Anthony E. Padget-Gettys

Dr. Allison

TRPG Thesis Project

Spring Semester, 2020

Tabletop Role-Playing Games: A Unique & Deserving Narrative Form

A Glossary of Terms

- TRPG: Tabletop Role-playing Game
    - The genre/form of live and collaborative storytelling on which this work centers. It will most often be referred to as a form rather than a genre, as it will most often be addressed more for its shape than its common content. However, as a form which creates stories like no other, the content of a TRPG campaign ends up so unique that it must qualify as its own genre. As a simple example, when I have an idea for a story, I will place it in a folder based on how it will be told: a poem, short-story, essay, etc. The TRPG receives its own folder, as ideas for a TRPG campaign (defined below) are rarely interchangeable with ideas for other forms. Thus, the TRPG will take on both definitions for much of this work, as its uniqueness leads to the embodying both a form and, in many ways, a genre.
- *D&D*: *Dungeons & Dragons*
    - The most popular subgenre, or game system, of the TRPG. The term game system refers to the set of rules regarding how one plays (also referred to as the game

mechanics or the system mechanics). The "game system," or just "system," will usually be used to describe these ideas over subgenre, as genre suggests content, and while each system has its assumed, or usual, content style or setting, any system can be adapted to fit most any story. *D&D* is famously set for a medieval fantasy genre, but even the system's publishers, *Wizard's of the Coast*, have released suggestions on how to change their system to fit Sci-fi or Modern settings.

- Campaign:
  - As a book is to an author, a campaign is to a TRPG group. A campaign is an individual narrative told over many sessions by a TRPG group, usually featuring the same player-characters (defined below) and overarching plot throughout. The term is repurposed from the TRPG's wargaming roots.

- GM: Game Master
  - The one who ultimately controls the rules, setting, and non-player characters (defined below). The GM prepares the storyworld and acts out everything that is not the player characters. They also act as middle-man between the players and the rules, and have final say on anything regarding said rules or as to what enters the narrative.

- NPC: Non-player Character
  - An NPC is any character within the narrative which is not controlled by a player, and are therbey controlled by the GM.

- PC: Player-character

- ○ The character that a player controls and role-plays (defined below) as.

- The Party:

  - ○ The collective group of player-characters.

- Role-play (colloquially called "RP")

  - ○ The act of voicing a character. When a player or GM acts as though they are their character within the narrative, interacting with the storyworld, they are role-playing that character.

- Storyworld:

  - ○ The inner, narrative world fabula. The story being fabricated within the shared imagination of all those involved, where the PCs and NPCs exist, is the storyworld.

- Table fabula:

  - ○ The frame of all the people involved in the TRPG session around a table, or speaking through the internet, who are aware of the real world and of the rules.

Index

<u>Introduction</u>[1]

Two warriors face off against a large bull made of iron, which is spewing out a green gas capable of turning flesh to stone. Two other companions stay back, supporting the melee fighters from a distance. *The players have worry across their faces. One bad roll could make their character a statue*. The bull, which one warrior recognizes as an infamous "Gorgon," charges the two warriors, who barely avoid its goring horns. However, they cannot escape the enveloping green cloud about them. *"Roll a fortitude save," says the GM. A dice hits the table, a natural 20, a lucky success against slim odds*. One of the warriors manages to fight off the petrification of the gas with sputtering coughs. *The players go wild, yet quickly quiet again. The other player must roll too. A second natural 20*. The second warrior—*The eruption around the table is too much to contain. The slim chances, combined with near-missed disaster, creates too much of a thrill to hear the narration of the GM. They have survived another round; they can take down this beast*.

And we did. In the next turn of combat my cleric-fighter, Kiwa, scored a piercing blow with his trident, finishing off the raging Gorgon. We were elated. Not only had our characters

---

[1] **Pre-Introduction**: Completely unfamiliar with the very concept of a TRPG? Then I would suggest watching the video below. Not only will it explains some of the basics (albeit with a *D&D*-exclusive focus) and show you what the playing of a TRPG even *looks* like, but it also touches on some major ideas that we will be exploring in detail: flow of play (as they put it: describe, decide, and roll), the ability to affect the setting, the playing of roles, and more.

"Dungeons and Dragons, explained" by *Vox* — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PEt5RdNHNw

survived a near-death experience, we felt like we ourselves had practically conquered the world, all with the roll of a twenty-sided die. Our characters could go onwards, further discovering the mysteries of the place we found ourselves in, with plans to report back home afterwards, having learned more regarding our overarching quest and the wider campaign narrative. All this, and plenty more, was happening in our weekly *Pathfinder* campaign.

Pathfinder is but one of many Tabletop Role-playing Game (TRPG) systems. In this example I was a player, controlling my storyworld-character, Kiwa. Our Game Master (GM), Austin, was guiding us four players through a campaign he had prepared. And yet, despite the dice rolling, the TRPG is not just a game (as the final letter would suggest). While sharing similarities to boardgames, the TRPG reaches a scope far greater and far more unique: the TRPG is a storytelling form combined with a game, in which players role-play, through their characters, in order to interact with a world of the GM's devising. Via the player's acting as protagonists, and the GM acting as everything else, a narrative is formed over live-time, filled with improvisation, dice rolls, and game mechanics. The concept of the TRPG session or campaign is an oddity to understand without seeing it first, due to its utter uniqueness as a form. I myself failed to understand what it was upon first hearing of it, originally thinking I would have no interest in playing in one of these "campaigns." Five years of constant playing later, and I am thrilled to have been proven wrong.

I started playing TRPGs around my senior year of high school. Several friends had discovered the hobby first and eventually brought me in to play in a *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) campaign. I was quickly enamored. Since then, I have played in many campaigns of various systems with multiple different groups of friends. While many have played more than I,

plenty boasting TRPG careers that surpass my 22 years of age, I would still declare myself an experienced player. Besides, *any* TRPG player can attest that when a TRPG campaign is crafted and played with care, the stories forged and emotions encountered are incredible, often greater than those received from other narrative forms.

So, for the last five years TRPGs have been my primary hobby. But as I grew as a player and scholar, I realized that considering TRPGs as simply a regular hobby was reductionist. Rather than being just a pleasant pastime, every session of a TRPG campaign is a session of collaborative storytelling. TRPG players become attached to the characters and stories that they play in the same way they do for the works of the greatest fiction authors. The form of the TRPG combines compelling, collaborative, live storytelling with gaming elements to create a narrative form with worldwide fans in the tens of millions. Yet, so few analyze the TRPG. Many of its merits and faults are completely unique to it, but scholarship and wider-recognition is lacking. Thus, I analyze it here.

Of course, I am not alone in analysis. The field is sparse, but not empty. However, while drawing from the works of others, the following pages stand apart in either opinion, direction, or depth. This is not a criticism of the works I quote here; they are useful works in their own right, and I highly suggest you seek them out yourself. Rather, it is to say that we sometimes differ in opinion, or more so, differ in focus. The coming chapters center on a narratological approach to the TRPG, but not exclusively so. Being an English major, I find myself best equipped for dissecting the narrative style of TRPGs rather than delving primarily into sociological benefits or cultural impacts. These topics will be mentioned, but will rarely be the focus. Moreover, this work is not historical in purpose. The history of the TRPG and how it traversed decades to be

more relevant today than it was in its origin is a fascinating tale, and we will touch on it where applicable, but it will not be center stage. The coming chapters will work to prove to the scholarly community at large that the TRPG has its place amongst their narrative forms, and deservedly so.

Thus, before we get too deep into the multitude of pages to come, allow me to establish some popular TRPG systems which may get mentioned. I will also note that, even in this, we pull apart from scholars before, who often have a narrow approach focussing just on *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). While useful, and a natural place to gravitate due to *D&D*'s popularity, I wish to see scholarship expand to the other TRPG systems, as well as be made to apply to TRPGs as a whole. Thus, while most works may use the term "Dungeon Master," or DM, to refer to the "referee" or setting designer of the game, I will use the, also commonly accepted, and more TRPG-system neutral, term: "Game Master," or GM. So, with a desire for boh variety and generality in mind, let us give a small number of the ever-expanding list of TRPG systems which exist.

Dungeons & Dragons has been, and remains, the most popular TRPG system. I myself have played *D&D 5th Edition (5e)* the most by far, but there exists numerous other systems utilizing different rules to facilitate more or less difficult play, more or less in-depth rules, or generally the various needs of differing settings or styles. *D&D* is famously created primarily for medieval fantasy tales, containing rules for magic, swordplay, and other Tolkien-esque setting needs. Meanwhile, other popular games give us a wide range of subgenres for the larger genre/form that is the TRPG. *Call of Cthulhu* features the 1920s Lovecraftian setting, equipped with guns and sanity scores. *Shadowrun* grants a cyber-future fantasy setting of magic and

technology. *Champions* allows for modern day super-hero tales modeled after the comic book aesthetic. *Legend of the Five Rings* changes the medieval fantasy of *D&D* towards being somewhat less fantastical, while still containing magic and monsters, and while changing the setting to a feudal Japan-esque locale. *Monster of the Week* gives a simple rule set in order to hunt down cryptids and other beasts. *Urban Shadows*, too, gives a simple set of rules to the modern fantasy setting of hidden societies of vampires, werewolves, faeries, and more. *Deathwatch* is one of many systems created for the setting of *Warhammer 40k*, having rules specifically for the battling of hordes and utilization of squad maneuvers. *Starfinder* lends to sci-fi fantasy, while also being made by the same company as *Pathfinder*, another popular medieval fantasy TRPG based on taking the *D&D 3.5e* rule-set and expanding it to be more in-depth and dense. And of course, as stated above, many more TRPGs exist beyond this short list, giving near endless options for complexity and settings to match the wants of any players and GMs.

