
92 John:   Is there anybody we can
93 John:   Is there any um
94 John:   Ah
95 John:   Does this game have any magical spell that will allow
96 John:   A connection or a trace
97 Dave:   Of the dead?
98 John:   Of the dead
99 Dave:   For a trace
100 John:  From his objects
101 Dave:  Um there is [and if it's] third level then he would have it
102 Warren: [Not at our levels]
103 Dave:  And I forgot to mention it be - if I didn't
104 Dave:  I meant to look for it actually just a minute ago
105 Dave:  I didn't remember if it
106 Dave:  Look up third level spells there-
107 Dave:  It would be like speak with dead or something
108 Warren: Wizards.. spells
109 John:  Speak with dead
110 Warren: Speak with dead people [stuff]
111 Dave: [It is] a spell
112 Dave: Old edition it was third level
113 Warren: Speak with dead people stuff
114 John: Well could we could speak with his *blood*
115 Dave: I alright I think you just summon his spirit
116 John: Oh, do you
117 Warren: Do do do do (singing)
118 John: Is it a third level for a sorceror?
119 Warren: Is he a third level wizard?
120 Dave: Yea, no no no
121 Dave: He spea- third level spells dude
122 Warren: Right, third level spells he does
123 Warren: He didn't take any of the cool ones
124 Warren: There are so many cool ones
125 John: I agree- like fireball
126 Warren: Clair clairaudience and [clairvoyance]
127 John: [Speak] with dead is third level
128 Warren: Not me
129 Warren: Give me another level
130 Warren: I'll have it then
131 John: And you need a corpse

The transcript shows how much of the game has nothing to do with rules, role-playing, story-telling, or any other planned activity. The first 58 lines of the dialogue (more than a third of it, even discounting the laughter) all pertain to the social environment. The players spend time trying to call attention to the game, complaining, blaming one another, gesturing, explaining a gesture, making fun of the gesture, and laughing.

Somewhat more importantly, the transcript provides several examples of rule-following as a social practice. The first example comes in lines 59-84. One player suggests that his character (who happens to be a
snow leopard, at the moment, as a result of having been reincarnated) will search the room, a procedure familiar from the idealized example of play for Basic D&D. Another player suggests that the leopard sniff or smell the room, but the two players recall that for some reason that is impossible. At line 69, Dave reminds the players that D&D’s third edition defines characters with a skill called Search, and a check against that skill would be appropriate. John and Mike look for a die for Mike to use, and then the whole group wonders what modifier should be applied to the die roll (that is, what attribute modifies Search, Intelligence or Wisdom?). Dave remembers that Intelligence supplies the modifier, according to the rules (although he uses the word “intellect,” not found in the rules). Mike rolls, and Dave judges that the result is a failure. In this case, rule-following is preceded by a co-operative endeavor to plan a reasonable course of action. Once the situation is put forward, the rule comes as a series of orders from the referee, which the players co-operatively follow, and the result is then evaluated by the referee—all of which exactly parallels Wittgenstein’s account of rule-following (1958: 82e).

A more distinctive example of RPG rule-following comes in the last part of the transcript: lines 95-131. The problem begins with John’s question of whether the game includes a situational rule (a spell) that will
permit a desired course of action. The referee thinks there is, and he "cheats" by asserting that a particular character will be able to use the rule, even though that had not been previously established. Still, he asks the players to consult the rules to ensure that he remembers the function of the rule correctly. In the end, he has not remembered correctly: the rule requires something not present (provocatively, for such a discursive game, a corpse). In the middle of all this, the other players continue to joke, envision amusing possibilities, ask questions, and even sing a little tune. In other words, they interrupt with seemingly irrelevant digressions. It is unclear whether rule-following is an essential goal of this rules-ridden game at all (cf. the game of playing the imaginary game Mornington Crescent) or just another digression relative to the discursive elaboration of imaginary events.

There are many gaming groups in which the behavior exhibited in this transcript would be unacceptable. Some groups try to achieve a playing style closer to the machine-like ideal exemplified in the pseudo-dialogue in Basic D&D. Other groups have resolved to play immersively and to take their imaginary roles very seriously, as if they were method actors with a job to perform. But in many other groups, probably the majority, there exists a "permanent parecbasis," or parabasis: an endless
deviation and digression that conflates interior and exterior perspectives on the imaginary sequence of events. Of course, all kinds of play signal some relation to non-play, at least allusively, or else they would not be recognizable as play. But in an RPG, it is extremely common for the events construed as being within the game’s unfolding story to spawn sideline discussions among players, and then for the sideline discussions to call attention to and become constructive moments for the game’s imaginary events. The opposition between game and non-game is routinely violated. And so, the continued play of the game hinges on a certain kind of irony.

In “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Paul de Man writes:

Far from being a return to the world, the irony to the second power or “irony of irony” that all true irony at once has to engender asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world. Well before Baudelaire and Hoffmann, Friedrich Schlegel knew this very well when he defined irony, in a note from 1797, as “eine permanente Parekbase.” Parabasis is understood here as what is called in English criticism the “self-conscious narrator,” the author’s intrusion that disrupts the fictional illusion. Schlegel makes clear, however, that the effect of this intrusion is not a heightened realism, an affirmation of the priority of a historical over a fictional act, but that it has the very opposite aim and effect: it serves to prevent the all too readily mystified reader from confusing fact and fiction and from forgetting the essential negativity of the fiction. The problem is familiar to students of point of view in a fictional narrative, in the distinction they have learned to make between the persona of the author and the persona of the fictional narrator. The moment when this difference is asserted is precisely the moment
when the author does not return to the world. He asserts instead the ironic necessity of not becoming the dupe of his own irony and discovers that there is no way back from his fictional self to his actual self (1983:218-219).

The relationship between playing a role in an RPG and writing from the point of view of a fictional narrator telling a story is contentious—role-players sometimes reject analogies with narration and story-telling. Some players are too aware of the contrived historical act of playing a game and envision their characters not as personas to be inhabited or even as types or personalities to be appreciated from a distance but as mere pieces moving on an imaginary board. (Note that the players of the transcribed game never spoke with the voices of their characters, though they did use “I” and “we” assert character actions rather than player actions. Prosopopoeia is surprisingly incidental to role-playing; it is nearly unavoidable, yet still peripheral to many games.) Other players insist that the distributed and constructivist character of role-playing is too fragmented to be considered story-telling—a coherent story can only be told afterwards.

But even if an analogy with literature would be problematic, parabasis remains a common feature of role-playing rhetoric, dominating its order (in the sense of *taxis* or *dispositio*). De Man’s argument is therefore on point: the constant digressions disclose the historical situation of the game as one that can never twist free of the endlessly rule-following
imaginary of the game, even as they assert the game’s inauthenticity. The
excursive game is played as an “irony of irony” in that its social activity
consciously aims at and results from an obviously ersatz stream of false
consciousness.

**Impossible friendships**

In the doubly ironic play of a game where everyone role-plays
despite and in some measure because of the impossibility of suspending
disbelief, friendship blossoms—a fragile truth. “O my friends, there is no
friend,” says Montaigne; but in the game, faltering illusion shelters
faltering illusion, and perhaps the truth of friendship may be preserved in

Again, some role-players do take seriously the notion that they are
adopting a persona and that their voice and emotions should all be in tune
with the imagined events suffered by that persona. The vast majority of
gamers, however, consider that following the rules of the game is
constitutive and sufficient for role-playing—they may become emotionally
attached to their characters and may bore strangers with descriptions of
their characters’ adventures, but the shifting identification of player and
character is otherwise inconsequential. The character has the status of a
possession or artifact used in the game and possibly cherished. And of course there are those gamers who treat their characters as little more than game-tokens.

Anthropologists working with Wittgenstein’s observations on rules have followed Searle in making a distinction between constitutive and regulative rules (Das 1998:178). A regulative rule is an imperative governing and limiting behaviors that are already understood to exist or be possible: they repress behaviors. Constitutive rules guide behaviors toward situations that will be sufficient for having followed the rule: they make behaviors count as something constructed through the rule. Constitutive rules, such as those constructing ritual acts, generally permit greater variations in performance, leave open the possibility of simultaneous activities unconstrained by the rules, and may permit interruptions, digressions, and other irrelevant moves (Das 1998:178). Constitutive rules do not try to account for all situations that will arise, only for those that will have been sufficient. Role-playing games, according to this distinction, would be made up of constitutive rules, and they certainly leave open many different attitudes toward the game and greatly underdetermine what actually happens in the social world of play (rules being in any case rhetorically re-invented rather than pre-forming the social world).
During the role-playing game as such and alongside the constitutive rule of play, there is room for everything else: the gently faded everyday, not quite what it is ordinarily but hardly anything else. One could consider the situation of playing an RPG to have a faint liminality, but the ritual participants usually believe the ritual has no special point or effect. This faintly liminal state cannot be likened to the invisibility or bisexuality sometimes associated with liminality (cf. Turner 1967: 95-96), but perhaps it does offer a pleasant myopia and the opportunity to say “I” for a character of the opposite sex. The communitas so engendered ought to be weak as well, and it is. What role-players share at that point is friendship, “if there is any”: a slight feeling that the Friend cannot be made fully present, cannot be made to show itself in a language of presence, and yet it approaches and remains available in the impossibilities of the game.

A difficult chronotope

One last example of play will show what it means to manage a chronotope unbounded by the walls of a cavern and the timing of a combat round. The game Nobilis has in its second edition been revised to be more accessible. Billed as “the first coffee table role-playing game” because of its lavish production values, the new edition includes a 17 page example of
play, which is a crucial marketing strategy as the first edition of *Nobilis* left many experienced role-players wondering exactly how to plan a scenario for the game. *Nobilis* is a diceless role-playing game in which the characters are incarnate essences of the physical and social world (e.g. “Powers” of Time, Love, Guns, Treachery, or Arthropods) who live in the mythical world beyond, grow elaborate gardens, and protect the Earth’s prosaic reality. How four to six people can go from knowledge of its setting and rules to actually playing the game is a pressing issue for *Nobilis*. Below are two brief selections from the example of play, which guides the reader from knowledge of the chronotope to a practice of managing it.

In this first selection, there are three spatial “cuts”: a change in perspective to see the entire world in its aspect of Treachery, a telepathic jump to a mind in an unknown location, and a complete change of scene stipulated by the referee. (Note: the term for referee in *Nobilis* is Hollyhock God, abbreviated below as “HG.”) Before the scene change is announced, the referee has to make sure that a momentary digression among the players has no ramifications in the ongoing construction of the game’s events. The scene change is also a temporal “cut”: the players have agreed to a plan that they assume will be carried out with maximal
expedience until the plan reaches its limit or is interrupted; the referee cuts to the point of interruption, revealing a new twist in the game. As soon as the twist is introduced, the game is temporarily suspended to order pizza, adding verisimilitude to the dialogue but more importantly teaching the referee to anticipate and to use breaks in the game to set up cliffhangers.

HG: ... Edward, your mind spans the vast extent of treachery, the seas and tides of it wash over the world, and spots the blemish. You're pretty sure that the problem's in Washington, D.C.
MARSIGLIO: As I was saying, not here. Somewhere in ... D.C.
ROOK: [coughs] Should be easy to spot, then. Not much treachery going on there.
MARSIGLIO: I could home in more carefully if I were there.
HG: You can.
HEATHER: I'm going to step into my Anchor Shelley's mind for a moment. [as Julianna] Shelley, drop whatever it is you are doing right now. We're on our way to the airport. Ready our jet, and clear a flight path to the air exit from the Chancel. [as Heather, gesturing grandly at the other players] To my partners in crime, here, I add, [as Julianna] I say we move on it quickly, then.
ROOK: 'Ey, don't order me about.
JULIANNA: Don't be childish, Viscount.
HG: Is anyone seriously protesting Julianna's plan?
EDWARD: Not really.
DIANE: No.
HG: Then I'll skip ahead a bit. You're on the jet—usual pilot, I assume?—sipping drinks and breaching the barrier between the Chancel and normal reality. It's just as the skies clarify into the blue skies of Earth that you see the cruise missile wending its way toward the plane ... time for a short break. So who's paying for pizza tonight?
EDWARD, HEATHER: Hey!
DIANE: Mean ... (Borgstrom 2002: 60).

The next selection, from much further along in the example of play, shows two techniques that help to negotiate the problem of the chronotope:
first, the referee’s prompt and instant cut to the site of a planned encounter, and second, the player’s improvisation of a special effect (shattering the door to sawdust) that the referee simply confirms. The first technique changes the space of the game, and the latter changes the time (it happens without a die roll or other delay).

HG: Out of curiosity, do Marsiglio, Pandareos, and Rook check Benjamin’s apartment? Where Faith lived until she stopped living?
EDWARD: Sure.
HG: Rook is just raising her hand to knock on the door when she hears Hope’s voice inside. Saying something or other about Faith.
DIANE: I shatter the door into sawdust with one blow of my fist and stride in.
HG: Ffsssst! It drifts down in a shower of little tiny bits of wood. Hope’s standing in the room, causally chatting with someone who must be Benjamin. He instantly turns to look, his eyes narrow.
ROOK: Hope! C’mere now.
HOPE: [smiling] I’m afraid that Hope’s not in right now. I’m Genseric Dace, and I’m terribly sorry that we must meet under these conditions.
PANDAREOS (as voiced by Heather): An Excrucian-shard?
MARSIGLIO: Indeed … (Borgstrom 2002: 74).

Other portions of the example of play illustrate the use of the game’s rules, but for the most part, the example of play is an inductive rhetoric, teaching the use of language to construct a sequence of events (that is, a chronotopic relation among narrative phrases) while speaking from shifting points of view. It is a pseudo-dialogue that shows how to displace conversation with the game’s pseudo-dialogue.
Chapter Four

A Game of Motives

A role-playing game is a collaborative and predominantly discursive construction of an imaginary sequence of events out of postulated points of view. Most role-playing games have a written set of rules or at least some documentation exemplifying how the game is to be played, but the written materials generally leave the direction of the game very much undetermined. Only a few role-playing games specify particular objectives of play. Accordingly, it is left to the game’s collaborators to work out some co-ordination of mutual interests, if the game is to be a satisfying leisure activity.

Rec.games.frp.advocacy is one very loose online association of role-players that has developed a technical vocabulary for designating the variety of standpoints from which a person can be interested in role-playing and for discussing the tensions and disagreements that may follow from differing interests. They have proposed that there are at least three opposed idioms of style and purpose in role-playing, three standpoints from which players approach the game. This “threelfold model” constitutes a
theoretical perspective on the possible motives for role-playing, and
regardless of its metaphysical inheritances, it can be read as an artifact co-
emergent with reflexive statements of interest. Its examination is
propaedeutic for a general investigation of the grammar of motives under
the sway of reflexive modernity and of the differends of invention that
animate everyday structures of attention in popular culture.

Splits

In May 1992, after much debate and a hotly-contested vote, the
Usenet newsgroup rec.games.frp was re-organized into six separate
newsgroups. Usenet is a global network of online discussion groups on the
Internet. It pre-dates the World-Wide Web and continues to grow in
volume every year. Its groups are organized hierarchically, and
rec.games.frp expands to mean “recreation,” “games,” and “fantasy role-
playing.” The creation of additional subdivisions in the hierarchy is often
contentious (see Lotfalian, 1996). In this instance, the additional
subdivisions for rec.games.frp were explicitly exclusionary. The new
groups were chartered to divide and contain topics that did not have general
appeal in rec.games.frp.
One group that came out of the rec.games.frp break-up was

rec.games.frp.advocacy. Here is its initial description from the Call For

Votes to re-organize rec.games.frp:

"NAME: rec.games.frp.advocacy
"CHARTER: Frequently discussion on rec.games.frp amounts to
vigorously overstated disagreement about the quality or lack thereof
of a particular game system or game company. This unmoderated
discussion newsgroup will give readers of the rec.games.frp
hierarchy an outlet for such material. This newsgroup would be
expected to hold such lines of discussion as: Champions versus
GURPS; AD&Dv1 versus AD&Dv2; AD&D stinks; classsystems
versus skill based systems; game critiques wanted; mine are bigger
than yours; and so on" (Miller 1992).

There were five other newsgroups created in the same vote:

rec.games.frp.announce, rec.games.frp.archives, rec.games.frp.dnd,

rec.games.frp.marketplace, and rec.games.frp.misc. Only

rec.games.frp.advocacy was chartered in such deprecating terms.

By 1992, the creation of advocacy groups to contain interminable
flamewars was already a standard practice on Usenet, and once created,
rec.games.frp.advocacy began in the usual fashion with heated evaluations
of various role-playing games and role-playing practices. The arguments
bore a significant resemblance in tone to arguments over the relative merits
of different kinds of computers, programming languages, video games, and
sports teams. There were few signs that the group would be able to reflect
on gamers' idiomatic differences productively or take up the problem of how to categorize styles, purposes, and practices of role-playing in general.

In retrospect, it is difficult to gauge the attractions that rec.games.frp.advocacy held for its readers. But reviewing its first year's threads, two themes seem to have elicited the most responses and dominated attempts to begin new topics: product evaluations (broadly conceived to include extremely personalized evaluations, but also including more informative reviews), and questions of technique, such as the pleasures and distractions of random character generation versus point-allocating systems, diceless role-playing versus the more common role-playing with dice, bell-curve distributions versus flat distributions in die rolls, and so on. There were also some *ad hominem* questions about what sort of person might express unusually strong opinions on these topics.

Many early participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy seem to have had no sympathy for others' opinions about particular games or styles of play, but although they were vocal, they were probably not in the majority. In fact, new discussion threads were frequently opened up with expressions of curiosity about what others' found most useful or interesting in a certain technique or style of play. 'What do people think about ...?' and 'I was
just wondering at people’s opinions …’ were common ways of introducing new topics.