Even beyond the expansive set of options set before a TRPG group, most, if not all, of these systems are designed to be tinkered with. TRPG systems expect that you may want to change their rules for your personal games, or even use them in a setting they were not originally intended for. As an example, the second *Legend of the Five Rings* campaign I ever played in was set in the 1650s Caribbean Sea, featuring pirates rather than the usual feudal samurai aesthetic. In this example, the GM simply created rulesets for firearms and cannons, adjusting the existing system to fit their needs. We will touch more on the malleability of TRPG systems later, but for now, early on in our discussion, it is useful to mark how diverse TRPG campaigns can be. It is for this reason that I have, before, described the TRPG with both "genre" and "form." While I

will primarily be describing the TRPG as a form, due to my focus lying often in its structures

before its content, the uniqueness of the TRPG can often lead to it being described as a genre all

its own even though the TRPG can be used to tell stories of different styles, as well as ones set in

many different eras and places. A TRPG campaign idea can not easily be changed into a plan for

a novel, just as a poem concept cannot easily be changed into a longform novel. Both the form

and typical genres of the TRPG vary greatly to other works, and thus establish uniqueness on

both sides. Perhaps, in this, we find further support for Northrop Frye's cross sectional theory of

modes. But, for now, we will avoid the depths of minutia, being only just now out of the gate.

     In the coming chapters we shall brush upon the key features of the TRPG, as well as, in

our later moments, the uniqueness of the TRPG community and purpose as well. Until then, we

shall narratological explore the TRPG, recognizing its bizarre oscillating use of fabulae, its live,

improvisational, and collaborative format, and its intense interest in immersion and role-play. We

will also discuss common tropes or literary devices of the TRPG, as well as the form's more

distinct advantages and disadvantages. Through the coming chapters, I shall lay out why the

TRPG stands as a completely unique and powerful form, beloved by millions, by analyzing it

with narratology and my own experiences. And, by the end, I believe you, the reader, will not

only agree, but will have an interest in this "hobby" yourself, if you have not tried it already.

- Chapter 1 -

Formal Elements: POV, Descriptions, Time, and Fabulae

Where is the best place for us to begin our analysis? Well, that is no easy question. So much of the TRPG is interrelated, causing one subject to interlink with several others, creating a web of things to explain. However, we cannot jump around so wildly, lest everything fall into chaos. So, I find it best to start from the outside and move in. Thus, the analysis shall start by examining some of the more obvious formal elements of the TRPG, before delving into less concrete concepts later on. In these early pages we will often turn to the narratological works of Mieke Bal's *Narratology* as we pick our way through formal concepts while prodding at the wider ideas that we will continually breach moving forward. As our discussion on formal elements of the TRPG will be both large and dense, I have chosen to split the conversation in two. Primarily, the faultline between these chapters is based on the location of examples given, as well as how "deep" into the playing of the TRPG we are discussing. Thus, this primary collection of formal elements shall cover the more obvious, surface level, TRPG observations, before diving into complexities created by the TRPG's uniqueness.

This chapter will also introduce us properly to the fabulae of the TRPG: the storyworld and the table fabula. While we will dive into more thorough discussion of these below, it is useful to quickly mark them as the oscillation between these two fabulae is one of our key TRPG components, and it is utterly unique. As we will see, TRPG play flows between the storyworld fabula, that of the narrative, in-game, world of the characters and campaign setting, and the table fabula, that of the players and GM in the real world, sitting around a table, rolling dice and

discussion rules or ideas as themselves. We will see the interrelation of these two fabulae in

nearly every facet of the remaining work, as their essential combination, the two of which (only

together) form the TRPG story and experience, is integral to the TRPG.

POVs in TRPGs

TRPGs exist in a strange combination of first, second, and third-person points of view

(POVs). When a GM narrates pieces such as setting or group actions they will likely utilize

third-person narration, referring to character names or to the party's actions. A "character name"

refers to the name of a player's character in the storyworld, better known as a player-character, or

PC. For example, "as the morning comes, Erza (the name of a PC) awakes first to the distinct

smell of burning wood." However, they may also utilize second person when leading to the

actions of a certain PC or the party, best illustrated in the famous TRPG phrases of "what would

you like to do," or simply "what do *you* do," as well as "how do *you* want to do this," a phrase

popularized by famed GM Matt Mercer.

The first person point of view comes almost entirely from the voice of the players. When

role-play occurs, meaning when players speak and act with each other, as their characters (often

using a different voice from their own, referred to as their "character voice"), players will utilize

the first-person POV. They may also be talking, as their character, to a non-player character

(NPC), who are controlled and voiced by the GM (they are the rest of the storyworld populace;

anyone not controlled by a player, as players typically only control one character). Often, even

outside of their character voice, a player may use the first person, saying things such as "I cast

fireball," or "I want to approach the innkeeper," before transitioning into role-play, which will further include first person as they speak as their characters within the scene of the storyworld. Thereby, first person point of view appears via the players speaking as themselves and in their role-play. GM's will rarely use the first person for phrases such as "I cast fireball," as the GM plays the role of many NPCs, and thus a vague singular could be confusing in statements like that. However, while role-playing as an NPC, the GM will use first person just as that character naturally would while speaking. This example is usually free of the confusion from the earlier one, as the GM will likely begin by saying "[NPC name] says," or they will be using a character voice which is specific to that NPC, making the distinction obvious.

It is interesting to also note the commonality of players utilizing the third person as well when referring to the actions of their characters. However, this is often seen by experienced players as denoting a new player's uncertainty of stepping into role-play (refusing to speak as though they *are* the character in the world), or more comically denoting a separation of the player's thoughts and the character's actions. Often this latter example occurs when the player recognizes the actions their character would take differ from their own thoughts in a concerning way. An example of this more comical side of player-based third person use could be seen in a player's desire for their character to remain safe but knowing that their character would likely choose to rush into some danger presented in an attempt to save a friend, thus leading to them distancing themselves from their character, often with a sigh of stress. They may say, "Erza is going to run in to defend," after much deliberation. Examples like these are rare but always create an interesting, and often exciting, outlier in the game and narrative.

These schisms between what is in-character and what is distancing oneself from the role-play of your character is a crucial signal, as these differences in POVs can help show what frame of the narrative we are talking in. Is a player talking as themselves or as their character? The same holds true for the GM, who is either speaking as themselves or an NPC. Gary Alan Fine, while analyzing a very different style of TRPG playing, having published in 1983, outlines a piece of POV information that still holds today, telling us "a player may say: 'I go, "Who goes there"' rather than simply saying 'Who goes there?' This of course minimizes confusion as to which level the action is on—the real world or the fantasy level—but it can also be taken as an indication that the player has not become deeply implicated in his role" (213). More will be said on role immersion later, but this important distinction in where the voice is coming from, player or character, and how it is addressing others, meaning what POV is used, gives us a clear indication of what level we are operating on: the narrative storyworld of characters, or the real gaming world of players interacting. In practice, we pick up on these distinctions easily without confusion, particularly when more elements are added to minimize any uncertainty, such as character voices to distinguish when the player is speaking versus their character, or other blatant tells that come with a bit of acting or roleplay. In general, once play has been going for some time, these moments of confusion will slip away as everyone involved gets used to when one another are speaking as themselves or their character.

There are many other more rare uses of POV in the TRPG, being such a dynamic form. For example, a player will occasionally use the second-person POV to describe a character action, as they momentarily take control of descriptive work to say what other characters see their character doing. "You see Erza (in this example, the speaker's player-character) raise her

finder and fire off a magical beam!" Other less common examples occur as well, but the important thing for us to note before moving forward, is the diverse use of POVs across multiple fabulae. This wide range, in minutia or in common use, of POV, from multiple speakers, is unique. I cannot imagine another form having this many POV switches in its language, as relates to two fabulae. The frame stories of novels or films certainly do not have as much rapid and casual oscillation between both POVs and fabulae.

Description & an Introduction to the Necessity of the Shared Imagination

Once again, we must introduce a key part of the TRPG, which we will be discussing for many pages to come. One of the greatly unique facets of the TRPG is its nature as a live-play collaboration. We will talk more about prepared work soon, including the minor facet of the backstory, which we will address in this section. However, much of the TRPG is improvisational, being performed in live time by the players and GM. And, with every person involved in the TRPG group being a creator, and all playing in the same storyworld, it is crucial that everyone understands the occurences of the storyworld the same. Thus, description is crucial, as the only way to ensure a stable fictional world, understood by all involved, is through concrete description.

Mieke Bal describes the power of description as making "it possible to participate in the imagination of someone else" (26). This definition applies to the TRPG even more directly than general narrative, where Bal already suggests that description is "practically and logically necessary" (26). The main job of the GM (albeit also a job for the players when they wish to

describe the more specific visuals of their character's actions or appearance) is the description of the world. A common phrase that weasels into a majority of a GM's statements is "you see," as this often starts their required description of where the characters exist within this shared imaginary world, the storyworld. They may need to describe a town square, the location or appearance of a dangerous monster, the body language of an NPC, or anything else that would affect the senses of a character but cannot affect, or are not affecting, the senses of the players. Without description the game falls apart, as Bal suggests, because this game, founded on the imaginatory nature of group role-playing, cannot be shared with said group when no one can participate in the imagination of the others.

Without communication of descriptions, the game world, and all actions occurring within it, are trapped within the heads of the individuals, to the point where they are now participating in a completely different and solitary form of narrative. Thus, the shared imagination is a necessity, being the storyworld that all collaborators understand and interact with. If a novel fails to clearly share the imaginary world, the reader will be confused; if a TRPG fails to uphold the shared imagination, it can no longer function as a collaborative storytelling form, and thus is no longer functioning, full-stop. This necessity of a shared imagination will be a recurring theme in the coming chapters, as it proves to be one of the primary concerns when creating a TRPG story, and it is one of the unique concerns of the TRPG. Especially considering immersion, the state of being absorbed in the storyworld (as well as the table fabula), is completely disrupted if the shared imagination reaches a schism. Although, we will discuss immersion more indepthly in a coming chapter which holds the term in its name.

One facet of description, which proves different to how the rest of the TRPG story is created, is the player-character's backstory. Before a TRPG campaign can properly begin, backstories of PCs are usually required to be made up and shared with the GM to establish the players' characters in the setting, and lend them a story that explains how they have arrived at the campaign's beginning point. While infamous for lacking parents and often leading to a mystery to be explored or a revenge to be had within the campaign, backstories also bring one of the few examples of a more common narrative form into the TRPG. These are things written, before the campaign's onset, by a singular player (albeit they are often written in partial collaboration with the GM to ensure setting and character compatibility), making them one of the rare pieces of the form that is not wholly collaborative or made-in-motion like the rest of the TRPG narrative. Other examples of more traditional writing do exist in some of the GM's preparation of the setting and various descriptions, as well as in the wrapping up of the story that comes after the campaign's end, also known as the post-game (often executed via a monologue from the GM to end the narrative). However, the post-game can also be treated more casually, with players spitballing what they would like their characters to end up doing in the future.

These smaller pieces of singular writing bring forth a more traditional writing process as part of a foundation to help begin the TRPG playing. The act of writing preparation or backstory are more akin to writing in a novel. Yet, while these are important pieces, they do not make the TRPG what it is. Additionally, these ultimately smaller parts are given vastly differing levels of import depending on player and GM; they are not fully key to the narrative form, thus making their importance to the form variable. But, I would argue a campaign is much better for having them, and the general consensus of the community is that characters should have, at minimum, a

loose and small backstory in case questions regarding their past crop-up while playing. A player can always improvise a backstory explanation mid-play should it come up, but in doing so they could dangerously bypass the GM's approval, possibly saying something in character that the GM's setting would not allow to be the case, as they are less informed about the setting (compared to the GM). This would be a rarity, but as the GM must keep many secrets from the players, regarding the world they are in and the plot, it is a dangerous possibility to have floating free as, if it did occur, the GM would have to correct them, possibly revealing important information in the process. Even if important information is not part of the concern, the player could nonetheless step on toes if they improvise something generally ill-fitting to the setting or tone of the campaign ahead of them.

Backstory helps lend description to a character's life before the campaign, allowing the character to be made more concrete in the setting, and generally more "fleshed out" as a realistic character. This establishes a solid foundation to endure an ease-of-entry for the player-character into the shared imagination, and into smooth role-play. Having a character's life, attitude, and appearance, all thought out before the game begins will help ensure good role-play and good character descriptions. All of which helps for a smoother shared imagination. While we will say more about role-play in a future chapter, the importance of description, as relates to preparing one for role-play via a backstory, and its use as a crucial pillar to hold up the shared imagination (which in itself is a pillar for holding up the whole of the TRPG's storyworld play), cannot be understated.

Temporality & The Table Fabula

While a TRPG shares much in common with a more regular narrative's tempo, it often

has differing beats due to its status as a game. TRPGs share the similarity, with most narratives,

of having time dilate. A lack-luster seven hour trek through the woods is likely summarized in a

small paragraph within a novel, while in a TRPG the same is done in a short verbal descriptor.

However, while a novel will slow down real-time as thoughts unfold rapidly, the TRPG tends to

slow for non-narrative reasons. For this we look to Bal's narrative theory as well, as it breaks

down narrative tempo. While a slow down or pause for the player to think, or even for the player

to describe their thoughts a little, is common, often the GM will press for quick action so as to

keep the role-playing immersion of "being in the moment," assuming the moment is logically

happening in haste. Perhaps a player is taking time trying to decide what to do, but the GM

pushes them for a more rapid answer, as their character only has seconds to react and thereby

would not have the same clarity as a player in paused-scene-time can have. This problem

between player-time and character-time can show us a possible split between player and

character in terms of role-play, breaking their immersion (a concept discussed in great detail later

in this work) momentarily, as they are temporally disconnected.

While this emphasis on not slowing down for thoughts or wildly long description exists,

slow downs or pauses occur frequently to address the rules of the game. Bal describes pauses as

"narrative sections in which no movement of the fabula-time is implied. A great deal of attention

is paid to one element, and in the meantime the fabula remains stationary" (95). The fabula-time

is time in the storyworld, the time that the narrative of characters experiences, which in our case

is often equivalent to the real-time of Earth due to the game's live-play format. When a player is

speaking as their character, real-world time and storyworld time are progressing at the same rate, as the character would not logically be speaking faster or slower than the player currently voicing them. The difference is that pauses in TRPGs frequently occur in order to ask the GM for a clarification, or for a rule of the game to be implemented or discussed, or for a dice to be rolled. While these could be considered to not be a part of the "narrative" as Bal describes it, but rather a part occurring on the outside that shapes the narrative (almost as another pause in the creation of the currently paused narrative), this would be to describe the TRPG as simply a way of laying out novel-like occurrences. This is not the case, the TRPG consists of both the stroyworld and table fabulae, with only the storyworld you lack the entirety of the gaming aspect of the TRPG. Neither fabula can be severed, they are both essential to the TRPG's story, and this dual essentiality is a key specificity of the TRPG form. Without the table fabula, you are at best telling an adaptation of a TRPG campaign, for the table fabula is a required component for the story to be a TRPG narrative.

Anyone who enjoys the watching of a TRPG, be it via video of others or as a player watching a fellow player enact something, can tell you that these gaming elements are a huge part of the narrative experience. The wild rush to figure out the rules on a crucial spell, putting everyone on the edges of their seats trying to parse if the game mechanics will assist or hinder an incredibly intense moment, is exciting. The pause as everyone watches a player roll a dice to determine if they succeed in lying to an important figure, or to see if they hit the terrifying beast that has laid their surrounding allies to near death, is a thrill. These moments of gameplay that interlace within the more traditional narrative flow make for an experience that builds emotion to an extreme. There are times when these pauses can be boring, or jarring to the flow, but this is a

rarity to seasoned players. The chapter breaks in a novel do not diminish the narrative in the pages. Nor does the outer layer of cinemagraphic detail put into a movie take away from the film's narrative. So, much akin to a dutch-angle not actually being a part of the story fabula or the direct narrative, but still attributing to the work, pieces of a TRPG's rules too add to the experience of the narrative, even if they are not a part of the usual descriptions and dialogues of a narrative. These moments of excitement around the rules (moments set in our real world game playing) are the events that take place in the table fabula, and the table fabula of players checking rules and rolling dice is often thrilling, and is always an integral part of what makes a TRPG.

The game-hood of the TRPG lends the form an additional level atop the inner narrative of the storyworld as the rules and rolling create a frame story around it via the table fabula. It is reminiscent of the frame stories of the Medieval Romance, a genre that so inspires parts of *D&D*, where the narrative gives us a speaker-character telling us another narrative inside, creating a layered tale. The TRPG form innately carries a frame as the players and GM, stereotypically seated around a table (hence the fabula's title), frame the characters and world with their actions. Alongside this, the frame also consists of the rules of the game. A TRPG narrative could be retold as though the players, rules, and GM were not a part of it, simply cropping out elements that do not exist within the storyworld fabula. However, this would be to take away much of what makes the TRPG what that final letter stands for, a game. Many TRPG players have stories that revolve less around the inner narrative, but rather around the excitement, touched on above, in the making of a crucial dice roll, which becomes a part of the overall narrative itself. Our introductory *Pathfinder* example, the fighting of the Gorgon, would not be nearly as exciting, or as well remembered amongst our group, if two of us players had not rolled natural 20s (a 20 on a

20-sided die). That slim chance of success, rolling the best possible result in a dangerous situation, is what made that moment exhilarating. No one would have shouted in joy if the dice, the table fabula, were not involved.

The pieces that make the form a game, the way a TRPG requires skill and chance as most games do, are crucial in elevating it. When a player comes up with something clever that can then affect the inner fabula of the storyworld, that action will be remembered with excitement. While more regarding the randomness of diced play will be discussed much later, the outer workings of the table fabula still assist, and make up, the narrative of the TRPG as well. Thus, as a part of what makes the overall narrative, as the storyworld is not alone the narrative of the TRPG, the table fabula's contributions are crucial and very much a part within the TRPG story.

Beyond small moments, many TRPG players will swap stories that entirely concern an interesting or powerful character build they had, meaning a combination of abilities, spells, items, etc. that allowed their character to do something particularly strong within the game system's mechanics, or perhaps just something unusual or funny. Many stories from TRPGs are qualified in their scale by the height of numbers achieved, or builds used within the game. When someone is retelling an epic fight they played during a TRPG session, they are likely to quote the number they rolled on damage dice to quantify how powerful the attack was, perhaps doing so to point out the epic scale of a final or crucial blow. Many excited TRPG players have told stories of campaign ends in which some final boss battle ends with an immense roll saving the day or a perfect spell or ability choice turning the tides in their favor. These stories exist to be appreciated this way only because TRPGs have systems of rules, as games, that allow for these numbers and clever rule usages to exist and create these moments of awe. Consider it like the perfect

Monopoly roll landing on the overflowing free-parking spot, or the clever solving of a *Clue*

murder just before another has a chance to get it, but ten-or-more-fold higher in emotion due to

the more intricate narrative it plays a part in. The rolling of dice are not just there to inform the

storyworld narrative, the rolling and rules themselves are constitutive parts of the TRPG

narrative.

Here is a small example of a moment of rule-based revelation that occured in one of my

own games, in which we played *Pathfinder*. This should help highlight the thrill that can

sometimes come from something as plain and static as the rules of a game:

Our high-level party was in the midst of an epic final battle against an archdevil

who was attempting to consume the Weave (the legendary force which upholds all magic

in the world). Without it, the world would fall into chaos and an unseen entity threatened

to end everything. With these high stakes in mind, a collection of low rolls banished our

Paladin, Max, our Wizard, Salem, and my Cleric-Fighter, Kiwa, from the devil's realm

back to our own. We left behind our Ranger, Ellar, and Oracle, Colo, alone with the

archdevil while we were prevented from returning for 24 hours.

Our estranged, banished group struggled to figure out how to return, lest our allies

face certain death alone. The rules we were applying allowed for using a system of Hero

Points to do things beyond our normal ability. One use included spending one point to

regain a spell slot we otherwise did not have. ("Spell slots" are required in order to cast a

spell, a game mechanic that thereby prevents an endless supply of magic casting.)

Another use of one Hero Point on top of that would allow for the obtaining of a powerful

spell, stronger than we usually could cast (higher than our level would usually allow us to

cast). With this, we could spend two Hero Points to cast the famous, high-level spell "Wish" via our Wizard. However, we would need to cast Wish twice to return to the fight: We had to cast Wish once to remove the banishment curse preventing us from entering the realm of the archdevil, and a second time to teleport us to the realm. But, this would require four Hero Points, of which Salem, the Wizard, had only two. The saving grace seemed to be the Paladin Max's ability to grant one temporary Hero Point via a spell he had two times available, but these temporary Hero Points could not be had at the same time, or, to put it in game terms, "they could not stack." In our stress we were struggling to even reach the Wish-based plan, let alone solve our Hero Point conundrum, leading us to almost swear loyalty to a powerful Lich to gain assistance.