It is important to remember that the rules of a role-playing game attempt to indoctrinate mechanical aspects of play while often leaving other stylistic and social issues unstated or unresolved; though such issues may never require explicit resolution, a sufficient compromise among the players’ differing goals and pleasures is required for continued play. The givens and unspoken assumptions worked out to play in one gaming group can be difficult to articulate to others, and the satisfaction achieved with one set of rules and one group’s style of play may actually interfere with one’s awareness of possible alternatives. But faced with repeated expressions of curiosity about their assumptions and interests, participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy acquired an unusual facility for articulating the givens behind the styles of play they had developed. Moreover, they began to specify meaningful points of contrast through a sometimes careful and sometimes polemical hermeneutic of interest.

**System effects**

Gamers typically suppose that the rules systems they use guide them beyond mechanics and directly to a certain manner of play. For example,
the game *Dungeons and Dragons* is often presumed to encourage "hack and slash" role-playing, games in which the imaginary events played out are for the most part combat encounters. Conscious of this belief, role-playing game designer Robin Laws has on multiple occasions intentionally set out to design games that guide players to a certain manner of play, e.g. the game *Rune*, which overtly demands and rewards "hack and slash" role-playing. But as it happens, there is no particular reason why the rules used in *Dungeons and Dragons* cannot be used to play out the events of a comedy of manners scenario, a romance scenario, or some other adventure having no combat at all. (*Rune* may be another matter, because it places definite regulative constraints on scenario design.)

In any case, the assumption that the game system tends to have effects on the style of play was the starting point for what eventually became a theoretical discussion in rec.games.frp.advocacy on the various standpoints from which a gamer approaches role-playing. A very early message on this topic put the matter this way:

"There seems to be a continuing trend away from 'gamey' type systems with arbitrary rules towards 'reality simulations', which model reality [sic]. Many complaints about this system [sic] or that system [sic] revolve around the fact that 'It's not realistic' - more in fact than complaints about playability [...] What do people think about the trend towards 'Reality Simulation' in frps?" (red1@waikato.ac.nz 1992).
The message also included two extended examples: Chaosium’s Basic Role-Playing system was said to offer a “compromise between realism and playability” and Steve Jackson Games’ GURPS “also attempts to model reality” (ibid.). The author did not say which games were more “gamey,” and aside from one reply that mentioned Dungeons and Dragons as a game so unrealistic that a player could not possibly suspend disbelief, no one else in the discussion clarified the term. The thread quickly turned into a long debate over the realism of the rules GURPS uses to simulate serious head wounds.

However, the distinction between ‘game’ and ‘simulation’ would re-emerge in later arguments as a crucial point of contrast, but one derived not so much from the rules of the game themselves as from the intentions and motives of the game’s players and from their interests in the rules. Some role-players, like other kinds of gamers, are motivated to manipulate a game strategically and create desired outcomes in the imaginary sequence of events, in which case the degree to which the rules are abstract, economic, or arbitrary is irrelevant. This attitude does place some value on the notion of following the rules as a matter of fairness, and a tangential concern may be for the rules to offer costs and benefits such that strategy is useful in discovering an optimal use of the rules. But some role-players are
more concerned that the imaginary sequence of events maps to their understanding of what is likely in the physical world, even if it is undesirable (e.g. a head wound). In this case, paying attention to every detail of the rules should result in imaginary events consistent with the necessary laws of physics and other routine orders of the imaginary world. If the imaginary events are inconsistent with the physics, then the rules should be rejected. These are the different motives behind ‘game’ and ‘simulation.’

Drama

In the years 1992 to 1994, participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy often considered the problem of “dramatic tension” in role-playing games. In arguments over the relative merits of random and non-random resolution of actions and events, some participants would say that dice increase dramatic tension because no one could know how the imaginary event would turn out, but others would say that non-random event resolution was useful at times because it would always yield a fitting result—a result that would be intentionally satisfying. Referees recounting their experiences would mention specific judgments and also entire games where they had set out to supply maximal dramatic tension, with or without calling for rolls
of the dice. Other referees would emphasize how they decided in advance what was going on in the imaginary world, aside from what the characters in the game were doing, and would simply let matters run their course with an expectation that the results would be provocative and in any case realistic.

In May 1994, publishers of a new role-playing game called *Theatrix* (Backstage Press) began to publicize the game in rec.games.frp.advocacy. Many of the newsgroup’s readers would become playtesters for the game, trying it out before it reached the general market. Partly thanks to the early adopters in the group who had responded to the publisher’s special offer and partly thanks to the vigorous advocacy of the game by one of its designers, David Berkman, the game *Theatrix* would become a lightning rod for debate over “drama” as a tool, goal, and situation in role-playing games.

The rules of *Theatrix* are premised on an extended metaphor: a role-playing is movie-making. The players are “Actors,” who happen to be improvising their lines. The referee is a “Director” responsible for “Staging” (developing a setting), managing the “Supporting Cast” (characters in the scenario that are ordinarily run by the referee), outlining the “Episode” (the scenario), and so on. An Episode may include cut
scenes, flashbacks, and dream sequences. A cut scene actually involves the Director declaring a cut to a new Stage that may or may not have any place for the Actors—the scene may be played out by the Supporting Cast (i.e. the referee). The Director is instructed to plan Episodes according to a well-known Hollywood formula: Act I, the introduction leading to Plot Turn I; Act II, the confrontation structured as Pinch I, Midpoint, Pinch II, and Plot Turn II; and finally Act III, the resolution (cf. Field 1994). The movie-making metaphors in the game are too numerous to catalog.

*Theatrix* was not the first game to mold role-playing in the shape of movie-making—that honor probably goes to the parody game *It Came from the Late Late Late Show* (Stellar Games)—but it was nevertheless extremely innovative. Many gamers were talking about role-playing as a kind of story-telling (thanks to popular series of horror games from White Wolf). Some gamers were thinking about narratological problems of role-playing (at least, how it differed pragmatically from story-telling). Only a few were playing with techniques adapted from other media, but then, that had a lot to do with preference. Most gamers had some sense of what it meant for a game to be more “cinematic” and had already decided whether that fit their style. Many had already rejected the story-telling analogy.
When the designers of *Theatrix*, especially David Berkman, began to
tell the “non-story-telling” gamers what they had been missing,
rec.games.frp.advocacy became a crucible for testing ideas about role-
playing games in general. Berkman was the primary exponent of
arguments in favor of “drama” as a critical concept in role-playing. He
faced opposition from several directions, and the ensuing debate uncovered
fault-lines in the common ground of role-playing, some of which have
already been mentioned with the benefit of hindsight. First, there was the
aforementioned problem of diced versus diceless role-playing. Referees
who had been “fudging” die rolls all along were usually amenable to
diceless play. Second, there were the two opposed camps on the matter of
game “narratives.” Many gamers insist with good reason that stories and
narratives are subject to composition, planning, and control to a much
greater extent than role-playing games are; they suggest that a role-playing
game only has a “story” in retrospect—that what is going on in the game is
something else. Other gamers, perhaps based on a simplistic analogy with
campfire story-telling or perhaps based on knowledge of *romans fleuves*
and of digressive self-conscious literary experiments, believe that story-
telling is an entirely appropriate way to understand what role-players do.
The third fault-line detectable in this debate emerged as a tentative distinction: "drama-based" or "drama-oriented" gaming versus "world-based" or "world-oriented" gaming. In June 1994, John Kim gave this account of the difference, as he saw it:

"The difference comes in resolution of actions, I think.

"A 'world'-based game determines success and failure based on what is reasonable in terms of the game world - results depend on skill, tactics, situation, and random chance. The GM sets up a scenario by preparing an initial situation: characters, setting, and so forth. He does not have a specific plot in mind - just a framework around which various plots could run.

"Now as I said, this does not mean that you abandon having drama in your games - but rather, you arrive at it more indirectly - for example, by controlling pacing and making inherent conflicts to the situation.

"_Theatrix_, as a 'drama'-based game, determines success mainly by plot requirements and player description. The GM judges the player's description of the action he is attempting, based on creativity, humor, appropriateness to the genre, and how well it enhances the plot. The GM sets up a scenario by planning a story - developing how the characters will get from the start to the expected conclusion" (Kim 1994).

The difference described for "drama-based" and "world-based" games had already been noticed by others attempting to theorize the workings of role-playing games. At about the same time as the Theatrix debates were brewing, James Wallis (owner and operator of Hogshead Publishing) officially announced a new magazine devoted to RPG criticism
and theory: INTER*ACTION (eventually re-titled Interactive Fantasy).

The announcement for the magazine promised the following:

"INTER*ACTION aims to chart the evolution and development of role-play, to create a new critical vocabulary to describe the way it works, and to use academic and literary theories to help understand how it works, and how it can be made to work better. The first issue contains articles from games writers like Allen Varney, Greg Porter, Robin D. Laws and Marc Gascoigne, and covers fields as diverse as the history of RPGs, designing morality into games, the divide between story-telling and simulation in today's role-playing games, and developing a critical voice for describing role-play. Plus much more, obviously" (Wallis 1994).

The first issue of the magazine sold out in weeks, but the three issues after that never sold out; so, the magazine was eventually canceled.

Nevertheless, to say that there was a "divide between story-telling and simulation" anticipates the central problem of the Theatrix debate without the benefit of such an extreme exemplar as Theatrix. The divide between story-telling and simulation was very much what John Kim would describe as drama-based versus world-based, and in the continuing debates over games such as Theatrix, participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy began to speak of the difference between 'drama' and 'simulation.'

The term 'world' fell out of favor in this discussion, probably because the setting of a game—the imaginary history and other contingent details of the imaginary world—was not nearly as important for 'world-
based' event resolution as were the imaginary physics and other necessary laws governing the imaginary world. ‘World’ is potentially an ambiguous term with respect to the history and physics of the world. Some role-players definitely stress the former meaning and others the latter, but it is difficult to say that either group excludes the other meaning when they talk about the game’s ‘world.’

At any rate, ‘drama’ and ‘simulation’ came to signify an elementary difference of style, motive, and interest in role-playing. Another elementary division already mentioned was that between playability and realism or ‘game’ versus ‘simulation.’ The two pairs were soon united.

**Three times**

Throughout the 1990s, rec.games.frp.advocacy remained a place for the advocacy of one game or kind of game over another, and participants continued to discuss how a game’s rules might tend to encourage one style of play or another. But the ferment of the ongoing conversation was to put emphasis on the styles and interests of the game’s players, regardless of the rules. In the summer of 1997, a consensus began to form around how to name and describe the basic styles and interests in role-playing. The special usages of ‘game,’ ‘simulation,’ and ‘drama’ to describe approaches
to RPGs were fairly well-understood by members of the group when Mary Kuhner proposed that the three be considered as one threefold theoretical construct:

I think this is a point on which we see the Game camp in splendid isolation and Simulation and Drama in agreement against it. I'm becoming more and more convinced that a threefold split, while still clearly an oversimplification, captures the RPG world better than the twofold one does (Kuhner 1997).

A month or so after this message, the “threefold” was still a matter of debate, but the term itself had achieved the status of jargon; participants could refer to the threefold model (or “The Threefold”) without mentioning its components. No one in the group believed the threefold model gave the full picture of how role-playing styles vary, and some still questioned the relevance, utility, and constitution of the model. Nevertheless, its terms became conventional, even if to some they signified long-standing points of disagreement rather than consensus.

An introduction to the threefold and explanation of its terms was codified in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document, edited and mostly written by John Kim. FAQs originated on Usenet, where they were designed to reduce the amount of discussion devoted to repetitive topics and to aid new newsgroup readers to discern the attitudes and polemically-
evolved lines of fragmentation in the group. The FAQ for rec.games.frp.advocacy, a.k.a. "John’s FAQ," explains a number of related topics: the scope of the newsgroup, the threefold model, additional distinctions that can be made in discussions of "plotting" an RPG, how diceless role-playing works, and so on. There is a short glossary defining acronyms sometimes used in the newsgroup; the acronyms touch on a couple of different topics, but reveal that the issue of how perspectives are acquired and disrupted in the game has come up so often that it requires numerous shorthand designations:

"POV: "Point of View"
IC: "In-Character Stance", i.e. the state of thinking from your character's POV
OOC: "Out Of Character"
SOD: "Suspension of Disbelief"
DIP: "Develop-In-Play", referring to players who only have a rough character sketch which is only filled out during the campaign
DAS: "Develop-At-Start", i.e. players who write a detailed character background/personality by the time the campaign begins
d-b: "Description-Based", i.e. using qualitative verbal description rather than game mechanics
PM: "Personality Mechanics," any mechanic with the aim to help simulate a character's personality (which can be advisory or coercive)" (Hetland 2002).

But the heart of the FAQ is its treatment of the threefold model:

"1) What is the Threefold Model?

"The Threefold Model is one way of grouping many aspects of group contracts into logical categories. Full group contract includes
every facet of how the game is played: not just the mechanical rules, but also how scenarios are constructed, what sort of behavior is expected of PCs, how actions not covered by the rules are resolved, allowance of outside distractions, and so forth. The Threefold divides up many of these into categories known as Dramatist, Gamist, and Simulationist.

"An important part of the model is recognizing that there are valid different goals for gaming. Many models of RPGs or gamers tend to have derogatory categories of "munchkin," "poseur," "rules lawyer," etc. which are contrasted with "true role-players". The Threefold model is intended to promote an understanding of diverse interests; it is not meant to single out one style as better or worse than another.

"Role-playing games don't simply classify into good and bad. The exact same game which one player enjoys, another might dislike. Rather than say that one or the other has bad taste, it is more useful to try to make sense of patterns of what different players and GMs enjoy.

"2) Which one am I? A Dramatist, a Gamist, or a Simulationist?

"Most likely, none of the above. Your individual style cannot be pigeonholed into a single word. More to the point, you probably use a mix of different techniques, and work towards more than one goal. You may tend more towards one corner of the triangle, but you probably value a mix" (ibid.).

Like most FAQs, the tone is moderate and even but mildly exhortative: it is the business of a discussion group's FAQ to foster understanding and to encourage mutual acceptance. In its notion of a "group contract," the FAQ alludes to the likelihood that each reader will be familiar with how her own gaming group has already worked out a sufficient co-ordination of interests, a sort of social contract that may be allegorical for what the
newsgroup's participants should aim at among themselves. The FAQ is also self-effacing with respect to the threefold, admitting up front that the model is not exhaustive and moreover simulates interests that probably hold true for no one—interests for which there are no original or existent referents. But note that the FAQ does not agree that the elements of the threefold are reducible or translatable one into the other. It actually emphasizes the idiomatic and untranslatable quality of interests, which are relative to the "group contract" or to "individual style" but not to an absolute frame. The threefold is only "one way" of arranging the heap of factors being considered.

The FAQ goes on to define the categories of the threefold:

"3) Stop beating around the bush!! What is it already?

"OK, here is the short definitions [sic]:

""dramatist": is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying, depending on individual tastes, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama. It is the end result of the story which is important.

""gamist": is the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the *players* (as opposed to the PC's). The challenges may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else. The players will try to solve the problems they are presented with, and in turn the GM will make these challenges solvable if they act intelligently within the contract."
"Simulationist": is the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision. Thus, a fully simulationist GM will not fudge results to save PC's or to save her plot, or even change facts unknown to the players. Such a GM may use meta-game considerations to decide meta-game issues like who is playing which character, whether to play out a conversation word for word, and so forth, but she will resolve actual in-game events based on what would "really" happen (ibid.).

The definitions of the three standpoints contrast criteria for evaluating possible directions for a game, current tactical conditions in a game, and pre-arranged necessities of the game. There is a hidden logic of time too. Dramatist criteria project that there will have been a story and consider the affective impact of the story to determine which direction to take. The referee will guide the construction of the game toward the story she believes will have been most satisfactory. Gamist criteria assess the challenges at hand to ensure that they are "fair" and perhaps adjusts them such that reasonable and, especially, clever tactics achieve the desired result. The term "referee" is most appropriate for a gamist referee, who (figuratively speaking) weighs the contestants, observes the match for fairness, and counts out the losers. Simulationist criteria reflect on what the referee has decided beforehand about how the world works, what is going on that the players are not aware of, and so on. The simulationist referee has not decided how the game itself will play out, but the events
constructed in the course of the game are all judged as the necessary consequence of what has been established earlier.

The definitions of the three standpoints overlook these temporal contrasts entirely yet make them nonetheless, in spite of the murky incorporation of "in-game" and "meta-game" contrasts that inconsistently distinguish the standpoints and cloak the problem of irony with the myth of the meta-. The "logical categories" of the threefold actually turn on a re-introduction of the threefold of past, present, and future, a resurrection of the old threefold of temporality. It is no wonder, then, that the threefold of role-playing is said not to pigeonhole different interests. Taking the metaphysics of tripartite temporality to its limits, Heidegger famously concluded that temporality temporalizes "as a whole" and "as a future which makes present in the process of having been" (Heidegger 1962: H. 349-350). That is, in his discursively imagined threefold, each of the ecstases or temporal frames enfolds the other: we can speak futurally of some pasts and presents and futures; we can speak presently of past, present, and future; and we can speak historically of the pasts, presents, and futures that have been. For Heidegger, it was in each ecstasis a future that handed down possibilities to a present that will or was to have been, from the standpoint of that ecstasis; furthermore, the futural ecstasis had priority
on the whole. For the threefold of gaming, the future, present, and past are all viable sources of possibility—though each stance gives a different ecstasis priority—but Heidegger’s point that they enfold one another is still meaningful. The threefold of gaming envelops itself in the same manner as the threefold of temporality. And then, like any other concept of time, the threefold, “in all its aspects, belongs to metaphysics” (Derrida 1982:63).