The Lich appeared to us as an illusion, and our Paladin, who hated said Lich (for much of the campaign before this moment this Lich had been our primary enemy), even bent the knee till we realized that by using one real and one temporary Hero Point, then doing the same again after the first Wish cast, we could order the actions so we could use the four total points to cast Wish twice. With this, after our player-based revelation, our characters could react, as Kiwa pulled Max back on his feet, saying there was another way. With a plunged trident through the illusion, and a furious annoyance from the Lich as his image dispersed, we were able to move back to the fight. This did require two turns apart from our allies, leading to Ellar having to flee while Colo was killed. But the three who were banished were able to return, finish off the archdevil, and succeed in saving the Weave, thereby saving the world.

The entirety of this intense moment that had all our hearts racing was brought on by random chance (the low rolls that led to our banishment), and was solved by an immense use of game mechanics, creating an entire scene of near disaster, as well as moral quandary, that otherwise would have never happened. And, more simply, the ecstatic reactions when we realized a way to bend the rules in our favor and successfully execute the casting of Wish twice was a huge thrill.

This example highlights a common way in which temporality is warped in the playing of a TRPG session, differentiating game-time and real-time. Notably, this example takes place mostly within the table fabula, with only a moment of storyworld interaction in the encounter of the Lich's illusory self. Furthermore, most of this moment took place within a Bal-like pause, where narrative flow stopped and we were hastily attempting to find rules to save the moment before too much real-time had passed and we would be forced to give up, lest the whole night be spent in the rulebooks. This example should make clear, not only an example of temporal pauses, but more so the importance of the table fabula as a part of the overall TRPG narrative (something ultimately unique to this form). The rolling of dice may have landed us in a bad situation, but it was exclusively the rules of the game which brought us so much thrill, and made it a moment to remember.

- Chapter 2 -

<u>Formal Elements Continued: Setting, Space, and Focality</u>

"The Earth comes into view of our imaginary super-camera. Arcana [a term for super-powers] has recently become spread to a select few of the populace after the choices of a few college kids ten years ago changed the world forever. But they aren't our concern now. Our camera, instead, zooms in through the atmosphere until we're looking over the nation of Japan. And then, after lingering a moment, even further to an island housing a domed city: The City of Sheruta. Unbeknownst to anyone below, lest an incredible diviner be hiding, this city is about to be changed forever. Whether this be for good, bad, or somewhere in between, well, not even a hidden diviner knows that. But this being a city filled to the brim with the Arcane [people who have super-powers], it's certain to be a wild ride. Surrounded by the Japanese Government, who claims to be holding the place up as a "Sanctuary for the Arcane," is a populace with every kind of person, with all sorts of abilities. But only a few of them will turn out to be the 'Legends of Sheruta...'"

The above passage comes directly from my own notes of the first thing I would say at the start of a *Champions 6e* game I was running. With the backdrop of "Gimme Shelter" by AC/DC playing, I began a campaign set on an island owned by Japan, but still distant from the mainland. As the introductory snippet includes (albeit in less detail, as the players had lots of context and knowledge given before our first session), the city of Sheruta was a city within a dome in which

all the "Arcane," or super-powered citizens, of Japan were sent to live, so as to not disrupt mundane life. This setting was the keystone of this small campaign, as the main concern would come to surround the idea of whether the city was indeed a sanctuary, or just a fancy prison to be broken out of. This description may be a summary, made in a stylized way to build some excitement for the start of the campaign, but it still functioned as a tiny explanation of our setting. While settings were briefly discussed before, with the wide range of systems to accommodate any possible setting ideas, there is still much to be said of this, one of the GM's primary jobs: Establishing the setting.

The Wider Storyworld

While Sheruta was a relatively small setting, to fit our smaller campaign, it still represents the idea of an overworld, or map, or general wider game world. Many games only take place in small parts of the fictional world in which the game is occurring (later, look to the ideas of the textual reference world (TRW) vs the textual actual world (TAW) in appendix A). But most settings at least involve nations, kingdoms, empires, or more, leading to the GM's control of the wider world, even when it is unseen. To make a believable and lively world of fiction, things must still be happening even when characters are not in the room. Other nations still wage war, political leaders still meet, tragedy still strikes in other places on the map. This is all likely to play into the actions of the characters in a more minor way than their direct locale (though it can affect it majorly). Nonetheless, it still affects their perceptions of the wider place they are living in. In the case of Sheruta, the "few college kids ten years ago" I mentioned were

our group's characters in the previous campaign that had occured in the same world. I was

creating a sequel which, while separate from the previous campaign, as it was GMed by another

person, had effects and connections to the outside world; it had the memory of the other game

affecting it. Now that the "Legends of Sheruta" campaign is finished, the other GM will do

another campaign within this world soon where, presumably, the actions of the players in the

Sheruta locale will have a minor impact on future characters' world perceptions, even if the next

game takes place in a locale on the other side of the planet.

The wider world dictated by the GM can be a fascinating setting full of moving pieces to

forge a world that *seems* alive. But, because the impact player actions have on the world, from

which a GM can then reflect those actions onto the setting in real time, the world *truly is* living

and changing. More involving the wonderful freedom of change and live-play in TRPGs will

come later, but simply for the setting this freedom can already clearly create a world that is

actively malleable, just as our own. This creates a sort of realism in the way societies, planets, or

planes work, despite the fact this could all be happening in a highly fantastical setting. It is also a

showing of the collaborative side of the TRPG, as even in the setting, which is primarily under

the GM's control, the players can have an effect via their characters' actions in the world.

In the aforementioned *Pathfinder* campaign in which the party my character Kiwa

belonged to saved the world from disaster, a commonality in TRPGs, the wide setting was

obviously affected by our actions. However, more than just these finale success or failure ideas

occurred, as our characters would also go on to be leading figures in the nations we had been

fighting for (two of us had already founded a town before the campaign's close). Some became

parts of a deity's pantheon; others turned into teachers for a new generation; one of us became a

wandering wizard, always moving to protect an important relic. It does not take a wild imagination to see the fascinating possibilities for further chances to change this ever-changing wider setting with another campaign in which new characters' nations are led by a past character, pray to the shrine of another past character, or look for our old wandering wizard and his powerful artifact.

Consequently, like in other forms, TRPG campaigns can often be sequels. Albeit, they are usually not direct sequels, as often a campaign ends with high level characters, and starting a new campaign with characters that are already at a high level leaves little room for further growth in gaming terms. However, some campaigns do end before their story is finished, segmenting them into parts like many fictional novels do via ending at some convenient point to be revisited later as a sequel. But generally campaigns are played through to completion, making another kind of sequel the more likely option: the disconnected sequel. By this I mean a sequel that has the same setting, likely thrown forward some years from the previous campaign, but stars new PCs and a new, usually at least partially (if not entirely), separate plot. In the Sheruta example, I was creating a sequel to a game that had occurred, in storyworld-time, ten years ago and was set around Europe. My campaign had influences from this earlier plot, but ultimately, being separated by a decade and many kilometers, I created a separate, easily contained story with the players.

So, a singular GM will often run campaigns set in the same world, creating sequels and side-stories that contribute to the wider setting and may touch bases with each other. This is common in novels as well, and should thereby be unsurprising. As an example, see J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts* and *Harry Potter* series, both set within her *Wizarding World* setting.

However, a much rarer occurrence comes in the example I have given in my "Legends of

Sheruta" Campaign. Set in the wider world of another GM's, Austin's, setting of Arcana, I was

creating a detached sequel to his completed campaign, "Legends of New and Old." While it is

generally rare in novels for writers to write sequels to each other's works, sharing the same

setting, it is not unheard of. The difference comes in the practice being common in TRPGs.

Official setting books are often published for the sole purpose of sharing a TRPG world

for others to use as the backdrop of their own campaigns. Most *D&D* players set campaigns in

the popular *Forgotten Realms* universe, with there being other famous settings too, such as

Greyhawk, *Eberron*, and *Ravnica*, to name just a few. Even popular livestream, *Critical Role*,

which will be discussed often in the future, released campaign setting books, *Critical Role:*

Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting and the later *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, so fans of the show

could set their own adventures in the world they watched. Most of the time, the use of these

settings suggest a building off of official prequels, or premade lore, but they are not as connected

as others. If I set a campaign amongst friends in the *Forgotten Realms*, that campaign will not

become a background for another group across the country who do not know us, but are also

playing in the *Forgotten Realms*. In this case it becomes more like a fanfiction. Many set their

own characters into a world they are a fan of, interacting with some famous NPCs that all know,

but those individual PCs will not be shared in the setting of everyone. This more intimate sequel

connection we see in our example must come from a direct line of players, or from players who

know each other; otherwise, there is no way for the stories to connect.

Nonetheless, looking more widely at the idea of character actions affecting the world and

changing it for the future of not only their own campaign, but possibly another they may play in

the future, it becomes clear how malleable the history of the world is. Once something has happened, it becomes a part of the world's lore, but, as will be discussed more later, almost anything can happen in a TRPG campaign thanks to the unpredictability of the live-pay format, and the extreme freedom given to players in deciding their character's actions. Thus, a history is molded collectively as time passes. This is a natural thing to occur in a TRPG story because it, as will be discussed elsewhere, must be told chronologically. The unique format of the TRPG's temporal and spatial components creates a higher commonality of creating a rich lore for the setting, which is likely to be touched on again and again in the future as the ever-time-progressing TRPG campaign unfolds. And it is this lore, built in large part via the PC's world interactions, that further emphasizes the collaborative side of the TRPG. At first glance it is easy to assume the entirety of the setting is the GM's realm, but in reality the GM presents a setting, often one that has already been molded by players, and then the GM must react and modify the setting as the player's interact with it through their characters.

This malleability of setting, as well as the unique ease with which sequels to a GM's campaign can be made by other GMs, works to further show how unique the TRPG form is. The collaborative, live-play, and often improvisational nature of the TRPG leads to a highly distinct narrative form in which setting is malleable and unpredictable. We will discuss TRPG unpredictability later, but recognizing the interactability and malleability of the TRPG's setting is a good step towards recognizing more key features of the TRPG: the freedom, unpredictability, and reactionary capability, which contribute to making this distinct narrative form.

The Smaller Setting & An Introduction to the Dungeon

The more immediate surroundings of the player-characters, the setting they are interacting with during play, brings in its own interesting divisions from other forms. Primarily, it does this through its gaming aspects, which, as a part of the table fabula, is an intrinsic part of the TRPG story as well. Here we will touch on the dungeon, dice rolls, and the immediate surrounding, as most of these ideas will be carried with us moving forward.

While the wider setting has some effect outside of the characters, often being realized after the fact in character's hearing of distant news, it is the more direct, local, area around the characters that is naturally interacted with more immediately and in live-time gameplay. This is true of role-play with villagers, town officials, bandits, or more, but it is most interestingly seen in one of the most famous aspects of the TRPG: The dungeon. In the TRPG sense, a dungeon is defined loosely as a locale that is explored and usually fought in. Most often dungeons are places where puzzles, monsters, and loot lie. They are also the most common place where the necessity for game maps comes into play, as will be explained later. Rather than being a term exclusively for dark and dank underground passages (although that is where the name takes its origin), the term has come to stand in for any enclosed locale where gaming mechanics tend to take precedent. Ultimately, the term dungeon relates more to a locale's uses and typical elements rather than a lone spatial appearance, an idea to be pushed further in a coming section regarding spaces.

Popularized in the TRPG genre by the most famous member of its club, *Dungeons & Dragons*, the dungeon formula can be seen in a great majority of TRPGs. Even in modern or more realistic settings we see "dungeons" where one may be sneaking into a building, past the

guards, perhaps fighting a few, only then to work out a "puzzle" or "pick the lock" on the great

"loot filled chest" that is a bank vault. In many ways the modern day heist story functions as a

contemporary spin on the dungeon crawl. But, to properly understand this first half of the *D&D*

name, we must look to the fantasy style of *D&D* that birthed it.

In his book, *Playing at the World*, Jon Peterson describes the innate connection between

the commonly underground dungeons and the human tendency towards the treasure-filled burial

ground as the reasoning behind why loot has become so naturally integral to the drive behind a

dungeon. After this, Peterson gets more specific, pointing out that while the wider setting, or

overworld, is "virtually an afterthought" in the older rule books, it is in the same older books

where they become immensely specific regarding the dungeons (134). Peterson says the books

mention "a minimum of six levels recommended for play" and in later texts, "[there is included]

helpful diagrams of the manner in which dungeon levels might connect with one another. That

text suggests that 'a good dungeon will have no less than a dozen levels down'" (134). This

focus on the smaller, dungeon setting comes powerfully from the TRPG's start in wargaming,

before it became more and more narratively propelled, as will be seen later. However, while

these rules may seem restrictive, Peterson still points out the "great deal of latitude in the design

of dungeons, a crucial openness when one appreciates that the dungeon is, for all intents and

purposes, the primary venue of the game" (133). While Peterson immediately admits that claim

"is a bit of an overstatement," he is striking an accurate chord (133). The *game* portion of the

TRPG does largely come in the form of dungeons. There are still concerns of game mechanics in

the more general world, but the dungeon is the primary locale of combat, and a party can hardly

be called adventurers if they do not go risking life and limb in a dungeon for some gain.

The dungeon will appear frequently in this work, as it highlights some of the best qualities that the TRPG genre gains from its being a game. The intense moments brought by dice rolls and live-action consequences, or the uncertainty that was mentioned earlier, are often found in the dungeon. It is where characters die and players reach the tips of chairs working out their character decisions in a genre where, thanks to its live-play form, you cannot see that there are some collection of pages left to remind you that it will all be fine. There is no quickly looking ahead to know things work out as there is in print. The TRPG, being partially improvisational, always holds an uncertain future for the storyworld. The dungeon is the cornerstone of the gaming aspect of the TRPG. It is also one of the most pre-prepared of the settings a GM gets to form to then set before the players for them to change as they move through it, creating a story out of the framework, that is easily modified by character action, to create a living locale.

Focalization & Perceptions of Space

Fabulae, as described before and as related to our TRPG in its having two major ones, are reminiscent, and heavily related to, the idea of frame stories. We have also mentioned this before, but as we are about to step into focalization, defined very soon, it is important to further drive home the fabulae. Our two, the storyworld of the in-game narrative, and the table fabula of the players sitting together having a TRPG session, interact in ways that create a constant flow between them. This flow will be visualized soon, so as to help better understand the form's constant oscillation back and forth between the two with ease. It is this oscillation between the

two fabulae which both further makes the TRPGunique, and makes focalization much more complex.

The frames of stories, or layers of fabulae, that exist in the multilayered genre of the TRPG leads to a strange muddling of where our perception of the shared, imaginary, storyworld is coming from or is going to. Some of this plays into the aforementioned mixing of POVs, but Mieke Bal gives us a more acute way of defining exactly how our perception of the narrative frame functions. Bal describes the concept of focalization as "the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen" (135). In the TRPG, this formula is made more complex due to the extra layers that come with the TRPG. Within the narrative level, that which is seen is the occurences in the storyworld, which is seen by characters, or "agents." The vision may be different between these characters based on their own positioning, biases, or even poor perception stats. But that last piece brings us outwards, to the table fabula of gameplay, where the Bal formula must be applied again.

Now that the narrative understanding of vision is established, the focalization of the table fabula can be. That which is seen on the table fabula is usually either the GM narrating the experiences of the characters to the players, or the use of visual game cues such as a digital or physical game map. This audio/visual information then reaches the players, or the "agents" of this fabula. The "vision," or information being passed from source to agent, is still malleable, based on the player interpreting what they see/hear. Or, the player's interpretation of the "vision," given by the GM, for their character can be a way of adding subjectivity, or change in the vision as it passes from GM to player/character. For example, the GM may say something which the player misinterprets, or, more specific to the TRPG form, they may say something

which the player then purposefully modifies as they transfer the information into what their in-game character would see/think.

This formula can then be changed even further, for if a player is narrating an action their character is doing in the moment, then that player becomes the source of that which is being perceived and the other players, plus the GM, become those who are perceiving. Then, once any actions have been made by the players guiding their characters' movements, the ordering flips. First, all the players and GM experience the explanation of the action from the GM or player in the real world, then the characters within the narrative see it as the players apply that knowledge back into their role-play in the storyworld. Sometimes this is shortened, or perhaps more accurately, made an instantaneous process from player witnessing to character witnessing, as, if the player narrates the actions in a way that is significantly in-character, then the reinterpreting from player-player to character-character perception is almost imperceivable, as it just happens thanks to immersion (a concept to be pursued, in detail, later). The extra layer of fabulae in the TRPG causes an immense addition of complexity to the usual formula we can follow with Bal. The conclusion comes as follows: the TRPG's focalization formula is constantly going back and forth between player vision and character vision, endlessly going from one to the other and then back again as the narrative flows forward. This creates a constant oscillation between the fabulae of the storyworld and the table fabula.

That Which is Seen: The source of the information

The Vision: The information itself

The Agent: The one recieving the information

The Agent   The Source

The Vision

Here is a diagram of the usual flow followed. There are many outliers, several described here, but this is the most common cycle.

Table Fabula ▌ Storyworld

GM ← GM ultimately determines what happened   Something Occurs

GM communicates the storyworld to the players

Character actions affect the storyworld

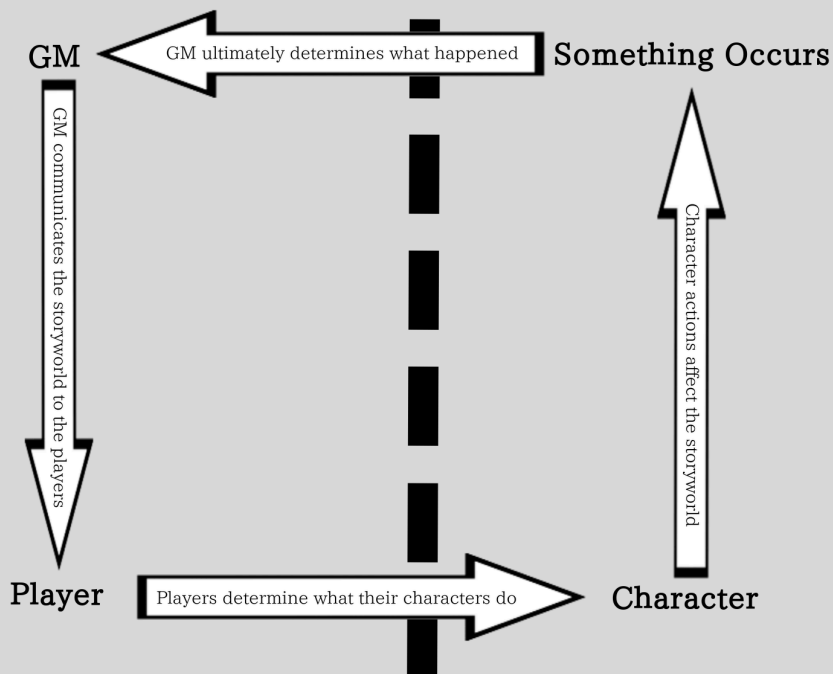Player   Players determine what their characters do →   Character

Figure 1. Shorthand definitions for the key parts of focalization, as well as a diagram visualizing

the common flow of narrative across the storyworld and table fabulae.