**Enter the pentad**

Nevertheless, the threefold remains an artifact of multiple interests, carefully hammered out in years of debate. Interests, in this case, are motives. They are reasons for playing the game in a certain way. And the threefold is an attempt to state those reasons, not exhaustively but very generally.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke poses the question “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (1969:xv). The emphasis is on “say,” because Burke is concerned with the language of reasons, motives, causes, and attractors—discourse about what moves people to action. Burke suggests five terms as a generative principle for investigating the discursive moves that are possible in the game of assessing motives for action: scene, agent, agency, purpose, and
act. Altogether, the five terms are known as the pentad, but Burke eventually added a sixth term: attitude. Before returning to the threefold, it will be useful to think about the terms of the pentad and imagine what accounts of role-playing as such might belong to each one.

"Scene" implies setting: place, time, circumstance, context, situation, the where, the when, and material cause. Materialism highlights the scene, and to point out that role-playing became possible as a hobby thanks to earlier growth in the leisure class and in the fantasy paperback market would be to feature the scene as an explanatory condition.

"Agent" implies actor: person, the who, participant, efficient cause, and -er nouns such as maker, player, or writer. Idealism highlights the agent, and to relativize all elements of role-playing to its agentive subject positions (individual, player, character, and persona, plus referee) and consider those subject positions as the necessary ground of role-playing would be to feature the agent as an explanatory condition.

"Agency" implies the means: tool, equipment, with what, procedure, mechanism, and instrumental cause. Pragmatism highlights the agency, and to think of the mechanics of the game (character design rules, event resolution mechanisms, and so on) as causes of other elements of the game (such as tone, feel, or style) would be to feature the agency.
“Purpose” implies ends: goal, objective, telos, for what, and final cause. Mysticism highlights the purpose, and to imagine that role-playing is motivated in some point such as to achieve catharsis or reach a climactic ending would be to feature the purpose as an explanatory condition.

“Act” is the act itself: action, event, occurrence, the what, the happening, process, and formal cause. Remember that the pentad is concerned not just with what people say about motive but with what they say about motives for action. So to explain the act in terms of the act itself is to remain within the scope of the formal cause. Realism highlights the act, and to explain role-playing game simply in terms of playing roles and following the rules of the game is to feature the act itself.

Finally, “attitude” implies manner: style, quo modo, and how in the sense of what way. Burke discussed attitude in the first edition of A Grammar of Motives, but only made it a term of the pentad in an addendum to the revised edition (1969:443); so there are actually six terms in the pentad. Theories that construe style as the reason for an act—a literary act, for example—highlight attitude, and to explain varieties of role-playing as contrasts in style is to feature the attitude as a condition for the act. The threefold, therefore, privileges attitude.
Further splits

Burke uses the terms of the pentad in ratios. For example, to say something happened because someone wanted to achieve a particular goal is to deploy an agent-purpose ratio; the act itself is not an issue in the reason for the act, because the reason is stated first as the desire of an agent and then second as the agent’s aim at some purpose. To say something happened because of the style in which it happened is simply to feature the attitude, and to say that something happened because the agent possessed or wished to display a certain attitude is to deploy an agent-attitude ratio. The notion of pentadic ratios completes the picture of Burke’s discourse grammar of motives, a grammar that is heuristic and combinatoric but not definitive.

Now, it is possible to divide up and re-assemble the terms of the threefold as distinct pentadic ratios. The threefold as a whole explains role-playing by privileging attitudes toward event resolution (that is, styles of play); so it features an attitude-act ratio. But each term of the threefold works differently, and the pentad will help to uncover the contrasts of the threefold as something more than temporal and show structures of attention at play.
The dramatist attitude is the simplest case (as long as it is not confused with Kenneth Burke’s own theory of Dramatism of which the pentad is a part). A dramatist standpoint posits a final cause, the story, toward which the action should be directed. Many gamers reject the standpoint precisely because of its *hysteron proteron* confusion, saying the story only exists after the fact of the game and cannot really be part of the game. But the projection of a telos as the criterion for judging the action of the game very clearly shows that someone talking about dramatist role-playing is speaking in terms of a purpose-act ratio. Part of the dramatist game is to direct attention toward narrative concepts such as climax and denouement.

The ratios of the gamist attitude remain obscure from the definition given in the FAQ. Going back to the very early discussion of playability versus realism that led to the distinction between ‘game’ and ‘simulation,’ we find that one major difference between them lies in the supposed realism of the rules. A playable game does not necessarily have realistic rules. However, looking back at the definition of gamist, we find that fairness is critical. The use of tactics and strategies to overcome obstacles must always be possible and usually be rewarded. Tactically speaking, a game is considered playable if its rules are perceived as consistent,
enabling cost-benefit analysis of the rules and the situations they might be used to govern. The relationship between the rules and some idea of realism is irrelevant, and the only question is whether the rules are handy or unfairly restrictive. In any case, strategies, tactics, and cost-benefit analysis are all matters of technique, so the gamist attitude privileges agency. It is tempting but misleading to say that the description of the gamist attitude sets up an agency-purpose ratio, where tactical moves aim at the resolution of a problem. As Burke points out, Aristotle too was tempted to consider the means in terms of the ends, which is why the instrumental cause is collapsed into the final cause (1969:276). But in the pentad, the two terms are separable, and it is more proper to say that descriptions of the gamist attitude show an agency-act ratio, wherein tactics and use of rules attend to a proximal act of problem-solving rather than to any more futural purpose for overcoming the challenge. Also, the gamist attitude is stereotypically associated with hyperconsciousness of loopholes in the rules and of trade-offs and “balance” in the rules—another way in which it is associated with agency without specific future purpose.

Finally, the description of the simulationist attitude brings us back to the ambiguous concept of a game-world. Many game-worlds are elaborately detailed settings, such as the world of Tekumel designed by the
anthropological linguist, M.A.R. Barker, and published as part of several games (most notably *Empire of the Petal Throne*). Like Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Tekumel shows the careful hand of a scholar; its languages and cultural details are described to an amazing level of detail. Barker has written three novels using the setting and can always talk about things going on in the world that may or may not come up in a game. Self-designated simulationist referees in rec.games.frp.advocacy often say they plan their imaginary worlds in that way, and it almost inevitably happens that the players attempt to take the events of the game in some direction that intersects with the aims and trends that the referee has previously imagined. The description of a simulationist attitude suggests that a simulationist referee will tend to rule that the events of the imaginary world must go in directions that were already possible, given the design of the world's social and historical background. In that respect, the description of the simulationist attitude deploys a scene-act ratio. But there is another aspect to simulationism to complicate the picture.

A game-world may also be constituted as a matter of presumed natural laws: ordinary natural science combined with ideas about how the imaginary forces of the game-world work. Simulationist referees say they put a great deal of thought into how events of the game should follow from
their sense of what is “realistic,” based on their understanding of necessities of how the world works. The history and background of the world should follow from “realism,” and when the rules of the game do not seem to generate products in accord with “realism,” such as an unlikely healthiness following head trauma, then the rules are considered problematic and adjustments are made. In fact, to tinker with the rules and expand them to cover more and more cases realistically is considered a stereotype of simulationism, which is to say a common statement of its attitude from an unfavorable viewpoint. What is realism in this case? More akin to naturalism in literature, it is a condition where imaginary events are said to follow from a theory of causal action preceding the moment of imagination. That the theory is composed from a postulation of natural laws, which may be viewed as a kind of rules, does not make the laws into techniques or agencies—the law is a theory of the act. The imagined history of the game-world is intended to be in accord with the theory of the act. The rules are intended to be in accord with the theory of the act. In short, this version of simulationism privileges the act.

Of course, few participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy would claim that the statements of motive constituting the threefold correspond mimetically to actual role-playing practices. The experience of negotiating
the threefold model and compromising on the generalization of their own attitudes has made it fairly obvious that the model is a copy of no particular original, and many understand it to be a tool of dialogue, pragmatically coordinating discussions of contrary interests at some theoretical distance and making clear that interests can fail to reduce to a common set of assumptions. However, the relevance of the pentad is in no way lessened. The pentad is a heuristic for investigating statements of motive, not actual motives. It accounts for the stated motive for the threefold as a whole (attitude-act). It easily comprehends two of the threefold statements of motive: dramatism (purpose-act) and gamism (agency-act). It discerns an ambiguity present from the earliest description of “world-oriented” gaming through the later description of simulationist gaming: an alternation between setting-act and “realistic” act focus. So it responds well to what is said.

More importantly, it responds to what is unsaid. The pentad supplies other possibilities so that we can wonder what is omitted from the threefold model’s account of role-playing attitudes, such as what sort of account would show a scene-purpose focus or an agent-act focus. If a referee emphasized that his style of play was to make decisions in view of how the setting had been designed to convey some allegorical or didactic meaning,
then that would be an agent’s statement of scene-purpose as an attitude
toward the act of role-playing. If a player emphasized that her style of play
was simply to consider how the character would act and make all decisions
accordingly, then that would be an agent’s statement of agent-act as an
attitude toward the act of role-playing. Burke’s pentad is a combinatoric
grammar providing at least 35 heuristic counterpoints for any statement of
motive, showing therefore much of what is unattended in a discussion of
reasons and motives.

**Speaking of popular culture**

Inaugurating a trend toward the ethnography of reading that would
eventually inform cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology, Janice
Radway once said that

“If we can detect exactly what it is the readers in a formally
recognized group share, and how this common fund of knowledge
affects what they ‘do’ with printed texts, we may be able to ask
certain questions of apparently unconnected individuals that will also
reveal the particular ways in which they behave with printed texts
and, therefore, how they are literate” (1981: 469).

The interests in reading articulated by the group that Radway studied,
romance readers, are intriguingly susceptible to pentadic _heuresis_, possibly
suggesting further lines of inquiry in ratios of motive (i.e. vectors of
attention to the act of reading) that could have been unspoken by the readers or overlooked by their interpreter.

But the case of rec.games.frp.advocacy and the threefold model of role-playing present a more contemporary problem for Radway’s proposal and for the ethnography of reading in general. Radway’s work on interpretive communities does anticipate the problem of “idiocultures,” which Gary Alan Fine describes as the interactional formation of small-scale but communal practices and orientations for playing out the textual rules of the game as a series of inter-referential scenarios (Fine 1983: 136-152). The prevalence of such idiocultures is part of what makes the general discussion of role-playing attitudes problematic. However, Radway’s proposal did not anticipate the increasing trend toward reflexive aesthetics, as exemplified in the threefold, and the ethnography of reading as a localized idiocultural practice may be more and more difficult to isolate.

Gamers and readers in general have begun to detect for themselves both what they share and how they differ idioculturally and individually. The position of the ethnographer or rhetorical theorist is called into question by the fact that similar and possibly identical positions are already occupied by gamers/readers who try to understand their own interests and styles of playing/reading by actively engaging with those of others.
Although this is a problem for the notion that academic research is super-authoritative with respect to popular understanding, it opens a new line of investigation into the workings of reflexive modernization in popular aesthetics.

The sociologist Scott Lash has offered a number of qualifications to the theories of reflexive modernity put forward by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens to account for contemporary re-alignments of structure and agency in social formations and the public sphere (Lash 1994). Lash goes along with the notion of reflexive modernity as a “very ‘strong programme’ of individualization … in which the ‘I’ is increasingly free from communal ties and is able to construct his or her own biographical narratives,” that is, as producing and being acted upon by reflexive subjects (Lash 1994:111). He adds two points of significance for the study of popular culture. First, under reflexive modernity, not only gemeinschaftlich but also many familiarly modern gesellschaftlich social relations have yielded their priority and relevance to new structures of information and communication (Lash 1994:114-115). Second, reflexive modernity is also characterized by an aesthetic of non-identity in which reflexive subjects routinely invest their consumption with a utopian uplift of the particular against the grain of the universal and in which “already
reflexive objects" (already reflexively trademarked, commodified, and advertised objects) are circulated in the global information economy with the cognitive foreknowledge that the objects will be reflexively aestheticized and made non-identical (Lash 1994:137-138).

The relatively tiny role-playing culture industry was profoundly altered by the growth of the Internet: direct sales, quick and massive consumer feedback, easy communication with peer companies, and the vast amount of fan-written material all changed the dynamics of production. The already extremely permeable boundary between consumer and producer in role-playing—where consumers are actually intended and instructed to become producers on a small scale—became even more self-consciously permeable as every fan with a modem began to share advice, rules, world concepts, and entire game designs with other fans. (Curiously, the one thing that referees most often produce for themselves, namely scenarios, are among the things least shared on the Internet, which suggests that scenarios are much more frequently informal or improvised than rules and game-worlds, probably because rules and game-worlds tend to remain the same, require more consistent agreement in perspective among players, and so reward formal documentation in a way that scenarios do not.)
Discussion groups such as rec.games.frp.* make it much more evident what gamers share in what they “do” with texts, and in groups such as rec.games.frp.advocacy, a sort of ethnography of reading and gaming evolved as the ordinary goal of many participants, who take up positions as reflexive subjects and offer reams of detail about their own practices of appropriating game texts and game concepts to their idiocultures and then patiently or polemically analyze the offerings of others. They are very aware that an idioculture or, as they say, “group contract” is integral to compromising between individual motives, assumptions, and assessments in gaming. Several participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy have actually read Fine’s ethnography of the social worlds of role-playing, and many have read the short-lived quasi-academic magazine of role-playing, *Interactive Fantasy*.

Other discussion groups such as the discussion group for written science fiction, rec.arts.sf.written, are similarly informed by and devoted to reflection on participants’ manners of aesthetic reception, albeit unevenly so, and we should suppose that review repositories such as Amazon.com both encourage and result from aesthetic reflexivity. Of course, many statements of personal interest are only very limited evaluations, or they obscure individuating particulars with commonplace formalist vocabulary;
but if the statement is at least intelligible in terms of the pentad, then it is
readable with respect to how it has attended to some matters and not others,
revealing sleights of attention and making the statement available for
reflexive evaluation in contrasting pentadic ratios.

So reflexive modernization in many cases impels an everyday
practice of comprehending and negotiating contrary statements of aesthetic
interests. The reflexive reader tied to communications networks will
already understand and anticipate much about what remote individuals do
with texts, rendering the study thereof belated and difficult to legitimate.
Although in a personal communication Janice Radway dismissed the
reflexive reader’s attempted mastery of others’ reading interests and
practices as merely the bravura performance of liberal subjectivity (2002),
the project nevertheless remaining to an ethnography of reading under
reflexive modernity would be to understand widespread procedures for
intelligence-gathering, protocols for showing and being shown how another
reflexive reader uses a text, artifacts of distributed and differential self-
interpretations (such as the threefold model of role-playing styles), and
differends of attention (which can be seen in oscillations or entrenched
oppositions of motivating ratios). The “social worlds” of role-playing
shown in Gary Alan Fine’s traditional ethnography are still of relevance,
but insofar as they are enmeshed with reflexive modernization and its attendant consciousness of competing products and varying attitudes toward play, their particularization or idioculturation will be read by their culture-bearers reflexively as the enacted allegories of a difference already anticipated in advance. In other words, a rhetoric of difference will have had a self-conscious impact on the habit of reading becoming an individuated social practice, in addition to having emerged from individuated practices.
Chapter Five

The Secret of Existence

Greg Stafford has been writing and publishing role-playing game materials for over 25 years. Although he also designed the Arthurian role-playing games *Pendragon* and *Prince Valiant*, Stafford is most well-known for inventing the fantasy world of Glorantha, which has appeared in the role-playing games *RuneQuest* and *Hero Wars* (see chapter 2), as well as in several board games and game-independent publications.

The most elaborately detailed aspect of Glorantha is definitely its mythology. Stafford has published several books of Gloranthan myth, such as *King of Sartar, The Glorious Reascent of Yelm, The Fortunate Succession*, and *The Entekosiad*. Many shorter myths have been published in the role-playing games, online forums, and magazines devoted to Glorantha. M.A.R. Barker’s world of Tékumel is comparable to Tolkien’s Middle-Earth in terms of its linguistics, and Stafford’s Glorantha is comparable to Middle-Earth in terms of its extensive mythology; overall, it is difficult and probably pointless to try to determine which fantasy world is the most detailed.
Participation ultra-mystique

Stafford describes himself as a "practicing mythologist," not to mention a "practicing pagan," and he has a rich personal vision of what mythology means for him, for his role-playing audience, and for the world in general. His discovery of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1966 was an early step on the path to his practice of mythology, and although he perceives that there are social reasons for variations in myths (variations which particularize the myths), Stafford's understanding of myth remains more or less humanistic, universalized, and psychological. But to actually write myths and moreover to make them available to an audience that would interpret them with such passion and near-scholarly interest is an experience of a different order than simply reading and contemplating myth, and it has affected how he thinks about the nature of mythology:

"I believe that humanity is hard-wired for certain things. And one of these is storytelling. Storytelling is the gateway to our inner selves that allow us to change and grow. And we are hard-wired to swap stories, to think about them, and engage in ritual activity. All of which, role playing games are

"Glorantha is my personal mythology. I first thought it would be only of interest to me. But I have realized since then that it resonates some other chords in other people as well. And I realized, well, that's their mythology. So what I'm writing is the mythological format. A playground of mythology. A place to experience what our grandfathers have experienced, and what is often taken away from us, which is active participation. And so
what I am trying to do in it is to very consciously rekindle or ignite people’s mythological consciousness so that they can interact with it in a meaningful way and make the world a better place to live” (Stafford 1999.).

Stafford is aware that his take on mythology sounds so “California” and perhaps that it is not always in tune with contemporary anthropology. Nevertheless, he is serious about mythology as an interactive and participatory relationship, and he is aware of everyday narratives being social acts organizing experience. Although he is an accomplished storyteller in the traditional one-directional sense, one of his intentions has always been to open his stories to other perspectives and constructions. The first publication of Glorantha in the board game *White Bear & Red Moon* was conceived not just as a board game but as a “do-it-yourself novel,” for which Stafford supplied the setting and characters and the players supplied the plot. *White Bear & Red Moon* was released at about the same time as the original *Dungeons and Dragons*. Once Stafford became aware of role-playing games and how they worked, he figured that they would be a better format than board games for inviting others to complete the direction and meaning of his text.

Stafford’s participatory conceptualization and practice of mythology has an everyday referent in his routine invention of open, writerly myth
texts, embedded in role-playing games, that as game materials explicitly
ask for further invention on the part of the reader. But for him, the
participatory qualities of myth are also associated with a higher mystical
purpose for myth, which he had not anticipated before beginning to work
with myth in role-playing games. Stafford says that he had not really
understood Joseph Campbell’s theory of myth when he first began to think
about it, but his ordinary experience of mythology as social participation
led to an understanding of mythology as an extra-ordinary mystical
participation:

“I believe I understand mythology now. Mythology is God’s way of
talking to us in a brief way. Everything we don’t know is part of the
great mystery. The great mystery is what we are here to interact with
and find out about. And mythology is literally the interface. It is
where our conscious, mortal, finite minds meet the infinite immortal
mind. And so to participate in the stories is to grow. Is to become a
full person. To seize our potentials and take our place in the
universe as we are intended. It’s a very spiritual thing, actually”
(Stafford 1999).

Stafford’s ideas about mythology as participation have practical
ramifications for his invention of new myths, but it is important first to
understand how he arrived at his perspective, what his composition process
is, and who he understands his audience to be.
A personal odyssey

Glorantha’s internal historical chronology derives in part from milestones in Greg Stafford’s personal life. He describes their relationship in the “Designer’s Notes” to the Glorantha Book contained in the boxed set, Glorantha: Genertela, Crucible of the Hero Wars (Stafford 1988:36), and he has added to that account in a personal interview as well as in a contribution to the book Heroic Worlds (Schick 1991:208).

In 1966, Stafford was a freshman at Beloit College in Wisconsin. Myths, legends, and their academic interpretations formed the whole of his reading interests—he had not yet discovered fantasy authors such as Tolkien or Moorcock, although he soon would. He says he ran out of mythology texts to read and thought he would try his hand at writing. He describes himself as having been a naïve, energetic, and visionary writer, but a terrible one. He wrote stories that, although very “two-dimensional,” would lay the foundation for Glorantha’s Dawn Age, and he began to fill in the history and geography of the world.

Writing out all the material for this First Age, he realized that it was told from a particular point of view within Glorantha, from the perspective of a certain region of the world. Probably the most important thing to know about Glorantha is that it would gradually evolve into a wildly
perspectivist setting in which the possibility of a fundamental ground or Archimedean point of view is often in question. The effects within the game-world are literal and profound in that the mythologies of the world’s many societies are both divergent and true.

In 1969, following a period of illness and personal crisis, Stafford acquired a new perspective on his own life and on Glorantha. Having been "reborn," he looked back on his experiences with the eye of a practicing mythologist and found inspiration for the story of Nysalor and Gbaji, a god revered in one place as Nysalor the White Light but revealed elsewhere as Gbaji the Deceiver, offering cures for diseases his cult had introduced in the first place. "I started writing at that time fairly consciously about how things were not what they seemed to be. This thing that looks so bright and shining at first, and it’s actually the polluting evil here. I learned a lot about that at that time" (Stafford 1999). Stafford would complicate the story further in the conflict between Arkat and Gbaji, where Arkat is the hero who defeats Gbaji but becomes Gbaji in the end. So ended the First Age of Glorantha. Regarding these reversals and transformations, Stafford says,

"This is very significant to me. I didn’t know what I was writing at the time. In retrospect, I look back and think, ‘You know, this looks like me here.’ And it’s very interesting. But I went through that,
and I got better, and I reorganized my life and wrote most of the material from the Second Age at that time” (Stafford 1999).

At about the same time, Stafford says he was beginning to re-think the role of myth in society and re-think his own process of researching and comprehending myths. He had previously held to a notion he called the Unified Mythology Theory, but he began to consider that myths were told in different ways in different places for different reasons. He began to write his revision of the Unified Mythology Theory into the world of Glorantha.

The Second Age of Glorantha was dominated by a philosophical society known as the God Learners, who were great manipulators of myth and who routinely entered and re-shaped the God Plane with a unified theory of mythology as their guide. The Godlearner’s magical technique for identifying mythic correspondences in order to manipulate the God Plane was eventually lost. It led to catastrophe and stopped working. Their understanding of myth had been incomplete—a shortcut way of thinking about mythology—that “often deprived them of the secret experiences necessary to truly understand [their] power” (Stafford 1988:24).

So the history of the Godlearners is an allegory within the story that emblematizes the story’s construction, in this case recapitulating Stafford’s
own early theory of Gloranthan mythology and also displacing it with a
new theory that is the other, stronger truth of the world. Furthermore, what
the Godlearners discovered about the world is one of the great mysteries
about Glorantha that Greg Stafford swears he will never tell. The Secret of
the Godlearners is part of something that is capable of destroying the
world:

“Well, see the Godlearners discovered something which is wiped out. This has happened in Glorantha a couple of times where
knowledge and information and power was exterminated and people
would go back and find it. And this is what’s happening in the Hero
Wars game. Those powers have been revealed again and they’re coming out and everybody’s grabbing them. And you’re going to
destroy the world again. Every 300-500 years, it happens” (Stafford
1999).

Such secrets would become an integral feature of Stafford’s inventio, once
he found an audience for his work.

The activities of the Godlearners, that is, their frequent forays into
the God Plane (also known as the sky world) to interact with the myths of
Glorantha, is something that Stafford is encouraging in his new game, Hero
Wars. “For me, one of the best things in Gloranthan gaming is that you can
go to the sky world and come back, and that you can participate in the great
myths and legends of the world … I want the Hero Wars game to do that a
lot” (Stafford 1999). So Stafford’s concept of myth as a participatory
experience is doubly enacted in the game as both players and characters have their encounters with the myths of Glorantha.

While still working on Glorantha’s Second Age in the early 1970s, Stafford says he had “kind of drifted away.” He says he traveled around and “the only time I ever shared my stories in those days was when I was trying to pick up girls. When I couldn’t afford to go to the movies, I said, ‘Let me tell you a story.’ I talked myself into some interesting places.” But eventually he married, and with new responsibilities toward his family came a new understanding and feeling of depth. He began to think about Glorantha’s Third Age, the time period of all the game publications.

In 1973, still never having published any Gloranthan stories, Stafford moved to California. He says he was a “frustrated novelist,” when an especially nasty rejection letter from a fantasy magazine spurred him to change direction and set aside any plans for an ordinary writing career. He decided to write the “do-it-yourself” novel that became the boardgame *White Bear & Red Moon*. He sold the game design to three publishers, but they all failed before the game could be published. “In a wacky moment of desperation, I consulted my tarot cards, which gave a clear message that I ought to begin my own game company. They said, ‘No one can do it as well as you’ (Schick 1991:208). So in 1975, living in the ghetto in East
Oakland, he founded Chaosium, his game company, and mimeographed the first two editions of *White Bear & Red Moon* in his basement.

Stafford describes the birth of the role-playing game *RuneQuest*:

"One day some men at a party asked if they could produce D&D statistics for the characters in my boardgame. I told them I didn’t particularly like the way D&D handled magic, and they said they didn’t either. These guys showed me some of their writing and game design, and eventually this group became the *RuneQuest* authors. *RuneQuest* was our first role-playing title and was published in 1978" (Schick 1991:208; boldface in original).

*RuneQuest* would become an influential fantasy role-playing game for the mechanical reason that it modeled some character abilities as skills having a percentage chance of success and for the structural reason that characters were also individuated by their belonging to well-defined organizations in the game-world—their cults in the world of Glorantha.

The publication of Glorantha in games marked the end of its development as a private odyssey. The details of the Third Age have been worked out since that time in a very public manner with constant feedback from friends, co-workers, and fans. The new game, *Hero Wars*, seems to be heading toward a major transformation in the world. But what stands out in Glorantha’s “public” development is the proliferation of secrets, as if a new odyssey is being charted and those initiated into the game are invited to partake in its mysteries.
How to write a scenario

To write a game scenario is partly to plan the possible courses of action available to the game’s players and partly to develop tools and advice for the referee to make the play of the game more fluid and extemporaneous. In short, it should minimize the chance that the referee will be at a loss for what happens next. The following is Greg Stafford’s description of how he goes about writing game scenarios for others to use, and it reveals the degree to which he highlights the game-world as the locus of invention—not just the setting of the scenario, which it is of course, but the stimulus and ground of further invention and a structure of attention in itself.

“I know what I want the results to be. I know that the adventurers have to go up into the sky world [God Plane; the place like the dream-time, where myths happen] and talk to the dragon and make a deal. So, how do I work that? They could do it any of these five ways. They could sail to the edge of the ocean. They could go through a temple into the sky. Etc. I decide which of those is most entertaining and take a look around at the setting. What potential does the setting have to contribute to the story? That usually brings into focus the setting itself. So now we’re in a harbor at the edge of the world. And I say, ‘Well, they want to make this new planet start.’ And I say, ‘Well, what does that mean for the myth?’ Because they are in a mythological world. They are in the sky world here, you know. And I just sort of say, ‘Oh, they could sing a song and make it come up. They could fish.’ And I just play with the ideas. I usually write a rough outline, fill in all the easy parts, put it aside, think about it, and then finish it when it’s time by
extrapolating from what's there. You know, I try to build on my work that has been done” (Stafford 1999).

Initiates

As a game author, Greg Stafford tries to entertain his audience. He considers that role-playing is entertainment that is in some sense inevitably mythological—not always strange or larger-than-life, but at least personally meaningful fantasy. But he is also concerned that “there is good mythology, and there is bad mythology. I think this is a good one” (Stafford 1999).

When a game author writes scenarios for role-playing games, he primarily addresses the referee or game master. Both to help and to entertain the referee, Stafford includes a large amount of material in his scenarios that will never come out in any actual game session. That is, the referee will always know a lot more about what is going on in the world and what might have happened than any of the players will. But Stafford wants the referee to enjoy reading the extra material. He wants the referee to get involved in thinking about it and share that interest with others. One of the ways to do that, he says, is to build mysteries into the scenario background, mysteries that need not be solved to enjoy the play of the game but that keep the referee intrigued by the game materials.
At first, Stafford was “a little horrified” by the close attention that fans gave to his mysterious world. Someone might “come up to [him] and say … ‘You know, I noticed that red is the color of sovereignty.’ … I said ‘What?’ And he said, ‘Well, you know, I’ve read everything you published and not published, and here it is,’” meaning strong textual evidence that the color red symbolizes sovereignty in the world of Glorantha. Stafford’s initial thought in response to that kind of attention to detail was “What’s wrong with these people? [But] after a while, I realized, this is a compliment. You’ve pushed something in them, and it’s flowing out. And I feel good about it. I like to hear it … I appreciate working with these people” (Stafford 1999).

Such attention is partly a consequence of Stafford’s mode of composition, which he compares to a “detective novel”:

“You see what someone does, but they don’t tell you everything so that later on they can, in their dénouement, reveal it … In everything I’ve ever written that was published I leave hints and put in a little bit here, a little bit there … My writing is full of that, and I do it on purpose. And in part, I omit information … The thrill I get as a designer when … they [the readers] get the reward without being told, that’s really important to me. So those people who suss it out on their own, you know they do extra work. Since I do that and now that people know I do that, they look for a lot of connections … “That’s the fun. I don’t think anything is as pleasant as that emotional charge of knowing you made a correct discovery … I always put in secrets. When did it occur to me? Probably, well, when I started publishing the gaming stuff. I think at first part of it was because I just didn’t want to answer the questions, or I didn’t
know [the answer]. And so I would write around it and eventually have to figure it out or not. But that adventuring thing, you know, I mean as a publisher, as a creator, it is my job to make sure that that game master is entertained. If he’s not entertained, nothing happens” (Stafford 1999).

When a fan figures out some secret of Gloranthan lore, Stafford is usually happy to confirm it—even if it is one of the secrets that he intends never to publish. For example, he says that maybe seven people have figured out the Secret of the Godlearners, one of the greatest secrets of Glorantha. He confirms the secret for them, and he always makes them promise not to spread the secret further:

“There are some big secrets I propagate, and there’s a couple that I do just to irritate, so as to make people think and work and work, and I’ll never tell them. I have a couple of questions that I have decided I will just never tell anyone ... I’m never going to tell anybody [the Secret of the Godlearners]. Never will. But people who know it ask me, and if they’re right, I tell them ‘Yes, you’re right. Now you may not speak [of it]’ ... But if they’re right, and they guessed it, I always tell them” (Stafford 1999).

Fans also have a tendency to solve the mysteries of Glorantha incorrect, which can be more difficult for the world’s designer to handle politely. Stafford says he does not mind if people are making connections between Gloranthan matters in which he had no special interest. He accepts that other people thinking and writing about Glorantha will introduce links and parallels that may even be contrary to his own plans. But often, he has already determined the specific life history of some
character in unpublished material, and that can cause a problem. And if a fan speculates on Gloranthan matters, for example at a special Gloranthan convention, it can be tricky to correct problematic assumptions. "Someone will say, 'In 1624, we know that [a particular character] did this thing,' and I will go 'We do?' And so all the time now, whenever someone says that, my question is 'Please, tell me where that appears so I can understand the context, and I can explain to you what I actually meant'" (Stafford 1999).

How to write a myth

Many stories of Gloranth remain unpublished. Stafford says he has twelve unfinished novels in the works, only one nearing completion. And not all Gloranthan material is intended for a wider audience. In the course of writing a story intended for public consumption, some obscure character or cultural reference may be introduced casually to advance the plot, and Stafford likes to know what lies behind that reference. He says that is what makes the story rich. To fill in the background for his own stories, he tends to write entire books of mythologies (The Glorious Reascent of Yelm, The Entekosiad, etc.). Stafford says these books are "Gloranthan books, by Gloranths, in Glorantha, for Gloranths ... I wrote them because they are key mythological works to which I shall refer in my novels." The
books are written as if a Gloranthan had written them, and they omit even more information than one of Stafford’s game scenarios, because if a Gloranthan had written the book there would be so many things left unsaid. The books have been released as expensive bound photocopies to satisfy dedicated fans of Glorantha, but they are not marketed to typical gamers, who would not be able to understand much of what is implicit in the books. Here is how Stafford assembles these mythological pre-texts for his other writing:

“I relax. And I say, ‘What am I trying to tell? What is the story, and how does it look?’ I draw upon known myths. And so I write it in parts. I have little story bits. In the Entekosiad, for instance, I knew that the theme was stories of the emergence of consciousness among mankind. And I looked at it and said, ‘All right, what are the stories of it?’ And so we have in there... I said, ‘Okay, this is the language story.’ So in there, there’s the story of people discovering language. And then of course there is the fire story. So I said, ‘What is the Gloranthan version of the fire story?’ Let’s see, fire, cooking, sex, building, war, religion—that is, the gods – are the keys in that book, I believe. And so I looked at them all and said, ‘Okay, how would they think of this?’ And I try to put myself into the place of someone discovering it for the first time, which is what mythology is about. And so the Entekosiad is a bunch of fairy tales about people living in an ideal world in which they are discovering that it is not ideal. And so I say, ‘Well, all right. They learn to harvest.’ And I looked at harvesting stories, and I didn’t like any of them. So I made up one that fit the Zeitgeist to the mythology” (Stafford 1999).

The following very brief myth was selected from The Entekosiad to exemplify what Stafford means by myths about the emergence of
consciousness, in this case consciousness of religion. The myth is told by
the fictional author of *The Entekosiad*, one "Valare Addi, Sanct and
Viatora," a priestess and traveler from Dara Happa who became one of the
"Great Teachers of the Lunar Way" (Stafford 1996:97). So, it also
exemplifies how Gloranthian myth may be recounted from the perspective
of a Gloranthian and, furthermore, how Gloranthans have to deal with the
fact of variations in myth, very different mythic perspectives (irreducible to
one) that may nevertheless be true. This is the story of "Ersomoda, the
Sun God":

"The mystery of why the Pelandans do not honor the great god
Yelm as the Sun was a puzzle to me, until I had investigated enough
to understand.

"The Provarians were unable to differentiate between gods
and mortals. By Wendarian times differences had begun to appear.
By the time of the Pelandans the difference was painfully apparent.
Mortal people recognized the superiority [of] deities, and also
recognized the difference between sentient Beings and the
impersonal Life Force.

"The Sun was recognized to have had its own innate force and
power, intelligence and energy. Nonetheless, power of the sun was
[not] revered [sic] as the primary source of life as in Dara Happan
[sic]. Instead, it was seen to be an emanation or force of Idovanus,
and was called simply Ersomoda, the 'holy firekeeper.'

"They say the sun was first created by Idovanus as an ersoon,
a temporary holy structure or model. It was put away when not
needed, and reconstructed or rekindled as needed.