With this understanding of the TRPG's complex oscillation (or in this visual, more of a

cycle) of perception between the fabulae out of the way, the discussion of "space" in narrative,

with Bal, can be returned to. Much of this side of Bal's discussions becomes easier in the TRPG, as while in a novel the room around the characters may go undescribed and only the conversation mentioned, in the TRPG, in order to have a solid understanding amongst all within the shared imagination of the storyworld, the setting must be described. The GM will lend differing situations a differing amount of description for the space occupied, even often not mentioning pieces of the space until a player inquires about them. But, even in the moments when the narrative is not relying on the surrounding space, as most GMs will know, someone is going to inquire where they are or what is around. Even if an inquiry about spacing is not made, as it may not seem crucial, it will still play into the imagined scene of everyones' heads. And, with the aforementioned necessity of a concrete shared imagination among players, spatial descriptions and fictional awareness become crucial to the TRPG

Cracks in this shared imaginary visual can be more devastating in the TRPG than in the novel, as while in a novel if a reader envisions space differently than how the author intended it, the result will be momentary confusion for the reader. Meanwhile, this confusion for the reader does not affect the novel wholly; it only removes the reader from their immersion momentarily before they readjust and continue the novel. In a novel, this break in how things are spatially arrayed may often be considered inconsequential. However, in the TRPG, due to everyone collaborating in the same shared imagination, if spatial awareness amongst everyone does not align, the breaking of immersion can be worse, due to the necessity of playing the roles of the characters. Also, the consistency of the storyworld could start to crumble as players come to disagree as to who or what is where and thereby what is possible in the next moments of the story. Perhaps one PC attempts to punch another character but players are in disagreement about

where those two characters are existing. This means players are in a disagreement as to whether such a punch is feasible, and thus cannot agree on what occurs next until the spatial break is mended (usually by the GM) and the shared imagination is restored.

In the TRPG, the symbolic impact of the scene in which things are taking place is diminished compared to more common narrative forms. The surroundings can still very much be symbolic to a conversation in a TRPG, but being a genre performed in partial, collaborative, improvisation, neither the conversation nor the space it takes place in can be easily foretold by anyone to make them align poetically. More regarding drawbacks such as this will come later, but it is important to note this loss to the usual situation that Bal suggests.

While the TRPG and novel differ in their consistency or necessity of spatial description, as well as their ability to thematize space, the novel and the TRPG still share many qualities in regards to space. Much of what Bal describes about space applies to the TRPG as well as the novel. Bal mentions "determination" relying "on the basis of the reader's frame of reference," and thereby causing those more familiar with a space being depicted to more easily, or accurately, picture the space for the shared imagination compared to someone who does not have as much experience (126). Bal explains this concept in example:

> When a certain event is situated in Dublin, this will mean something different to the reader who is well acquainted with the city than to the reader who only knows that Dublin is a large city.... Those who are already familiar with that atmosphere will immediately be able to visualize much more, in more precise images. (126)

However, a lack of experience with a space can lend some freedom; as Bal says, "the unknowing reader has the freedom to imagine" what is being described, as they do not have a

premade image in their minds (126). In the TRPG this comes up the same way in the more realistic settings. This idea can even appear with TRPG settings based on other popular media, in which those familiar with the source material can use it as groundwork for the imagination. But the established imagination can also come simply from being a more experienced player in a certain setting. Visit the famed city of "Waterdeep" often enough as a *D&D* player in the *Forgotten Realms* and you will have a much better idea of it in your head than a new player to that setting. Meanwhile, a small positive for the new player could be the ability to freshly imagine this city, lending more freedom to the mind's eye so long as it does not end up so different to the imaginations of the others that it breaks the shared imagination. But, in most moments where this difference in experience could matter for imagining the world, the GM will simply have verbally described the scenery, ensuring a shared imagination. Even if the GM falsely assumes everyone has a solid mental grasp on the setting, the collaborative and live nature of the TRPG allows for the less experienced player to ask for more explanation.

Pushing these ideas of space further, we will be able to return to the dungeon as an example. Bal describes the "relations between space and event," giving the famous *locus amoenus* as an example, where the garden space is attached to love scenes (130). Thanks to the trope of the locus amoenus, we associate love scenes with the garden. The TRPG has its own tropes to be discussed in further detail later, but the dungeon itself is a space instantly entwined with numerous events or ideas within a TRPG player's mind. The dungeon comes with the aforementioned connection to loot or treasure, it comes with battle, and thereby experience points as well, depending on the game system used. Dungeons are famous for their puzzles, their terrifying boss battles at the end, and their tendency to make a marathon-like atmosphere as the

party slogs through room after room of foes, traps, and mysteries. Thus, the dungeon, as a conceptual space, tends to be mentally linked with the more wargaming-based ideas of the TRPG. Other common areas of TRPGs are linked to ideas in the same way, such as a tavern or inn in *D&D* being linked to the mechanic of a long rest, or the gathering of information, as inns are usually where party's sleep or collect together. However, no locales are as famous, or as heavily linked to gaming concepts, as the dungeon.

There is an additional, and more physical, concept of space that appears specifically within the TRPG, especially within the dungeon. This space is the distances within a battle map. As touched on before, TRPG combat, or exploration, is often accompanied by the visual aid of a map. Maps are usually given as a bird's eye view of a dungeon interior or bandit camp or other situation in which the exact space between things will matter for game rules. These moments, often battles, can still be seen to be in some ways equivalent to the novel. The narrative effect of your ally standing at your side to fight can be seen in both a battle map and the pages of a book. The difference lies in the massive increase in importance put on the exacts of space within a game's mechanics. A writer may have to keep his characters' positions in a battle close to mind so as to not lose the reader's imagination when an action is made. But in a TRPG battle, the position of everything matters and needs to be certain, as the distance of one square on the battle map may decide if your character is roasted by a fireball or simply warmed by the flames billowing *just* out of range. When the rules of the game enter, the need for a shared imagination becomes stronger and becomes literalized via the need to ascertain distances for ranged attacks, or closeness to execute a melee strike, as examples.
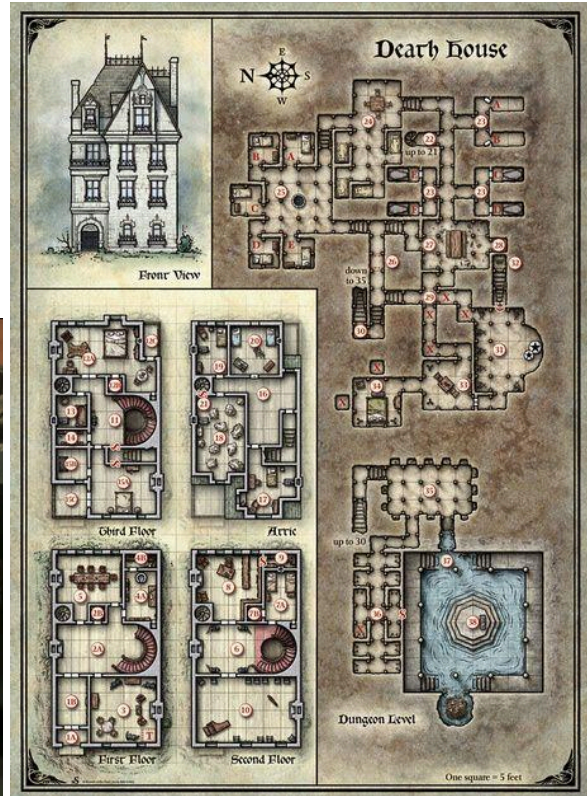
Figure 2 [left] & Figure 3 [right]. Fig. 2 is an example of a well-crafted, real-life table map, from

episode 22 of the second campaign of *Critical Role*. Many table-based maps are only

2-dimensional, sometimes even just being a white board that has been drawn on to hastily enure

a concrete shared imagination, but some companies provide resources for creating 3-dimensional

table maps with miniatures. Fig 3 is a digital image provided by *Wizards of the Coast* to

represent the optional dungeon for the beginning of their campaign module, *Curse of Strahd*.

This image could be printed out for use, simply referenced, or uploaded to a third party digital

tool for use in digital play, such as using it in Roll20, and online tool set and virtual "tabletop"

for holding TRPG sessions via the internet. I personally use Roll20 for my maps, be them from

an official source, or made myself by using Roll20's map-making tools.

Jon Peterson writes extensively on the rule systems of *D&D* and how the developers reached the conclusion, in their early years, of the need to have "systematized monsters" made out of the collection of varying mythoi they were pulling from (150). Without specifics relating to the distances, sizes, ranges, etc. of attacks, spells and monster abilities, the game portion could not function smoothly. Plus, the necessity of shared imagination is so great that most experienced TRPG players know that for any form of complex combat a battle map is needed lest everyone get confused about the exact distances between all involved, as those exact differences matter. This concern takes us more towards the wargaming side of TRPGs, but it is a crucial part of understanding space within the genre, and it is yet another testament to the TRPG's need for more exact and explicit descriptions of space, lest both the shared imagination and the game mechanics fall apart. In this way, a battlemap forces the needed concrete specificity, entering a more movie-like situation with certainty of locale rather than the less calculated vagueness of a novel.

From the widest setting descriptors, to locales, to the famous dungeon, to how we even quantify and explain space in the first place, space is extremely important for the TRPG. But it is important to note that where the TRPG grows in complexity, it is also simplified, as settings are made concrete, but rarely made poetically poignant due to the lack of possibility for perfect preparation (an issue addressed more in the future). These are pieces that most would take for granted as a natural part of a game or story without a second thought to how crucial they really are to crafting this genre. Setting, and our perception of it, encompasses the vast need of the TRPG to have a shared imagination of the narrative, as any collaborative genre must have in

order not to fall apart within an hour. This need is made more crucial via the TRPG's

collaborative nature interacting with its malleability, as all of this space is up for interaction and

modification via the player-characters' actions. The way in which this interaction occurs, and

how visual description for the shared imagination is processed, both heavily involve the TRPG's

system of oscillating between the fabulae. These fabulae both make focalization more complex,

and make the TRPG a unique form when compared to the workings of fabulae in other creations.

For more on the complexities of fabulae, and a contention with how Cover uses them, see

appendix A. Although, I warn that this section has been made an appendix due to its complexity

and references to other key concepts not fully covered yet, so I would also suggest reading it

after having read the majority of this work, especially as I will nod towards it again in a final

chapter.

- Chapter 3 -

Freedom & Immersion

"The first characters and adventures you create will probably be a collection of

clichés. That's true of everyone, from the greatest Dungeon Masters in history on down.

Accept this reality and move on to create the second character or adventure, which will

be better, and then the third, which will be better still. Repeat that over the course of time,

and soon you'll be able to create anything, from a character's background story to an epic

world of fantasy adventure....

Above all else, D&D is yours. The friendships you make around the table will be

unique to you. The adventures you embark on, the characters you create, the memories

you make—these will be yours. D&D is your personal corner of the universe, a place

where you have free reign to do as you wish.