It was because the Pelandans did not recognize the true
personality and rightful rulership of the Sun God that they fell prey
so often to the forces of darkness" (Stafford 1996:44).
*The Entekosiad* includes many myths in this style (that is, told in the voice of Valare Addi), but also dozens more that Addi supposedly collected from other sources, from peasants, and so on. It also includes very allusive instructions on how someone in Glorantha might enter the sky world and follow the path of some key myths to participate in crucial cultural mysteries of Dara Happa.

**And why**

Stafford’s mythologies and his reasons for writing them emerge always together out of a lifelong openness to mystery and a lifelong re-gathering of hints, hidden meanings, and *Unheimlichkeit*. His work is conditioned in a particular manner of being with others, a presumed audience, to which he gives attention in the construction of befitting myths. In role-playing games, stories, and myths, he sees the same spirit—the same inspiration, *Geist*, or phantasm of secrecy, motioning toward and animating the narrative with a point. For Stafford, the phantasm of secrecy is heuristic, guiding the invention of mythology, and hermeneutic, a matter at least of self-interpretation and perhaps also of mystical participation in the good.
[Stafford:] “We play with stories, you know, but every story, every real myth, has a secret meaning. Every one. Otherwise it’s not a real myth. I think those secret meanings are what’s activated when we play these games. And we get some benefit. And if you’re cursed or blessed, you pursue that meaning and understand what it’s trying to say or mean to you. And that’s really what has happened, and that’s why I do it. Because I see people, and they say, ‘Wow, you know, this changed my life.’ See, I was just writing this story. But that’s really what it’s about.”

[Pound:] “Different myths have different secret meanings?”

[Stafford:] Always. Yes. Yes. In fact—but one of the secrets of myths is that you can project any meaning on it you want. Now it may not be the right meaning, and it may not be a good meaning, and if that’s so, then it’s not going to hold. But we project myth. Mythology is a serious amount of projection. Psychological projection, that is” (Stafford 1999).

The relationship between myth and secrecy goes far beyond the design of puzzles and hidden relationships for fans to figure out. Stafford thinks of the secret in mythologies, whether they are exotic, invented, or everyday myths, as a call to existential care, awakening in each case a question of being here and pulling it forward:

[Pound:] “What were you thinking when you made there be a big secret behind Glorantha, and how is it still a motive for you in thinking about the world and writing for it?”

[Stafford:] “You mean the secret of existence?”

[Pound:] “Is it the secret of existence?”

[Stafford:] “I think so. Yeah. ... That’s what mythology explains to us, isn’t it? Why are we here? Mythology is one of the vehicles that
may be able to allow us to explain why we are here, and that is the mystery. All my life I’ve been looking for the mystery, I’ve been entertained by it … You know, it’s what keeps us moving forward” (Stafford 1999).

Summing up his rationale for practicing mythology through the medium of role-playing games, Stafford returns to the matter of interaction or participation, and more intriguingly, he introduces the problem of sense. Gloranthan mythology yields a world of sense, of connotations, and of hints of yet more figurations of the whole. And its author concludes that role-playing is what grounds it, actively configures and reintegrates it for us, and makes the sense of mythology possible:

“Let me do a closing statement. What I really think is that the role-playing games and the reason I work on them is because it’s a way for us to reactivate, reintegrate our mythology minds and selves. I think that it’s an active method of doing this and is everything that television isn’t, and that’s why we do it. It’s for that mythological sense” (ibid.).
Chapter Six

Opportunity Costs

Jonathan Tweet brings to game design an intense interest in game systems—the mechanics of play—tempered by an understanding that each game's techne is embedded in the assumptions and practices of particular audiences. His designs are considered radical, yet he downplays the innovative qualities of his mechanics and emphasizes how he has simply tried to make each game achieve a specific goal for an ideal audience. His works reveal an acute consciousness of trade-offs and compromises in game design, an awareness of the limitations of what one game can accomplish. And for some games, he intentionally constructs a decisionist problematic in the rules of the game, making it a source of delight for players who enjoy gaming for its difficult tactical choices.

Career options

Tweet began role-playing as a teenager, sometime around 1977, not too long after Dungeons and Dragons became well-known in gaming circles. He considered the available materials to be poorly designed, so much so that he decided he could do it just as well himself. The second
role-playing game he ever played was one he designed for himself and his group of friends. Although he did become a fan of games such as *Runequest* and *Call of Cthulhu*, the role-playing game market in its early years was not diverse enough to satisfy his tastes, so he continued to design his own new material. In college, he tried to sell his work to game companies but had little success, although he did publish a few magazine articles expanding on the game *Runequest*. (Incidentally, Greg Stafford’s company Chaosium was one that turned down Tweet’s first game design intended for publication.) Having found no publishers willing to go out on a limb for an entirely new game and not yet being very interested in working with another company’s game mechanics, Tweet was intrigued by his friend Mark Rein•Hagen’s suggestion that the two of them form their own game company. At least, it seemed like a reasonable alternative to grad school or a regular job.

Like many role-playing gamers before and since, Tweet discovered that the cost of entering the game industry was relatively low. He and Rein•Hagen got hold of a computer, a printer, and some layout software, invented the game *Ars Magica*, and published it themselves as the company Lion Rampant. Soon after, he found that he was taken very seriously in the game industry. He also found that the game industry is not usually very
remunerative, even if the product is relatively successful. Tweet eventually left Lion Rampant to sell mutual funds, and the remainder of the company merged with a magazine publisher to form the enormously successful White Wolf Game Studio (for whom Rein•Hagen wrote the “Goth” subculture hit, Vampire: the Masquerade). But Tweet’s connections to the game industry remained strong. While he was selling mutual funds, he designed the game Over the Edge (cf. Chapter Two) with help from Robin Laws (cf. Chapter Seven), and it was published by Atlas Games, a company that had previously produced some material for Ars Magica.

Tweet also took on several freelance assignments, including work for the tiny game company Wizards of the Coast (WotC), which turned out to be an extremely fortunate association for him.

When Wizards of the Coast began raking in millions and millions of dollars with their subculture-forming card game Magic: the Gathering, they hired Tweet to “come and do their role-playing games,” because everyone else in the company was busy expanding on Magic. At WotC, Tweet oversaw work on several role-playing properties. He wrote a new game for WotC too: Everway (cf. Chapter Two), a product that would not prove successful on the scale to which WotC had become accustomed. In fact, few RPGs could ever make enough money to justify the attention they
needed from WotC’s various costly divisions, so the company that began as an RPG company and that loved RPGs in principle eventually sold off its RPGs in generous deals with smaller companies, who could manage the design, sale, and distribution of an RPG in a tighter process having less overhead. Tweet was re-assigned to card game projects he enjoyed, such as testing rules for the mass-market collectible card game *Pokemon*.

Some time later, WotC saw an opportunity to re-enter the RPG market. The publisher of *Dungeons and Dragons* was ailing financially, and WotC bought them out. D&D was practically the only RPG property popular enough to both require and support a sizeable corporate enterprise, and many people at WotC adored the game. Given the chance to own it, WotC jumped at it and re-assigned Tweet to role-playing game development. When they eventually decided to go ahead with a substantial revision of D&D, WotC put Tweet in charge of the team designing the new *D&D Player’s Handbook*, which includes all the basic rules sufficient for playing D&D.

**Specialized economies**

To understand Tweet’s current perspective on game design, it will be useful, first of all, to compare the games he has written in the past to his
retrospective comments on what he tried to achieve in them. The way he reads his old games in the present reveals something of why and how he chooses goals for his current work.

Tweet’s first game product was not actually a complete game but rather a supplementary deck of cards that could be used in almost any role-playing game. Called Whimsy Cards, each card suggested a kind of event or plot twist that could be introduced into the game, not at random but collaboratively. In most RPGs, the players of the game are supposed to articulate imaginary events through the declared actions or personified voices of their characters. Only the referee is presumed to have the authority to bring other events into play. Whimsy Cards establish an alternative practice, whereby players have a limited ability to shape the course of events without reference to their characters. Whimsy Cards suggested events such as “Things Are Not As They Seem - Characters have been deceived, perhaps without malicious intent. The truth need not be known now. A good card for a secret note to the GM [Game Master]” and “Unexpected Aid - Much to your surprise, aid shows up. Aid could be anything from fog that helps you sneak into an enemy camp to the arrival of the cavalry.” Many Whimsy Cards turned on questions of pathos and motive, such as “Joy - Delight floods a character, making the world seem
beautiful. What brings about this wonderful feeling?” and “Change of Heart - A character's feelings change and alter a decision. Pirates spare prisoners and hassled innkeepers decide to make room for you after all.”

The cards constituted a generalized *inventio* of matters that could be brought to bear in any role-playing game. Players would be given at least one Whimsy Card each and allowed to use them to alter the direction of the game. In the guidelines for their use, the referee was discouraged from replenishing a played Whimsy Card if the card was used in a self-serving manner, whereas playing a card to advance the game in a way the referee might have done, if she’d thought of it, was to be rewarded with a replacement card.

Tweet says that the primary reason why Whimsy Cards were published as a separate product was that his company, Lion Rampant, needed a product to sell at Gen Con, the most important gaming convention of the year. Whimsy Cards had been designed as a component of the game *Ars Magica*, but when Tweet and Rein•Hagen realized that *Ars Magica* was not going to be ready by its planned release date, they quickly assembled the comparatively simple deck of Whimsy Cards and sold it alone. Still, the recommended use of Whimsy Cards dovetailed with *Ars Magica* more than with any other game. *Ars Magica* was designed to be played in a way
totally unlike any other role-playing game. The players were instructed to put together a community of wizard characters (one wizard for each player) but also to generate all the supporting members of the community: the wizards' talented companions, plus their helpers, hirelings, bodyguards, and so on. Each game session, only a couple of players would take on the roles of their wizards, while the remaining players would take on the roles of companions or even choose one character from the shared pool of weak and untalented helper characters. Whimsy Cards offered an additional incentive for playing weaker characters, as the wizard players would receive only one Whimsy Card per session, while the companion and helper players would receive two cards and three cards, respectively. The effect was to give all players similar opportunities for affecting the course of the game, because the wizard players had a wide variety of options, the companion players had some options designed into their characters plus two Whimsy Cards, and the helper players had few abilities but three Whimsy Cards with which to influence the direction the game would take.

*Ars Magica*'s unique injunction to have players take on roles with different power levels, not play the same characters every week, and share a pool of helper characters marked the introduction of "troupe" role-playing. The troupe style of play was designed to fit the game's special
mission, which was as Tweet says in retrospect to “do wizards correctly” on the assumption that wizards would by nature be powerful. Tweet recalls the initial goals for Ars Magica as being relatively humble compared to where the game later went. He and Rein-Hagen thought that existing games did not do justice to the potential options that would be available to wizards as they were imagined in legends, fantasy novels, and movies. Ars Magica was supposed to occupy that niche and be the game that allowed wizards a wide and befitting range of abilities. Of course, focusing on wizards so much raises the question of what to do with other kinds of characters—how and whether to make them similarly powerful in the way that other games do. More importantly, what incentive might there be for players to take on less powerful and non-magical roles in a game that focuses on super-powerful wizards? So there was a problem in Ars Magica of getting players to choose among all possible roles and yet to balance players’ opportunities to act in the game. The twofold design strategy of having players change roles every session and of giving variable numbers of Whimsy Cards according to the power level of the character offered an elegant solution.

Other aspects of Ars Magica were more personal. Tweet says many elements of Ars Magica emerged simply from the style of play his group
had evolved. For example, characters in *Ars Magica* were defined with mechanics for determining how their personalities would influence their actions. That is, each character had “Personality Traits” listed in pairs such as “Brave – Cowardly” and “Loyal – Disloyal.” The traits were given numeric values and rolled against when the traits might be expressed regardless of the player’s wish for the character to act otherwise (this turns out to be a very touchy issue for many players, some insisting that the character’s behavior should be their decision and others insisting that the mechanic interrupts their sympathy for the character’s emotional state by attaching it to a die roll). *Ars Magica* was also designed to evoke medieval Europe more strongly than most fantasy games of the time. Tweet says any game he might have designed at the time would have included “cultural stuff.” The game is full of Latin terms and routinely requires wizard players to use some Latin vocabulary to describe their abilities and what they’re doing. A later edition of the game would be supplemented with one of the most well-informed guides to medieval Europe ever published for gaming purposes. Another personal touch Tweet added to the game came from his favorite published game, *Runequest*. In *Runequest*, characters belong to cults that provide some sense of what the character’s attitudes and place in the world should be. In *Ars Magica*, wizard characters belong
to particular “houses” of magic. Tweet says that in that respect he mimicked *Runequest* “very consciously.”

The troupe style of play, especially its apparent indifference to power levels and its encouragement to occasionally role-play normal human beings, combined with the game’s emphasis on personality and realistic medieval history and with the Whimsy Cards’ distribution of narrative authority all served to make *Ars Magica* something different in role-playing. The game attracted an unexpected audience:

“"In a lot of ways it wasn’t received strictly as the game with the good magic system, because there wound up being so much more to it. That was okay. I mean, it became sort of an arty thing. And that’s fine. I mean, you know, I mean certainly we wanted to do a good game. Right? And I guess we did, and it worked so ... I guess our original intent was much more mechanical or low-brow even. I mean we just wanted to have a really good magic system. And we wound up developing a system that people played for the culture of the game rather than to play powerful wizards or anything. And so in that way it was a little bit different from how we originally intended” (Tweet 1999).

So in retrospect, *Ars Magica* was not only a lesson in designing trade-offs and equivalent rewards for different game options, but also a lesson in the rhetorical aspects of game design—that is, the relation between intention (with respect to design goals, personal interests, and marketing strategies) and interpretation (both of and by audiences)."
Jonathan Tweet’s next project was the game *Over the Edge* (OtE; see also the discussion of it in Chapter Two). While reading the long-running photocopied APA *Alarums and Excursions* (an APA is an “amateur press association,” meaning a periodical in which the costs of publication are shared by the contributors, who are also the main audience), Tweet was intrigued by one contributor’s “amusing but not serious” suggestion that the works of William S. Burroughs could inspire a great role-playing game. That one contributor happened to be Robin Laws, not yet a published game author then and certainly not the widely known figure he is today (see Chapter Seven). Laws described in general what a Burroughs game would be about and how it would work. *Over the Edge* turned out to be a different game entirely, but Tweet was moved by the article to read Burroughs’s novel, *Naked Lunch*. At that time, he was still selling mutual funds and wondering what his next game project would be. In his previous efforts, he been constrained by a wish to write profitable games, and he had also had to spend too much time demonstrating his game mechanics and rules to a new audience. But once his financial security was ensured in a non-gaming job, he was freed from the need to make money as a game designer, and he decided to invent a relatively simple game that he would not have to explain at length. Thinking about a game inspired by
Burroughs, everything came together for him. First, he expected that a Burroughs-ish setting would be too bizarre to be marketable, and he knew that would be an acceptable choice given his circumstances. Second, he felt that Burroughs’s modern context would make it easier for new players to enter into the game without tedious explanations of cultural limitations (such as “No, you can’t play a gypsy” in Ars Magica, because “There are no gypsies in 1200 AD in Europe”). Third, having abandoned the goal of profitability, he knew he could make the game mechanics as simple as he liked. Perversely but rationally, Tweet says, “I developed Over the Edge as a role playing game specifically to be unpublishable” (Tweet 1999).

But Tweet’s unpublishable game proved extremely popular with everyone who played it. The unusually simple rules were attractive to many. An Over the Edge character is defined with three traits and a flaw, and the traits can be virtually anything the player imagines: Doctor, Super Strength, Beautiful, Stunning Odor, Pyrokineticist, Anthropology Grad Student, or even Exquisite Teacup—as long as the player and referee can agree on the meaning of rolling dice associated with the trait. Once the traits are decided and assigned a number of dice according to a loose formula requiring the judgment of the referee, the mechanical part of character generation is essentially complete. The mechanical part of
playing the character is not much more complicated than rolling the number of dice associated with the most appropriate trait for the task at hand and then awaiting the referee's word on the successfulness of the roll. There are a few rules about how the rolls can change and what to do if the character has no appropriate trait, but little else is treated explicitly as a rule. In fact, the game did not even have a "hit point" system to measure how wounded the character could become without dying until Tweet was preparing the game for publication, which happened long after the game had earned a loyal following by word of mouth. Because the game had been so popular with his acquaintances and with local college students, Tweet wrote about his experience for the APA Alarums and Excursions. John Nephew (owner of Atlas Games) read about Tweet's game in the APA and asked Tweet if Atlas could publish it. Tweet says he actually tried to talk Nephew out of publishing the game, because it really was meant to be unpublishable. But Nephew persisted, and Tweet agreed to clean the game up (the text had been full of curse words), add hit points, and generally make the game more readable and playable for other people.

One issue in the compromise over the publication of Over the Edge was the question of, as Lyotard puts it, classicism versus modernism in artistic authority. Classicism is a situation in which the author can imagine
himself in the position of his audience and thereby write for his readers. Modernity, on the other hand, dissolves the analytic of taste that guides such authorial judgments through the imaginary audience and back, and in that circumstance, there is no presumed addressee for the work. Lyotard says,

"What is at stake in artistic language today is experimentation. And to experiment means, in a way, to be alone, to be celibate. But on the other hand, it also means that if the artifact produced is really strong, it will wind up producing its own readers, its own viewers, its own listeners. In other words, the experimental work will have as one of its effects the constitution of a pragmatic situation that did not exist before. It is the message itself that will elicit both the one who receives it and the one who sends it. They are able then to communicate with each other ... I think that such is modernity. It does not lend itself at all to the legitimation of the jeremiads of the misunderstood artist or of the haughtiness of the genius ahead of his time. Communication simply does not obtain because the value system is not sufficiently stable for a work to be able to find its appointed place and be assured of a hearing" (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985:10-11).

Tweet never anticipated that Over the Edge would find a general audience. He made it strange as an experiment in strangeness, but he made it simple and contemporary so he wouldn’t have to explain it. What he found was that the game encouraged unexpected exchanges and conflations of the possible positions of artist and audience (see discussion of Over the Edge in Chapter Two) and that the game brought together previously unknown players and previously unknown potentials of authorship for the
referee—directions and techniques of distributed narration, emplotment, allegory, chronotope, and event construction that would not be obvious in another setting but which the Burroughs-ish imaginary encouraged. The result was something therefore worth reporting to an intense circle of amateur writers (who might or might not have received it as a new guideline for artistic communication), but it still did not yield a game designed to others’ tastes. Only reluctantly and with little faith in its effects did Tweet domesticate the game in the manner of rhetorical classicism, making it speak to a kind of audience for whom he could imagine a more general and practical sympathy. That the final outcome was a critical and somewhat popular success may have partially restored Tweet’s appreciation for classicism as a mode of artistic production, a possible attitude to keep in mind for his later work.

Tweet’s next major publication was the game *Everway*. Having been hired as the primary role-playing game developer at Wizards of the Coast, a very rich company thanks to the fantastic sales of their card game *Magic: the Gathering*, Tweet was allowed a free hand in designing a game that might appeal to a new audience and open a new market for WotC’s role-playing games. “The whole point of *Everway* was to create a game that we could hope to sell to people who go to science fiction conventions,
who don’t play role-playing games” (Tweet 1999). At science fiction conventions, fantasy art and exotic Tarot decks are popular items on sale in the dealer’s room, so Tweet envisioned a game that would make use of fantasy art and a simplified Tarot deck to generate characters and resolve events (the interpretive procedures and visual rhetoric involved are discussed in Chapter Two). Tweet hoped for effects both of classicism and modernism in the appeal to and production of an audience. Everway would be grounded in a sympathy for the presumed tastes of an audience interpreted as such, but also be designed to turn that audience into a new kind of audience—transform them from science fiction fans into role-players by introducing them to a new communicative system, both in relation to one another and, more loosely, to the role-playing industry through the interface of Wizards of the Coast (Tweet was well-aware of the so-called first-mover advantage in reaching a new market before other companies). Everway was accordingly planned as an introductory game, something that a new reader unfamiliar with role-playing games could understand without too much difficulty. But Everway never reached its intended audience. Tweet says the game was never marketed at science fiction conventions at all, never advertised in places where fans of fantasy art and Tarot decks but not role-playing games might have seen it. What
might have happened if the marketing plan had gone forward and reached
that stage remains an “unsettled mystery” for Tweet even today. All that
actually happened was that Wizards of the Coast sold off all their role-
playing game properties and gave Tweet a comfortable job working on
card games.

Card games presented an interesting challenge to Tweet. He says he
would have been happy to be hired to work on card games in the first place.
He was especially intrigued by the problem of writing rules for beginners.
He worked on a beginner’s version of *Magic: the Gathering*. He tested
rules for the card game *Pokemon*, a licensed property that would be
astoundingly profitable for Wizards of the Coast, but which was first a
significant design problem: “How do you write rules for *Pokemon* that a
10-year-old can learn?” (Tweet 1999). Looking back over his career,
Tweet considers that many of his designs explicitly raised some question
about how to teach the game to beginners. For *Ars Magica*, Tweet wrote
the jumpstart kit to aid new players in approaching the game, despite its
complex rule system. For *Over the Edge*, he had wanted to avoid, for his
own benefit, having to give long rules explanations to new players, but the
simple rules actually had their roots in a concept for selling role-playing
adventures without rulebooks—the rules were designed to be short enough
to be included in every separate adventure product. For Everway, he wanted a game for people with no role-playing experience, building on the use of objects familiar to them (art cards and pseudo-Tarot cards). Tweet remembers these introductory aspects of his game designs as a theme linking them all to some degree. But more importantly, it turned out that they were all lessons in anticipating audience dynamics, and his most recent and most well-known project would put his sympathetic imagination for gaming audiences to an extreme test.

Legacy system

The refractoriness of Dungeons and Dragons grognards is infamous. The game has a vocal contingent of players who have never switched from playing its first edition (that is, the first edition of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons). The game’s second edition was nonetheless a very successful product, but the feelings its players could express for new rules supplements and their authors were sometimes notably anti-social. It is probably an understatement to say that some longtime D&D players are resistant to change and take personal offense at changes contrary to their sensibilities.
When Jonathan Tweet was given the task of re-designing D&D for its third edition, he could anticipate that the revision would be a hard sell to older players, and the project would obviously be a complicated corporate endeavor too. In his words, it was a project very different from his others because “it’s the one that’s most clearly a product,” i.e. something actually designed by many people—planned, written, and tested, then re-written, re-designed, and re-tested with various marketing goals in mind—and afterward pushed through a full marketing plan. His role would be substantial, but the project would take input and direction from many parts of the corporation. From any one person’s perspective, the positions of author and audience would shift and involve everyone else in some way as different aspects of the text and the design goals were debated.

The project was huge:

“There are different teams. There’s a design team prepper that meets to discuss design issues and political issues on which a team [needs to act]. There’s a brand team that meets with the design team, and their issues [have to do with] how the game is presented, who is it for, what image we present to the audience and so forth ... We work with them so that our design is in sync with what they want ... I mean, obviously we have input on what we think the design ought to be or what the audience ought to be ... And then there’s an internal e-mail bulletin board that’s just filled with people who have their opinions and like this and don’t like that” (Tweet 1999).

And it was
“important enough that all the way up to the president [of the company], people were involved. People all across the company played the game and have their opinions of how things should work, so a big part of my job was making the shared vision work. And that vision isn’t necessarily my vision though, you know, I share it … That’s very different from the games that I had done previously. Previously I had more of a vision of sort of what I wanted to see and do” (ibid.).

So Tweet was well-aware that the game’s composition was positioned and constrained in a social manifold. Furthermore, he had to keep in mind that he was not even one of the consumers the game was designed for.

“With the 3rd Edition it sort of doesn’t matter what sort of game I played personally. What really matters is how do people out there play, and what are they going to think is cool, and how are we going to make the game fun for them?” (ibid.).

He considered suggestions based on personal experience to be “first order game design,” and designing according to such individual concerns would have been an expensive luxury for D&D’s developers, as it would likely have met with relative failure in the marketplace. WotC aimed to keep D&D’s traditional market, so Tweet needed to assess design issues in a manner that distanced him from his own preferences and emphasized a presumed internal logic of the game that its players had evidently already found appealing:

“What I felt I brought to the 3rd edition process specifically was a keen sense of mechanics, rules and math and that sort of thing (and a sense of showmanship), whereas I think a lot of designers don’t have
a good grasp on math and are more involved in [just] what they like” (ibid.).

In college, Tweet had taken a class on game theory, and he brought economic concepts to bear on D&D’s design process, explaining how D&D used to work and how it would work in the future with reference to issues of rational choice and, most importantly, opportunity costs. An opportunity cost is any positive opportunity forgone as a result of taking another opportunity. Intentionally creating difficult choices around equivalently rewarding opportunities became a fundamental design principle for D&D3:

“For instance, in D&D the opportunity cost of being a dwarf is that you can’t be an elf. And the opportunity cost for using a two-handed sword is you can’t use a long sword with a shield. So just on a very mechanical level, we want to make sure that there are decisions that are interesting and that there’s more than one decision that’s interesting. We have to handle that through opportunity costs” (ibid.).

More than any previous edition, D&D3 was designed fundamentally to be a game of proairesis—deliberate choice—and, as Aristotle says, proairesis is always a choice of means (1941:968 [1111b]).

Returning to Kenneth Burke’s pentad, as discussed in Chapter Four, D&D3 seems to be doubly marked in Tweet’s account as a means game, on the one hand as an instrument of corporate success and on the other hand as a game wherein different means are evaluated for their opportunity costs (a
projection that, from a design standpoint, drives the invention of rules, rather than the other way around). To feature the means, i.e. the optimized choice of means, is a general characteristic of games constructed in economic game theory. Interestingly, an emphasis on optimal choice is not a general characteristic of games outside of game theory. Consider Greg Stafford’s rhetoric of gaming in Chapter Five, which clearly emphasizes the setting, or James Wallis’s rhetoric of gaming in Chapter Eight, which clearly emphasizes the style. So economic game theory takes one feature of games and expands on it to the exclusion of others. Probably not by coincidence, means are also featured by participants in rec.games.frp.advocacy (see Chapter Four) in accounts of “gamism,” of which D&D is a prime example. When Tweet carried his experience with economic game theory over into the revision of D&D, he recapitulated an existing rhetorical construction of the game as a means game and amplified it. The D&D3 core rulebooks have almost no setting information. They do not supply any special guidelines for generating rich character histories or for individualizing personality traits. They do not determine a moral or even a narrative purpose for the game. But they do offer very finely balanced choices of means (weapons, special abilities, moves to make in
combat, etc.), from which the action (rhetorical praxis) of the game follows.

The game was a huge success. In less than two years, the *D&D Player’s Handbook* (for which Tweet received the primary design credit) reportedly sold several hundred thousand copies, an extraordinary amount in an industry where selling fifteen thousand copies is excellent for a mid-list game. Most impressively, many diehard fans of previous editions raved about the new revision. As Tweet and WotC had intended, most consumers perceived the game as still being D&D in every way. But the new menus of complementary options to choose from, plus the rationalization of rules with ad hoc origins, did in fact open up compelling lines of thought for the game’s players—strategic questions about long-term plans for how their characters would gain new abilities and tactical questions about how to use such abilities in the game. The game’s tighter proairetic economy reached or attracted a vast audience, entrenching a decisionist rhetorical praxis in the field for years to come, and Jonathan Tweet’s personal resources in focused design, game theory, teamwork, and audience-oriented game development evidently paid off.
Chapter Seven

The Laws of Character

Robin Laws is a popular and prolific freelance game designer—one of the few whose name by itself can sell a product—who has also written two novels, the story-line for one computer game, and a short manual on the art of refereeing role-playing games in general. He occupies a key position facilitating communication among all role-playing game manufacturers, and he has worked as a consultant on the tastes of role-playing game audiences.

The diversity of his projects and the many sources he draws upon to produce them would be sufficient to make Laws a key interlocutor for any study of role-playing game design. But of special significance here are his observations on consumer preferences in role-playing, which constitute a rhetorical positioning of authorship relative to the construction of an audience and, more broadly, an illustration of the character-typological imagination at work in role-playing game production and use.

It may seem reasonable to suppose that the roles players take on in role-playing games would be crucial to the formation of interests and to the
rhetorical production of a game, but as previous chapters have shown, that is a supposition fraught with hidden exceptions and complications. The problem of character in *Baron Munchausen* (see Chapter Two), the ambivalence of some players toward any identification with a character, the many other aspects of the game that may be emphasized (such as the setting and mystery of the gameworld or the choice among means of action in the game)—all these are challenges to the assumption that playing a role is the essential or most significant element of role-playing.

Nevertheless, the design and use of character is inarguably a major component of role-playing, and Laws is one of its most careful observers, at least from the pragmatic standpoint of trying to guess who his audience could be or what distinctive features of character could be turned into the most marketable or crowd-pleasing roles he could make available in a game. To that end, Laws has developed an informal typology that relates kinds of gamers to kinds of characters they would enjoy playing. The typology has been useful to him privately in the realm of content and marketing analysis, and he has recently published it in *Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering*, where he also connects it to preferences in game systems and kinds of adventure scenarios that the referee might choose from to maximize the players' enjoyment of the game.
To avoid exaggerating the place of character in Laws’s rhetoric of gaming, it is worthwhile to consider several of his other projects and their widely divergent emphases, relating each one to topics covered in other chapters so as to deepen perspective overall.

**Had we but worlds enough, and time**

A Canadian with a degree in fine arts studies (film, theater, creative writing, script writing, and screen writing) who has always thought of himself as a writer, Laws broke into the role-playing game industry by chance through his participation in the APA *Alarums and Excursions*. Laws asked if anyone there would like to join a game played by mail, where play-by-mail (PBM) games have a long history in gaming, but as a result, he became acquainted with Jonathan Tweet. Laws later contributed the article to *Alarums and Excursions* that inspired Tweet to write *Over the Edge*, and the two of them exchanged thoughts on how OtE affected their understanding of role-playing as an art (see the discussion in Chapter Two). Laws’s comments were eventually published with few changes as a part of the *Over the Edge* rulebook.

As that was happening (in the early 1990s), Laws received a letter out of the blue from Steve Jackson, who as head of Steve Jackson Games
(a major game publisher) was interested in producing a book about a
strange fantasy world Laws had described in other contributions to *Alarums
and Excursions*. Laws had been running a fantasy game in which players
took on the roles of people in a palaeolithic community in an imaginary
world where insane and horrific gods terrorize human beings for
mysterious reasons. The gods happen to be parody versions of characters
from *Winnie the Pooh*: a moose god that looks like a donkey and projects
an aura of despair; a well-meaning rabbit god whose gifts generally kill
their recipients; an unpredictable bear god that devours human beings; an
insane cougar god that leaps everywhere, making a noise like thunder; and
so on, including a giant child god, two kangaroos, an owl, a gopher, and a
pig. But the parody is played with a straight face, and every effort is made
to portray the unfortunate people with realism (detailed descriptions of
their tuber plots and longhouses, story-telling practices, costumes, social
organization, etc.). The setting was published as *GURPS Fantasy II*, a
supplement to Steve Jackson’s Generic Universal Role-Playing System, so
Laws was able to elaborate on details of the world without spending time
on developing rules for the game, character generation mechanics, and
whatnot. *GURPS Fantasy II* established Laws as an author known for
imaginative world design.
Laws went on to write supplements for *Over the Edge*, as well as a novel set in its Burroughs-inspired world. Throughout the 1990s, Laws would steadily build a reputation as a reliable and talented freelancer, capable of expanding any game with supplements that would have wide appeal. He contributed to product lines at several companies, writing for games such as *Pandemonium!*, *Earthdawn*, *Nexus: The Infinite City*, *Deadlands*, and *Star Trek*. Along the way, he wrote a novel called *The Rough and the Smooth*, which was a political satire centered on the adventures of two anthropomorphized African naked mole rats (a species Laws had read about in *Scientific American*, which had an article on the strange termite-like social organization of the rats). Also, he developed a business plan for an Internet start-up that would have been a freelance content provider supplying ongoing story and adventure materials to enhance the stickiness of websites (that is, their attractiveness to repeat visitors), but for lack of time, the project never got off the ground. Some freelance content written for a computer game company did reach the market, however, after Laws was asked to write the story-lines for a computer game set in Greg Stafford’s world of Glorantha.

Laws says the computer game, titled *King of Dragon Pass*, is meant to be a resource management game where the player controls a tribe of
herders and raiders reminiscent of Vikings (the group is discussed briefly in Chapter Two in the section on Hero Wars). The game follows the history of the tribe over a period of a hundred years of daily life. The player faces difficult choices about whether to be a peaceful clan that raises cows or a war-like clan that raids cows from others. The number of warriors has to be balanced against the number of cows. Cows have to be fed either barley or oats, and their feed has to be managed. The game has characters in the form of named advisors who make conflicting proposals to intensify the dilemmas of the game. But in addition to tough decisions, the game features multiple unfolding story-lines deeply intertwined with the complex history and mythology of Glorantha. Laws mapped out many possible events that would work in concert to evoke meaningful narratives in the game without losing sight of the world’s quotidian charm and without forcing the game into any single thread. The interplay of setting, choice of means, event sequence, and narrative direction was therefore intended to be manifold. Laws would go on later to write the rules for Greg Stafford’s role-playing game set in Glorantha, Hero Wars (again, see Chapter Two).

Laws is well-known for games on which he is credited as the primary author: Feng Shui, Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games, Rune,
and *The Dying Earth*. The brief sketch of *Feng Shui* given in Chapter Two included its handling of the problem of genre emulation and its distillation of character “archetypes” found in Hong Kong action movies (a feature that is relevant to Laws’s later account of character type as a *topos* that may concern all aspects of role-playing). But *Feng Shui* was designed first of all as an intellectual property that could be developed in multiple media. Its setting appeared initially in the collectible card game *Shadowfist*, where it was depicted piecemeal on cards for the different characters, creatures, and sites of the game world. Each expansion of *Shadowfist* introduced new or updated cards connected to a gradually unfolding story published in brief prose fragments at the same time as the cards were released. The story-line provided a rationale for the various new cards. Laws has furthermore taken the setting and characters of *Shadowfist* and worked out a screenplay for a possible movie (which is plausibly saleable, given Laws’s training in writing for film and the demonstrated receptiveness of TV and film producers to other properties developed from RPGs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons, Heavy Gear*, and *Kindred: The Embraced*). So Laws does not imagine games in isolation from the larger world of entertainment production. When he sets out a list of character types found in Hong Kong action movies, it is not simply a matter of mimicking
another genre but of planning an entrance into the marketplace—it is a strategy of property design intended to be useful outside the domain of role-playing as well.

Much less commercial in its conception, _Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games_ was Laws’s contribution to the “New Style” line of role-playing games from Hogshead Press (i.e. James Wallis, see Chapter Eight; see also the treatment of the “New Style” game _The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen_ in Chapter Two). _Pantheon_ is not one but five different role-playing games that intentionally challenge the common understanding of what a role-playing game is. The games in _Pantheon_ share a set of rules called the Narrative Cage Match system.