Go forth now. Read the rules of the game and the story of its worlds, but always

remember that you are the one who brings them to life. They are nothing without the

spark of life that you give them." (Mike Mearls, May 2014)

The above comes directly from the Preface of the *Player's Handbook* for 5th edition

Dungeons & Dragons, written by the creative director, and co-creator, of said 5th edition *D&D*,

Mike Mearls. This preface encompasses a lot of what makes *D&D*, and more generally TRPGs,

appealing. Notably highlighted by the above quote, the control one has over the narrative, and

the freedom one has in acting in a TRPG as a player, are major appeals of the form. Here we

move towards the characters rather than just the narrative formalities. In this chapter, we will

illustrate not only how player and character freedom functions, but how it plays into one of the

most important aspects of a good TRPG: role-play immersion. These concepts of immersion and

unprecedented freedom are constitutive of the TRPG as a form, and thus, being so unique and

crucial, we will be spending a lot of time with them.

Historical Context: The Evolution of Character Game Mechanics

"Narrative – fiction as well as journalism, films, and informal narratives of

everyday life – thrives on the affective appeal of characters. Whether we like them or not,

we are compelled to read on because we respond to those paper, celluloid, or digital

people." (Bal 104)

If it has not already become clear, not only are characters some of the most beloved and

memorable parts of a TRPG story, but without PCs there is no TRPG in the first place. Without a

PC, the player has no purpose, and would simply be an audience listening to a GM's one-person

show. Things would assume the author-reader dynamic. But, the idea of Bal quotation above is

expanded when applied to the TRPG. We continue on as TRPG players, not just because the

characters outside of us are effective, but because we ourselves want to play the part of our

character to its completion. And, even further than just narrative desire, we too have the interest

in seeing how our character grows mechanically, meaning growth within those game mechanics

of the system being used. We add, on top of narrative interests, the rules of the TRPG system,

better known as the "mechanics" of the game, and how they apply to a literalized character growth. As you play a TRPG your character gets better statistics and abilities, they grow in power, be it through purchasing abilities with "experience points" gained every session, or via a simple "level-ups" which grant milestone-based power increases. This more wargaming-originating side of the TRPG aligns perfectly with the narrative idea of growth, as we can make the idea of the bildungsroman a literal, quantifiable, aspect. This idea of growth as a TRPG theme will be explored further in a later chapter, but it is important for now to quickly note that this drive for characters to grow, not just narratively but also in literal terms, is a highly TRPG-specific quality.

When we defne characters in the TRPG, we most often do so via a succinct explanation of game system mechanics. In discussing how to define the image of a character in narrative terms, Bal suggests the use of "relevant semantic axes. Semantic axes are pairs of contrary meanings. Characteristics like 'large' and 'small' could be a relevant semantic axis" (114). In the TRPG, our description will likely include this definition style for our narrative side: a character may be defined by being large, extravagant in appearance, and/or kind in attitude. But the gaming side of the TRPG lends its own character definitions, as a character may be described with the above information being further qualified by the attached, "they are also a Dragonborn Paladin," for example, if playing *D&D*. "Dragonborn" relates to the character's race, which grants certain common appearances and abilities, while "Paladin" relates to the character's class, or their adventuring role/occupation. Classes give a general idea of the character's role in the party dynamic, doing so largely by what abilities it grants the character. A Paladin for example, in *D&D 5e*, gains abilities to heal, defend others, and do battle with holy powers granted by the

God they worship. Thus, the Paladin usually becomes a "tank," or the one taking most of the damage being dealt by enemies, and thus more generally is also a front-line fighter. Statistical character definitions that play into game mechanics are a fundamental piece of what makes a TRPG character. Race, class, ability scores, background, skills, talents, weapons, armor, other items, and more can be used to properly define a TRPG character.

role	character qualification		
	strength	diligence	flexibility
farmer/father	+	+	−
student/son	−	−	o
mother	o	o	+

Here + = positive pole
− = negative pole
o = unmarked

Bal's example for describing character traits relating to example axes of strength, diligence, and flexibility.

These same axes can be used for TRPG characters as well, being narrative characters, but thanks to the gaming aspects of the TRPG there are additional descriptors that are usually utilized when describing a character while talking within the table fabula.

Here is a common version of the character sheet, here a player keeps track of many of their statistics and abilities, as well as their race, class, level, background, alignment, and more. The descriptors written on this sheet relate primarily to the gaming side of the TRPG, representing the bonuses applied to dice rolls or abilities a character has access to.

This example is from an official starter set for D&D 5e.

Figure 4. Bal's example of character trait axes, as well as an example *D&D 5e* character sheet from *Wizards of the Coast*

The image above includes an official *D&D 5e* example character sheet for a Dwarven Cleric. Thus, for this example, this Cleric may be known for certain narrative traits regarding the character's personality and loose attributes, but more specifically the character would be described by the numbers of their statistics, their class, race, background, level, go-to weapons or items, and more. Thereby we end up with both storyworld fabula descriptors in the likeness of Bal, as well as table fabula descriptors in the form of ability numbers and the like. While in both fabulae the character may be referred to as "wise," in the storyworld this simply means they are known to be wise, while in the table fabula this could correlate to a high Wisdom score. Interestingly, in both fabulae the character may be referred to as a Cleric. In the storyworld this would be a known name for the character's occupation, and many other characters would be familiar with how some of the Cleric's abilities function. What differs between the storyworld fabula version of "Cleric" and the table fabula version is that the storyworld characters would not speak in terms of whether a Cleric ability required an action or bonus action to utilize or how much one of their spells may heal in numbered terms. In the storyworld the characters will simply know a Cleric can heal and do various other impressive feats. Thus, even when a storyworld character and a table fabula player can both refer to a PC or NPC as a Cleric, the amount they know regarding what that word means differs, as one only knows things obvious on the narrative level and the other knows this alongside the additional quantifications brought by their knowledge of the gaming side of the TRPG.

Of course, what qualifying fields are used for these definitions in the first place is based on what system is being used for play. In *Legend of the Five Rings* I may define my character by

their family or clan, their highest traits or elemental ring, or even what their honor score is. In

Deathwatch, a system based on the *Warhammer 40k* universe, I may describe my space marine

character by which chapter they belong too (referring to what creed and sect of the space marine

army they belong to), their preference for ballistic or weapon skill, or even what kind of armor

they wear or what their armor's history is. In *D&D 5e*, I may be the aforementioned noble

Dragonborn Paladin with a kind heart. But, this option was not always easily available in the

D&D system, as *Dungeons & Dragons* has evolved majorly over time, mainly moving towards

freedom and narrative over its more restrictive wargaming origins.
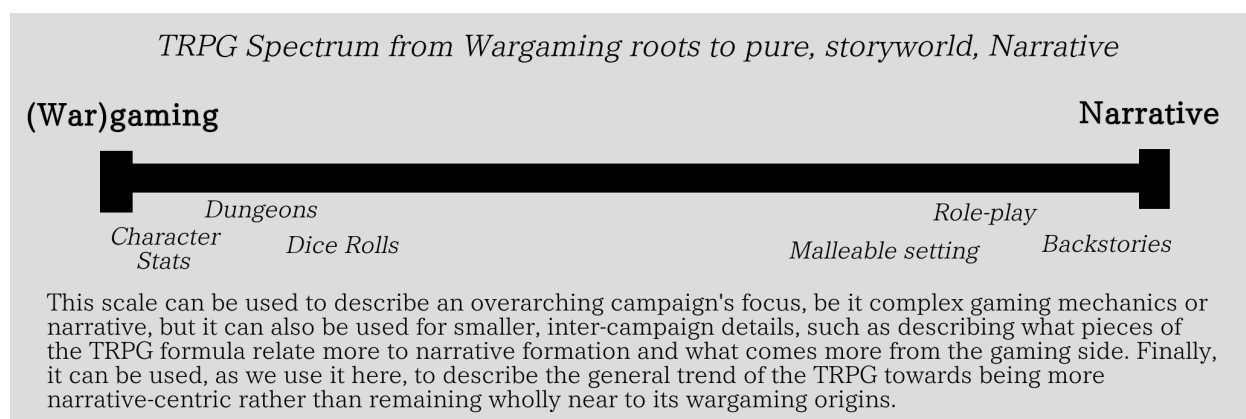
Figure 5. Simple diagram showing the spectrum of the TRPG from (war)gaming to narrative

Jon Peterson tells us of early *D&D* versions suggesting that the player can play "all sorts

of fantastic creatures as their character, that 'there is no reason that players cannot play virtually

anything, provided they begin relatively weak and work up to the top'" (141). While this

freedom seems promising, the same first edition restricts the player with statements like,

"'Dwarves may opt only for the Fighting-man class' and similar restrictions apply to elves and

hobbits" (Peterson 141). This first edition of *D&D* had "the three classes of Fighting-men,

Magic-users, and Clerics.... Only after publication of the first supplement would they be joined

by those who steal (Thieves) and those who judge (Paladins)" (Peterson 157). Additionally, in

this early *D&D*, "one cannot change class from a Cleric to a Magic-user or vice versa" (Peterson

177). While this piece can be attributed to an interest in keeping the different forms of magic

separated (divine vs arcane), it still adds to the list of restrictions applied to a system which was

built on an ideal of freedom.

It is also interesting to note the expansion of the alignment system from the simple three

choices of Lawful, Chaotic, and Neutral, towards the later three-by-three grid of nine choices,

adding Good, Neutral, and Evil as a new axis (alignment will be discussed again in further depth

in a later chapter, see page 155 for a visual accompanying that analysis). This expansion shows

progress towards more freedom, but this progression goes even further as the "alignment" system

in the 5th Edition of *D&D* is minor in importance compared to earlier editions. This has been

caused by a de-emphasis on the quantifying of personality. For example, in *D&D 5e* the only

example that comes to mind for alignment being highlighted or used within the game is for a

handful of legendary magic items. Meanwhile in a system like *Pathfinder*, which is based on the

earlier 3.5 Edition of *D&D*, alignment plays an important role in some spells and abilities (but

we shall talk more about this in a later chapter).