Unlike most role-playing games, _Pantheon_ has no referee. Players use the Narrative Cage Match rules to bid against one another to take control of the course of the narrative. Unlike most role-playing games, two games in _Pantheon_ use a pre-determined list of characters (that is not an uncommon element of role-playing scenarios, however, which _Pantheon_’s games arguably resemble). But three games in _Pantheon_ do require players to generate unique characters. And unlike most role-playing games, there is a winner declared in every game of _Pantheon_. Each game has a checklist of points to be awarded at the end of the game to the players whose characters
have achieved certain genre-appropriate conditions in the game. "Genre-appropriate" is a key phrase. The five games in Pantheon set up familiar premises for stories rich in stereotyped potentials for action: six people trapped in an experimental undersea station shortly after the horrible and unexplained death of a crew member; six greedy people (several members of the same family) who collectively own 49% of the stock in a corporation whose majority shareholder has just died; four to eight partners in crime gathering to collect the loot they stashed ten years ago in a time-locked vault; a group of giant monsters stomping on Tokyo; and finally, a theogony game, in which the gods are born and set about making the universe. The object of a game of Pantheon is for each player to make the narrative include stereotypical events featuring the player’s character appropriately (even if the event is not beneficial to the character). So, very much like Feng Shui (see Chapter Two), Pantheon is a game of genre emulation. In order to succeed at Pantheon on the first try, a player needs to be extremely aware of what kinds of things happen in movies like The Abyss, TV shows like Dallas, any crime movie where former partners turn on one another, any Japanese monster movie, and any creation cycle from any mythology. But after the first exposure to a game from Pantheon, players may then replay the game strategically to direct the narrative
toward a known list of goals. In short, *Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games* is an experiment in “New Style” role-playing that downplays the development of character and choices among means in the game, instead positioning stereotypical action as the telos driving the collaborative construction of an imaginary sequence of events.

Laws’s other games *Rune* and *The Dying Earth* are like *Feng Shui* in that they are more conventional RPGs, but all share with *Pantheon* a propensity for considered and affectionate parody. *Rune* is based on a first-person computer game, wherein a Viking warrior battles hordes of badguys in a long chain of twisting caverns until he finally gets to face Loki, the “boss” of the badguys. Laws approached the subject matter with tongue in cheek. He exaggerated the familiar chronotope of the RPG “dungeon crawl” (see Chapter Three) and designed *Rune* to be played as one long series of dungeon crawls, adding the *Pantheon*-like twist that *Rune*’s players could actually win the game. Even the referee could win. Scenarios for *Rune* have to be designed according to rules that make them balanced with respect to the abilities of the players’ characters, so the referee can win points for making up scenarios that nevertheless defeat the players.
*The Dying Earth*, on the other hand, exaggerates the mannered qualities of its source material—the Dying Earth stories and novels by Jack Vance—and comes out as a game antithetical to the “dungeon crawl” way of playing. Urbane and roguish, it is most comparable in style to *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (see Chapter Two). The game’s rules for suasion are nearly as detailed as the rules for combat:

“The most important ability in a *Dying Earth* series is not the ability to run your foe through with a rapier, or dodge his most fearsome attacks—though both talents are assuredly efficacious in certain unfortunate circumstances. Your most important ability is the one which allows you to hoodwink, inveigle, actuate, cajole, argue and otherwise persuade your interlocutors into doing what you want. Thus you can convince them that you meant no harm breaking into their mansions, that you are inexperienced in the cardsharp’s art, or that any deflowering of the ritual virgins was perfectly understandable, given the circumstances” (Laws 2001b: 16; boldface in original).

So a character is defined as having a particular style of persuasiveness (glib, eloquent, obfuscatory, forthright, charming, or intimidating) and as having an attribute that permits the rebuff of others’ attempts at persuasion (obtuse, wary, penetrating, lawyerly, contrary, or pure-hearted). Character interaction mechanics such as those governing suasion in *The Dying Earth* are occasionally the source of controversy in role-playing, because they intervene in the process of playing out a role and put to a die roll a matter that could be resolved by player and referee simply speaking in character
and having a dialogue according to the posited motives built into the roles they have assumed. The mechanics seem intrusive with respect to the nature of role-playing. However, what the controversy actually points out is the variability in how different role-players approach the problem of character.

The character of the audience

An astute and eloquent observer of role-playing game fans, Robin Laws has been employed as a consultant to gauge the relevance of particular elements of a game’s design to the preferences of different audiences. Asked about how he approaches game design himself, he offered the following:

“Well, I try first of all to develop a sense for what the audiences taste is, and so I monitor the internet and listen to feedback and come to shows like this [meaning Gen Con] to see what people like. I look at other products that are successful … Obviously this is a commercial medium. Although a surprising amount of personal expression ends up in there, … what you have to think about more are the prosaic things of what do people like and how do you create something that people will like that strikes a balance between being the thing that they already know that they like and something new that they’re going to latch on to and see as original and fun and worth pursuing instead of whatever else it was that they would have done with that time and that money.

“And so over the years I have developed a sense for what people want in a role-playing game. For example, power fantasy is an essential element, and people want to fantasize about being cooler and having a greater impact on the world than they do in real life,
and in a lot of ways I think that that’s a really positive thing. And then overlaid on that is the way in which they want to experience that power fantasy. So for example, they want to be able to progress and gain new cool powers (or crunchy bits as I call them) as they progress through the game. And in a way, my theory on this is that role-playing games are vicarious shopping for men, because men would shop if (A) they didn’t have to leave their home and (B) they could go buy cool super powers” (Laws 1999).

Laws is probably right that the majority of role-players enjoy games that allow them to play superhuman or larger-than-life characters. Only a tiny minority play games such as Little Fears, in which players take on the roles of small children being terrorized by insanely cruel monsters, or Behind Enemy Lines, in which players take on the roles of normal human soldiers in World War II. On the other hand, popular games such as Call of Cthulhu, Over the Edge, and GURPS are often played with normal human characters, although their circumstances may be very strange, and it would be a mistake to assume that power fantasy is intrinsic to role-playing—Laws is speaking of young male audiences and the profitability of selling power fantasies to them. He continues the point, relating it to his own game designs:

“So in a lot of ways a successful role-playing game is a catalog of the different cool powers that you can select with your budget, and it can be sort of a more traditional set-up the way Feng Shui is where there are all kinds of different types of characters, and then ... there’s then a subset of different cool powers. Feng Shui very specifically sets out to differentiate five or six completely unrelated categories of cool powers that you can buy. Or, for example, the
*Hero Wars* game (which is designed to appeal to a slightly different constituency of game or taste) let’s you pick your own super powers and describe them the way you want to describe them, and you assign numbers to them, and so the rules provide a structure for you to measure the effectiveness of your cool powers. And because the way the rules of that game work, everything is balanced against everything else so that your ‘conduct ethnographic interview’ scale is just as effective as his ‘punch you in the face’ scale. And you could conceivably use that to solve as many problems as the ‘punch you in the face’ scale” (*ibid.*).

Like Jonathan Tweet (Chapter Six), Laws emphasizes here the availability of a choice of means, but unlike Tweet, he more consistently relates the agencies of the game back to the agents—the players and characters. In this respect, his attribution of motive is more akin to idealism in its focus on the subject, and Tweet’s is more pragmatic or technical. As the key to inventing for role-playing audiences, Laws tries to grasp the positions of the game’s players insofar as they are situated through the fashioning of their characters (leaving aside for the moment those players who invest little or no affect in their characters). He evokes briefly the problem of genre in marketing games, but quickly returns to the theme of player type related to character type:

“And then on top of that ... there are very specific levels of specific images or pop culture ideas that people find attractive. You first of all want to model a particular genre. If you can do a sub-genre of action-adventure (and it has to be action-adventure that no one else has done before), you’ll get a lot of attention, so [for example] we did Hong Kong action movie role-playing which at that time had not really been done in a commercial level before. There
were a few small press games that never really got much attention, but this was really the first big one at the gate. And being first in category is as essential in gaming as it is in toothpaste or other packaged goods.

"And then finally there are specific things that people want no matter what game it is ... This relates to a different idea which is that there are a lot of different constituencies of taste within any given group of players and that too many designers make the mistake of designing a game that only appeals to their own slice of that pie. And one of the reasons that Dungeons and Dragons remains the industry leader after so many years is (A) it was the first brand of toothpaste ever, but also [B] because it serves all of the constituencies about equally for a number of years, until the groups like the storyteller fans and [intense] role-players start to get disaffected and break away and won't play the game. So you want to decide which constituencies you're going to focus on and whether you're going to have a broad-based one. The more broad-based constituency you're focusing on, the more you have to sort of nod towards giving everybody what they want. And there are even some really funny things that people quite often want. Like every successful commercial game has to have a ninja. You have to be able to play a ninja if you want a successful role-playing game. You don't necessarily call him a ninja, but you need a sneaky guy who looks really cool and infiltrates and has a sinister reputation. You also need to be able to ... There's always somebody who wants to play a cat man. So in Feng Shui you can play a transformed tiger. There are people who have like a feline fetish, and they want to play with cats" (ibid.).

The assertion that an ideally marketable game should have options for ninja and cat-man characters is striking as a parody of the peculiar obsessions of RPG fans. Here, Laws turns his eye for genre stereotypes to be emulated in games onto the gamers themselves and comes up with elements of a stereo-typology of players (its truth value as description is irrelevant—its rhetorical power as parody and its pragmatic effects in
marketing and in playing games are all that matter). Laws also keenly observes that D&D is not just the first RPG most game players are exposed to (even though that changed somewhat in the 1990s with the advent of White Wolf Game Studio), but more importantly, it is the first sufficient game—that is, one that serves any beginner’s purpose or style reasonably well—up until the point where player begins to lean strongly toward some manner of character enactment for which D&D is felt to be intrusive, irrelevant, or nonsensical. Laws goes on about the reasons why D&D remains strong in the market:

“And so the secret to a really successful game is to enable as many of those really super highly specific little fantasies within the broader framework of catering to people’s power fantasy: their desire to experience a rich world, or to participate in creating their own story, or to simulate war and tactical situations, or finally just to hang around with your friends. And that’s another reason why Dungeons and Dragons is very successful: because it’s simple even to people who don’t really care deeply about a role-playing game. [They] will still show up and play with their friends, and that will keep the number of players at the number that you need in order to continue playing. So it’s really kind of a balancing act, and the more inclusive you are, people who are at the [extreme] fringes of all of those different groups will look askance at what you do, so if you decide to slice away some of the traditional things that you usually give to the war-gamers in the group, well, the war-gamers will complain that it’s not realistic, or you can’t really simulate anything, or it doesn’t mean anything. If you create mechanics that relate to social interaction, some of the role-playing people will look askance at that because they feel that should just be totally acted out and only the physical things should be simulated by dice” (ibid.)
Laws's comments on the simplicity of D&D seem to reflect a popular feeling that the game is, at bottom, very easy to understand, which is an illusion sustained by familiarity in that the game is so often the first RPG that someone plays. D&D is in fact astoundingly complicated, especially if the many exceptions and special cases of the magic system are taken into consideration (as they should be given that other aspects of the game such as the special properties of creatures and treasures depend on detailed knowledge of the magic system). But Laws actually means to evoke a kind of player: the person who attends reliably and rolls the appropriate dice, perhaps at another's direction, but remains a low investor in the game as a practice in itself and uses the game as an excuse for interacting with friends. Finally, Laws discusses game design (from the perspective of a freelancer) as a problem of mediating various audience preferences, often including those of the publisher or lead designer:

“So it’s a balancing act that you do once you figure out who you want to target. Feng Shui, for example, is much more broadly targeted, trying to hit pretty well all of the groups. It says to the war-gamers, ‘Well, this isn’t realistic, but it’s modeling something different—it’s modeling a world of cinematic reality, and so you’re simulating this unreal world.’ And a lot of them are okay with that. Whereas for Hero Wars, it’s just ‘War-gamers, there’s nothing in this for you whatsoever’ in order to focus on the sort of role-players and storytellers who are the natural fit with this very complex world [of Glorantha]. To make the world fit with the rules [would never work], because if you have really specific hard simulationist rules, you’ll never encompass all of Greg Stafford’s vision, because it’s a
world of exceptions where things change all the time. Any time you attempt to codify anything [about Glorantha] numerically, in a traditional role-playing rule sense, you end up with weird results that don’t actually mesh with the way he sees the world” (ibid.).

When Laws mentions “simulationist” rules, he probably does have in mind the use of the term originating in rec.games.frp.advocacy (see Chapter Four). It is not an implausible neologism in this context, but Laws is well aware of the old debates in the newsgroup, which he regards as too esoteric and self-involved to be of much good from a marketing standpoint. Laws is engaged in a reading of RPG players’ styles and motives much like that from rec.games.frp.advocacy, but he has both a greater concern for the average player and a stronger inclination to connect styles and motives of play to a character-oriented typology.

Laws of character

In Robin’s Laws of Good Game Mastering, a 32-page booklet of advanced tips on refereeing a role-playing game, Laws begins with a lesson on understanding the players’ “in-game preferences.” He elaborates on Glenn Blacow’s 1970s-era taxonomy of role-playing styles, which had it that there were four basic ways of playing RPGs: “Roleplaying,” “Story-Telling,” “Powergaming,” and “Wargaming.” Laws adds three positions for a total of seven, and he relativizes them all to the players’ interests in
character. He imagines play first of all as a relationship to character, out of which other attitudes toward the game emerge.

Laws suggests that game masters (referees) assemble a chart listing members of their gaming groups and specifying each player's "type": Power Gamer, Butt-Kicker, Tactician, Specialist, Method Actor, Storyteller, or Casual Gamer. Laws says the Power Gamer is especially concerned with the character as a collection of powers and abilities. The Butt-Kicker enjoys having a character that beats up on badguys. The Tactician does not really care about characterization and may even become frustrated with those who do, if they fail to make tactically optimal moves; the Tactician is obsessed with finding the optimal means of approaching some situation or event. The Specialist is the kind of player Laws focused on in earlier discussions: the kind of player who wants to play a ninja, cat-person, or whatever single type of character. The Method Actor identifies strongly with any character they make or are given, regardless of the player's personal preferences, and sets goals from the standpoint of the character rather than by considering what the player would do herself, given the same set of circumstances. The Storyteller is interested in role-playing fast sequences of events and is made happiest when the experience of the game approaches the experience of watching a movie or reading a
novel (including the feeling for its over-arching narrative structure).

Finally, the Casual Gamer is a low-key participant only nominally concerned with the game as such.

Having figured out what kinds of players are in the game, the game master should then, according to Laws, consider the affective interests of each player and make note of the specific “emotional kick” or desired state of mind that, if achieved, will satisfy that player most. Laws goes on to address other topics but soon returns to his sevenfold typology of gamers. He recommends choosing a game system for the group that fits the group’s average interests, which should be calculated in terms of the seven types of players. He gives a simple numeric formula for figuring out how much the group will prefer complicated rules (offering strong definitions of what the characters can achieve) or simple rules (offering the game master flexibility in judging character actions). The sevenfold typology returns again in the book’s section on adventure design, determining the degree to which the game master should “structure” adventures (i.e. plot them in advance) and helping the game master to plan scenario elements (“plot hooks”) that fit not only the abilities of every character in the group but also the characterization interests of every player.
Of course, the organizing purpose of Laws’s book is pragmatic and not sociological. Viewed in that light, his typology of character interests strongly resembles the considered parody of genre that he incorporates into most of his game designs: the point is not to analyze and describe players or games in a distanced theoretical sense but to set out an inventory of rhetorical possibilities for redeployment in the play of the game. As argued in Chapter Two, one problem of genre is that every example of a presumed genre shows in its differentia (unmarked as genre) the way out and into another practice of genre—that is, a genre is not an object or category but rather a rhetorical relay. Taste and interests are dealt with similarly in Laws’s typology. From Laws’s perspective, game authors and game masters deal with a related problem of pleasing an audience—in other words, taste is an object and goal of rhetoric. Accordingly, the rhetorical construction of taste through parody is sufficient as understanding if the rhetorical practice following from it opens into the event of appropriation that is pathos and thereby anticipates its own rhetorical dissolution. Genre and taste need never be anything more.
Chapter Eight

Workshop of Potential Games

James Wallis is a self-consciously experimental and avant-gardist game designer who feels that role-playing as an industry is stagnant because it continues primarily to produce games patterned after Dungeons and Dragons (a tendency that has only increased in recent years thanks to the “d20” phenomenon, as discussed in the section on D&D in Chapter Two). The owner and operator of Hogshead Publishing, one of the very few RPG companies in the UK, Wallis has so far released five games under his “New Style” imprint, each of which is intended as a challenge to a conventional manner of role-playing. He is currently developing at least two other “New Style” games of his own. To put Wallis’s emphasis on style into both personal and social perspective, it will be useful to review his other projects first.

Writing popular culture

Wallis was introduced to role-playing games while a student at a well-known boarding school, where he soon began writing a role-playing
fanzine and spent so much time on it that he eventually failed his exams and wound up at a minor university. Having caught the "bug" of seeing his work in print and of bringing others' work into print, he continued working on his fanzine and also looked for freelance work in writing for RPGs. His first single-author book was *Mutants in Avalon* in 1991, a supplement for the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* RPG, where Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were a hot property in comics, film, TV, toys, and RPGs at the time.

Wallis was soon writing for other licensed properties in the book sector, where he was commissioned to write novels and adventure game books starring the video game character *Sonic the Hedgehog* and also a novel about the TV characters *Ren & Stimpy*. Writing for licensed properties gave Wallis experience with manipulating the given material and recognizing it as an invention of the resource having limitations (conventions) placed upon it as a social fact itself renewed in an everyday rhetorical manner. Although he describes the assignments as "hack work," he was given some freedom to play with the Sonic character. In *Sonic the Hedgehog in the Fourth Dimension*, Wallis says he came up with what he still thinks of as "one of the most complex time travel plots I've ever read" (Wallis 1999). He combined every time travel cliché he could recall and
included difficult allusions to dimensional theory. As a joke intended only for an editor, he also wrote Sonic into a sadomasochistic bondage scene, but the scene was left in the novel, because the editor failed to notice it. In Sonic the Hedgehog and the Silicon Warriors, which Wallis describes as “Sonic does Tron” (a movie wherein the characters enter the virtual world of a computer and its video game constructs become life-threatening reality), Wallis had fun working in amusing references to every video game possible, and in light of the limited editing of the previous novel, he also included a piercing sequence to reference the popularity at the time of body modification and “modern primitives” (Wallis 1999). His experience with the Ren & Stimpy novel was less than satisfying. The creator of the TV show Ren & Stimpy had left the series, and the show’s corporate owner was in the midst of changing the property radically. So contrary to the ethos of the show, Wallis was unable to include the kind of things with which the show had built its reputation.

Wallis’s next major project was the card game Once Upon A Time, for which he was neither the primary nor the secondary author, but rather the third person to work on it and the one to hone it to the point where it would be publishable. Once Upon a Time is a storytelling card game (not a role-playing game) where each player is first dealt a Happy Ever After
card, such as "So the evil-doers were thrown down a well" or "Which proves that one should be more careful of one's companions." Each player is then dealt a hand of cards featuring fairy-tale story elements, such as "Thief," "Lucky," "Horse," "An Object Breaks," "This Animal Can Talk," or "Cottage." The object of the game is to take control of the story, gradually get rid of all the cards in hand by working their elements into the story, and finish the story with the Happy Ever After card. There are a couple of ways to get control of the story (including cards that specifically allow interrupts), and there are some guidelines for how to judge the proper play of a story element card. *Once Upon a Time* was a modestly successful product in the English-speaking world and a huge hit in France, where it sold over 20,000 copies. But to Wallis, its greatest impact came when someone came to him at Gen Con:

"One of the guys who came up to me at this booth when the game had just been released ... said my girlfriend doesn't play games but she will play this. And I thought that is my mission. That is what I have to do: get non-gamers to play games or at least develop games that will ... show people that role-playing is not big and frightening, and it doesn't have to be a 250 page rule book. Because it doesn't. ... We instinctively know how to role play. A lot of us do it, I mean we do. All right. Who wrote the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*? Goffman? Goffman, yeah. Roleplay is instinctual. It is subconscious. We all do it ... Why do we need to finalize it? All right you need to finalize it if you are trying to sell it to 14 year olds, who are trying to apply rules to the way the universe works and therefore would very much ... enjoy operating in the universe where everything is formulaic and laid down and has to obey strictures."
But you know we are guys in our 30's or our late 20's. We surely get beyond that” (Wallis 1999).

Wallis’s “New Style” games some years later would indeed be shorter than most role-playing games, and some (especially Youdunnit, a game still in development) would be very accessible to new players.

But Wallis’s account of his break-through discovery of a new purpose as a game designer is characteristically intellectual. In discussions of role-playing games, he often mentions sources such as Goffman on the presentation of self, Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, various OuLiPo authors, Keith Johnstone’s *Impro*, and even Gary Alan Fine’s ethnography Shared *Fantasy*. His goal in addressing new audiences is less one of marketing than one of pedagogy: he theorizes role-playing as an activity that shows us about ourselves as social and improvisational actors, and he designs games that can make that understanding available to new audiences. One of the first projects he took on with his own publishing business was to launch a journal devoted to the critical study of role-playing: *INTER*ACTION (subsequently renamed *Interactive Fantasy*; see Chapter Four for additional discussion). The journal was a commercial failure, but Wallis remained committed to the exploration of role-playing beyond the scope of the existing role-playing industry.
Nevertheless, having some business sense and an unwillingness to throw away pots of money, Wallis had started Hogshead Publishing by tying it to a licensed product he knew would be commercially viable: 

*Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. *Warhammer* had already been a successful product for Games Workshop, the major UK games company, but Games Workshop was ready to license it out and focus its business on miniature war games (where it dominates the market). *Warhammer* is a medieval fantasy game in the mold of *Dungeons and Dragons*, but it has an especially dark feel plus good brand recognition in the market thanks to Games Workshop’s miniatures games, *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, *Warhammer 40k*, and so on. Wallis knew the game had its own niche, and Games Workshop preferred to license it to a British company; so Hogshead was founded with reasonable security. Wallis was, moreover, fairly well-to-do himself and backed the company with £50,000 (around $80,000 at the time) of his own money. Still, the company faced difficulty as a side effect of reprehensible business practices beyond his control. Eventually, combining good business sense with a roguish tendency to follow his own wicked muse, Wallis declared his company motto to be “*Brevior vita est quam pro futumentibus negotium agendo,*” and he followed that dictum closely both for peace of mind and for financial security. *Warhammer*
continued to pay off, and Wallis was freed to work on designing games
with less stress in his business dealings.

Then again, publishing has rarely been Wallis’s only source of
income. He has from time to time been involved in print journalism (co-
founding one magazine and editing another), TV journalism (as an on-
camera personality for a show about the Internet aired weekly on a British
digital TV network owned by Rupert Murdoch), and on-line games design
(where against his will he was assigned a project with the working title
“Sim Sleaze,” a city simulation where players would be porn lords
managing prostitutes and running sex shops; as Wallis predicted, no one
was interested in taking the game to market). Independent game design
and publishing for the hobby market is notoriously unprofitable, even for
the major figures in the industry, and Wallis has taken on other day jobs for
many years continuously while also publishing games.

Age of the Avant-Garde

So the story of the first “New Style” game begins in the interstices of
Wallis’s everyday life:

“I was literally trying to think of a way to do a Baron Munchausen
roleplay game that would work in the kind of conventional structure
[of RPGs]. And [the idea] was kind of well ‘Okay, you are either a
character who is the best person in the world at one particular thing,
... or you're very good at everything from time to time.' I played around with this, but I couldn't make it work, until finally I was in the shower one day. I have good ideas in the shower, I have bad ideas on the loo. It is kind of a mad thing. I was in the shower, and suddenly I thought, well hang on, the Munchausen tales never happened. They're only ever told, or only ever recounted as stories, so you could do ... Bang, and there was the game. It was just fully formed. Well not quite but the core concept, the idea of challenging the player next to you to tell a story and then interrupting him. The interrupts are a Once Upon a Time device. It's a ... kind of borrowing from other games I've worked on. But I took it to a convention and play-tested it in the very early form, which is the form without money [wagering a stake as part of the game]. Money came in much later on, and it worked. The core concept clearly worked so well that I thought, 'Oh I have to take this further.' And initially we pitched it to Radio 4 in the UK [and] to the serious talk radio station WBBC as a half-hour comedy series" (Wallis 1999).

For more about Baron Munchausen as a game, see Chapter Two. But the format of this "Superlative Role-Playing Game in a New Style" would become a model for future "New Style" games. Munchausen demonstrated that a short 24-32 page role-playing game that deviated greatly from the common understanding of an RPG would sell to role-players, at least at the low price of $5.95. Moreover, Wallis knew he had struck a nerve with Munchausen, stylistically, when Gary Gygax (designer of the original Dungeons and Dragons) repeatedly denied that The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen was a role-playing game at all. Wallis started looking for other "New Style" games to publish.
In 1999, Hogshead released both *Violence: The Roleplaying Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed*, a satirical game about violence in role-playing games, and *Puppetland / Power Kill*, two games in one 24 page book. Neither game was designed by Wallis. In fact, Wallis has not published a game of his own since Munchausen, though he has several designs in the works. *Violence* was written by the well-known game designer Greg Costikyan (whose name is jokingly given as Designer X to make clear that he had no special wish to be associated with the game).

*Violence* is barely playable as a game (Wallis was appalled when he heard of people actually trying to play it), but it takes the form of a role-playing game to mock role-playing games in general. The insulting *épater les bourgeois* tone of the game does not make it an experimental work; the experiment is rather negative—to call attention to the lack of experimentation in RPG design by exaggerating the ugliest but most common feature of role-playing, which is combat. The game begins with an ironically bombastic attack on the audience:

"After many years of laboring in the vineyards of game design, holding aloft the Platonic ideal of what the *Ars Ludorum* can achieve, and working for the time when game design shall achieve its place among the pantheon of Muses—that fabled 21st-century day when games shall be universally acknowledged as the premier form of the age, as the 20th century acknowledged film and the 19th century the novel—I have come to an unutterably grim and depressing conclusion."
“You puerile adolescent and post-adolescent scum [don’t care because] ... Games are about violence ... You’re all a bunch of perverted little Attilas ... Here, vile reader, you shall find what you desire. Violence of the most degraded kind” (Designer X [Greg Costikyan] 1999: 2).

This introduction elevates game design at the same time as it suggests (through bombast) that it would be very arrogant to elevate game design. Then, it denigrates the reader for having an interest in violence at the same time as it suggests (through ironic bombast) that the reader is already a good sport for having accepted the satire. The game goes on in this vein throughout. The premise of the game is that the characters are drug-addicted ultra-violent serial killers who “dungeon crawl” through ordinary apartment buildings killing average human beings. The point is that most role-playing games (especially those run as “dungeon crawls”) involve quite a lot of killing, which ought to be not just egregious and repulsive but also very boring. That the reader can recognize elements of Violence in most RPGs ought to signal that most RPGs are not very different. The game is therefore a satirical spur to develop games in new ways.

Puppetland / Power Kill (written by John Tynes and released at the same time as Violence) provides two examples of how to experiment with role-playing games. Power Kill is simple—more of a thought experiment about something that could be done with games rather than a game itself.
In fact, it is presented as an add-on to any game; it turns any game into a game within the game of *Power Kill*. The premise is that the characters in *Power Kill* are psychotic, and the game within the game of *Power Kill* (that is, the game that *Power Kill* is being added on to) represents the delusional fantasy of the psychotic characters. After each ordinary game session played with the rules and characters of another game, the players assume the roles of the *Power Kill* characters meeting with a counselor who explains what actually happened—what were the events that the delusional fantasy concealed. At different points in the series of games, the counselor gives the players a questionnaire to answer first as if they were the character in the traditional RPG and then later as if they were the character in the *Power Kill* game. The goal of the game is for the *Power Kill* character to gradually accept the counselor’s account of reality, which is signaled by the questionnaire answers growing closer and closer together.

*Puppetland* is a strange game in which all the characters are puppets in a land dominated by the grotesquely masked Punch (killer of the Maker). The characters live in a protected village led by a puppet named Judy. The goal of the game is to defeat Punch. One unusual aspect of *Puppetland* is that it is timed. Every game session lasts for exactly one hour. Another fairly unusual aspect of *Puppetland* is that absolutely everything the player
says while sitting is presumed to have actually been said by the character. That is, every utterance is considered part of the dialogue occurring in the world of Puppetland, and it is not possible for a player to say “I go into the shop to buy a hammer” in an extra-diegetic manner. The puppet is presumed to have spoken the same words. The players should alter their choice of words accordingly, perhaps saying “I think I shall go into this shop to purchase a hammer!” whereupon the event is presumed to have happened unless the referee (known as the Puppetmaster) says otherwise.

The text of Puppetland concludes with an explanation of the themes in the game: innocence corrupted, traumas of childhood, and the pain of growing up. The play of the game should eventually conclude with the defeat of Punch, but whether the Maker can be restored and the world put right or not is left in the hands of the Puppetmaster.

The next “New Style” game from Hogshead Publishing was Pantheon and Other Roleplaying Games by Robin Laws (discussed in Chapter Seven). Finally, the most recent of the “New Style” games was De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss. De Profundis is a translation of a Polish game by Michal Oracz. James Wallis tries to remain aware of gaming developments in Europe, which he regards as more open and even revolutionary in the field of role-playing. He has commissioned other
translations in the past, though *De Profundis* is the first to appear. In any case, *De Profundis* is written as a series of letters explaining the concept of *De Profundis*, which is to identify deeply with the works of horror writer H. P. Lovecraft and to extemporize fantastic and horrific events from a first-person perspective along with a "Society" of fellow players but without a referee. *De Profundis* proposes the term psychodrama to differentiate its manner of play from ordinary role-playing and suggests that it take place in a dark room or perhaps in letters. *De Profundis* players are encouraged to continue the game in everyday life, imagining all the things around them to conceal terrible secrets human beings were not meant to know and so forth. The game itself is a model of how to play, being a first-person collection of letters addressed to the Society of players and including story ideas, suggestions on how to play, and hints that the world of the speaker is a Lovecraftian world itself. In short, the game asks simply that players join in a *folie à beaucoups*.

Wallis himself has designed two more "New Style" games that have not yet been published. The first is *Youdunnit*, a game like the How to Host a Murder series of live-action games but one where the character of the murderer is not decided in advance in the game materials. Wallis describes the feel of the game as a cross between the Jeeves and Wooster
novels of P. G. Wodehouse and the murder mysteries of Agatha Christie. The rules of the game are to be presented as a story featuring the characters Grieves and Worcester, plus Worcester's Aunt Agatha. The play of the game will proceed from a list of scenarios set in Edwardian England. Each player is assigned a character who might be suspected of a particular murder, and the game entails making up testimony, accusations, and denials from the perspective of that character with the goal of pinning blame for the murder on someone else. As in Munchausen and Pantheon, there is a bidding mechanic for determining whose pieces of testimony withstand scrutiny and whose stories are shown to be lies.

_Copshow_ is another game still under development. The point of Copshow is to play out episodes of a hypothetical 1970s cop show. To emulate the "buddy picture" or partnering convention of cop shows, character generation involves a unique mechanic where each player in a circle declares one defining trait of her character and the next person in the circle is therefore determined as having the opposite trait (e.g. if the first player says "good," the second player's character is a "bad" cop; if the first player says "human," the second player's character is a "non-human" cop, such as a K-9 unit or a Robocop or an alien or whatever). The second player then declares a second trait for the second character, which defines
the third character as the opposite, and so on around the circle until all the characters have two traits—one chosen by the player and one determined as the opposite of the character to the right. The play of the game is also unusual in that the character’s ability to accomplish a difficult action is limited by how successfully the player has caused the character to act in a cliché manner earlier in the game. In fact, at the start of the game, players are given cards secretly showing them cliché lines of dialogue that, if the dialogue can be worked into the game, will yield additional potential for controlling the story. The game was originally designed to emulate British cop shows, so the dialogue includes lines such as “Get your trousers on … You’re nicked!”

Finally, for quite some time, Wallis has had two games in development that are not explicitly avant-gardist. One is another storytelling card game like Once Upon A Time, but instead of having fairy-tale elements, it will be based on the ghost stories of M. R. James. The planned title is It Was a Dark and Stormy Night. The second game is called FRUP, and it will be a parody of Dungeons and Dragons. FRUP tries to imagine what would happen if ordinary human beings tried to live their lives according to the rules of a game like Dungeons and Dragons. The premise is that the rulebooks for a game curiously similar to Dungeons
and Dragons have fallen into an imaginary world where the inhabitants have made the rules of the game into their basic moral and theological texts. As in both Violence and Power Kill, the game is conceived as an elaborate joke regarding the conventions of role-playing, and the technique of the joke is to literalize the conventions and consider their ramifications with respect to a real or a realistic world being affected by them.

**Regarding conventions**

James Wallis's "New Style" line of games emphasizes the manner in which role-players game, urging them to develop a curiosity for new possibilities. Wallis certainly does not despise fantasy-medieval games that center on violence and destruction—he is after all the publisher of Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay. But he does suggest that formal innovation in role-playing game mechanics and chronotopes might fruitfully serve to dislodge the tired conventions handed down to role-playing from Dungeons and Dragons, ending the stagnation of the field. His logic of invention therefore follows the familiar pattern of reacting against something old, borrowing techniques and practices from one domain into another, justifying the borrowing with reference to some theoretical discourse (e.g. Goffman or Huizinga), and aiming at some new pattern of activity (cf.
Ulmer 1994). So on the surface, his rhetoric is straightforwardly avant-gardist and rooted in a dichotomy between convention and invention that anthropology has called into question (Wagner 1981; Tyler 1993).

Yet there are many experiences that Wallis speaks of with evident appreciation for the problems concealed in that dichotomy. Looking back to his account of working on Sonic the Hedgehog and Ren & Stimpy, Wallis downplays the conventionality of the job as “hack work,” but then he speaks with pride of having manipulated the character in ways that provoke interest well beyond that expected of hack work—one begins to suspect modesty in the use of the phrase. Then, considering that he happily publishes a “conventional” fantasy role-playing game, it seems certain that Wallis’s avant-gardism is not single-mindedly devoted to outstripping the garde. Finally, taking at face value his expressed aim of developing games that non-gamers can play, it becomes clear that although Wallis’s “New Style” games emphasize the manner of play as the key reason to play the game, he also has faith in a populist goal of making role-playing games less baroque and of reducing the cost to enter the game in terms of time, effort, and cash. In fact, his position constitutes an avant-gardism of conventionalization, stripping away the strange assumptions of D&D-inspired role-playing with the goal of designing games more accessible to a
general audience. Wallis regards the initial development of D&D as an astonishingly lucky occurrence, wherein many odd potentials for gaming happened to coalesce into one product. From the right perspective, his “New Style” games, despite the *de novo* implication of their designation, read like parlor games revisiting the older psycho-therapeutic concept of role-playing, whereas D&D is the game emphasizing its novelty and uniqueness through incomprehensibly baroque rules and (in the person of Gary Gygax) a definition of itself as standing apart from earlier notions of role-playing.
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