The general lack of interest in quantifying the moral is even seen in 1st Edition *D&D*

when, as Peterson describes, "*Dungeons & Dragons* cannily avoids the common terms 'black

magic' and 'white magic,' instead presenting magic as something akin to engineering, merely a

set of practices that lead to a result" (177). This idea leaves the freedom of moral judgement in

the hands of the individual players, rather than the official rulings demanding a certain view. Thus, even early on, *D&D* had a tenet of freedom in spirit, even if some of their early rules would limit your PC choices. Furthermore, the issues of limiting choice in earlier editions of *D&D* have fallen away, further proving the TRPG's move towards a focus on the narrative pole. This move away from the quantifying of the moral also supports the TRPG's emphasis on freedom via not restricting characters with stringent alignment rules or labels like "black" or "white" magic.

Luckily, the game moved towards the expansion of options for further freedom. While "in its first edition, *Dungeons & Dragons* specified a narrow application for abilities in the system" the famous six abilities of *D&D*, Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma would grow in use and importance, as they always stayed a part of the *D&D* character definition (Peterson 370). Ultimately, we would reach our modern edition (*5e*) with nine races within the *Player's Handbook*, not including the many more in official supplements, none of which have hard restrictions on class, as the early editions had. Pile onto this numerous backgrounds, and more class differentiation than the aforedescribed races, and *D&D* is in a place of many mechanical options and little restriction on how to craft a character. Add further to this the *D&D* mentality of allowing anything should the players and GM agree to it, alongside the expansive world of homebrew, or non-officially created classes, races, and more, and the choices for character mechanics becomes nearly infinite.

So, while in the early days of *D&D* you could theoretically play a Dragonborn Paladin, the official options to do so easily, without having to homebrew it yourself, were lacking. This would be made harder with the game's early mixed sentiments, focussing on freedom but having

many restrictions, contributing to an assumption of playing the more common races/classes (although a Dragonborn Paladin would absolutely be a common combination today). However, whether the game is being played in an era of emphasizing the usual or the odd, it may seem that the options are still quite limited. While I could work out the mathematics to prove how high the number for race and class combinations is, it would be more promising to simply tell you that I can confidently assert that you could play the same race and class a dozen times and always have a different character. One fighter could be completely unrecognizable to the untrained eye when compared to another fighter. I do not only mean this in the sense of different characters of the same class favouring different weapons, abilities, or spells, but rather I mean that the characteristics of personality added on top of all this raises the number of character possibilities into the infinite. While on game mechanics alone I could craft *nearly* infinite options within one system, when combining this with how that character is played, the options skyrocket.

Ultimately, the character is something that must be role-played, like an actor taking on a part of their own devising for a play that is still in the making. The game mechanics present an expansive list of building blocks for the player, who then must create a character using them as a base, like the artist finding the statue in the block of marble. Thus as the artist makes the block of marble their own in creating a statue; as any good actor makes the role their own when they take it the stage; the TRPG player will make the class or party role their own when they create and play their own unique character based around it.

Interestingly, some systems, notably here *D&D*, also have options available to randomize a character's personality. While today, most create their own character without official aid, it used to be the norm to roll for various personality traits. Today most players decide their

character's looks and attitudes out of their own choice, but in early editions people would roll for these in addition to the continued tradition of rolling numerical statistics. Describing this norm in the *D&D* of the early 1980s, Gary Alan Fine gives an example:

> The character I had rolled up was a thief with an alignment of three (meaning he was a "good" person). I asked Don about this saying that it didn't make sense. Don looked at my characteristics and said that it made "perfect sense" in terms of my Wisdom of 3 (of a possible 20—"Foolish"). Don comments, "You always do what you consider right, but sometimes you have difficulty deciding what is right. Daddy was a thief and you feel that if Daddy does it, it must be right because Daddy is a good guy and only steals from bad guys." (216)

Fine describes this fitting together of a randomly rolled character by saying, "This process has been termed social constructivism (Barlett, 1932). Players working from scant, sometimes contradictory information attempt to construct a meaningful identity.... This identity construction... may appear trivial, but it is important for a player in giving himself an identity" (216). Fine finds this identity to be so important, not just for the limited role-play of the earlier version of *D&D* which he was documenting, but also as a way to set characters apart. This was important for the obvious reason of wanting a stand-out or memorable character, but also because early *D&D* was famously difficult and sometimes sparse. Many players played only occasionally, and with different people at events. Also, the game was designed to kill characters with ease and swiftness. As the desire for a more narrative focus grew, the deadliness of the system began to lower. And with the advent of new ways to play and get in contact with fellow

players, mainly via the internet's growing popularity and usefulness, people could more easily play consistently.

But more generally, in the above block quote, Fine highlights a version of our previous metaphors. It is not that people were heavily restricted by randomness, but rather that it gave a more puzzle-like aspect to crafting your own individual identity for your character. As opposed to chiseling away the marble yourself, you were surprised by being handed many pieces to a puzzle; a puzzle which it was your responsibility to put together in a logical way. But, with many open parts or vaguetities to this so-called puzzle, you could invent a creative and unique way in which it all fit together. We see this in the Fine example, as "Don" suggests a foolish son of a thief who became a thief themselves, assuming it was a "good" occupation. They could have just as easily gone in a Robin Hood-esque direction, but instead they looked at the pieces they were handed and invented a unique and interesting character concept. Much like the restrictions of a particular poetic form lending a greater exercise in creativity via problem solving, the rolling of random character traits did not make characters too similar nor truly take away players' freedoms. Rather, the randomly selected traits make for an interesting puzzle, and thus an interesting approach to character creation (it is a useful and fast tool as well, especially considering the high rate of character death in these early editions).

While this section may be very *D&D* centric, the overarching idea of having many (albeit technically limited) mechanical choices which are then made infinite by the compiled narrative choices, is true across TRPGs. Systems that forego classes in favor of skills alone, or otherwise create a less rigid defining system, will naturally have a higher number of mechanical possibilities, but will nonetheless reach infinity alongside other TRPGs when compounded by

narrative characterization. Thus, while this section focuses almost exclusively on *D&D*, it is just

used as the most popular example of an overarching trend. Naturally, some systems stray from

the trend, as some may prioritize complicated rules more than others. Some may even be

extremely close to the TRPG's wargaming roots. But, overall, the popular trend has been towards

narrative and freedom, as is illustrated by the direction taken by the TRPG's most played system.

> Surprisingly, returning to said most-popular form, Peterson tells us that:
>
> Ultimately, nothing in the published system of the original *Dungeons & Dragons*
>
> encourages players down a path to deeper identification with their characters.... The term
>
> 'role-playing' does not appear in the initial edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, as nothing
>
> in the system steers players in this direction. However, all of the earliest accounts of
>
> *Dungeons & Dragons* do incorporate imaginative characterization. (371)

But the natural draw to role-play (seen in most childhood games) and character seems an obvious

direction to drift with knowledge of Bal's explanation of character given earlier. We love

characters, and the more freedom we have mechanically, the more creative and unique characters

we can make. And when we recognize, as Bal points out, that "characters change" as they

progress, and that "relations with others also help build the image of a character," it makes sense

for the TRPG to shift further towards narrative and role-play rather than stay near its wargaming

roots (114). While some systems have stayed more mechanically focussed than others, creating a

wide spectrum of possible experiences, the TRPG as a form has slid more and more towards

player freedom, role-play, and general narrative focus as the years have passed. Yet, the form still

holds on to wargaming-related definitions and rules, creating a completely unique mixture of

gaming and free narrative. It is this combination that both sets the form apart from others, and ultimately defines the form as an intricate and compelling amalgamation of game and narrative.

Supreme Freedom

In my Sheruta campaign (see pages 26-27 for its introduction), using *Champions 6e*, the party found themselves at a moral crossroads. They had infiltrated a prison, where their powers, or "Arcana" in our case, did not work. They knew this was because of something called the "Nuru" project, which was nullifying their abilities (both making it impossible for them to activate their super-powers, and causing any physical effect created by their powers to be undone as though it had never occurred). Their job was to put an end to the Nuru project from the inside. Being broken free of their cell and equipped by an ally who had been masquerading as a prison worker, the party made their way towards the source of the nullification. When they arrived, they discovered the truth: that the nullification of their powers came from a young boy named Nuru Mukono. Nuru's own power, which he had no control over, was the ability to nullify arcana in an area close to where his blood was, including around himself. The party reached their defining dilemma. Do they kill the boy (stopping his ability) to get their own powers back in order to both break out of the prison and to stop the Arcane (super-power) nullification surrounding Sheruta's dome-walls (that nullification being Nuru's power in effect). The dome keeping the super-powered people inside the city had Nuru's blood being piped through it, which thus made it so no one could use powers to break out of the city. Their other possible option was trying to find another solution to avoid the blood of an innocent boy being on their hands.

As the GM, I made the mistake of having my expectations be too simple. I imagined this party would likely argue for a while, not wanting to kill an innocent, but would ultimately do so. However, this was not the case, and this moral quandary would become the keystone of the next couple sessions, and thus the rest of the campaign. What surprised me was the party splitting in half, with one side wanting to kill the child for the greater good or out of necessity, and the other half refusing to allow it or to work any further with the half of the party that they now saw more and more as ruthless criminals. The half who wished to spare Nuru had come up with a solution I had not anticipated. One player suggested that the main reason for wanting to kill Nuru was to stop his blood from nullifying powers around the walls, making escape from the city impossible, but if they could simply empty the walls of the blood by finding a pump station, then the government would never have enough time to obtain the level of blood from the boy needed to fill it again before the party's other acquaintances had busted a hole in the dome. It would be the harder option, but if they could evacuate the pipes into the ocean, they had a path around killing the boy. This led me, as the GM, to make battle maps leading to the pump station which before had not even come to my mind, but when I recognized the well done logic of the player, I realized a pump station must surely be there.

Before realizing the pump station solution, I had made the mistake of assuming my players and their characters would be predictable. When Bal describes character predictability, she defines it as being affected by many factors, including "the reader's frame of reference" (112). Bal also discusses the way possible determinations can be hypothesized based on the predictability of the character. According to Bal, predictability through these routes "makes it easy to find coherence; it contributes to the formation of a unified image of one character out of

an abundance of information" (112). Bal goes on to say that this is not the only way in which an image of the character is formed, but this is still an important point made. The possible directions I had predicted the party would go ended up being incomplete, a mistake I made as a GM from not expecting some of my players' characters to strive *so far* to avoid that one innocent death. Bal's idea of predictability raises two good points. One of these points was seen in me: The necessity of the GM to be able to predict character choices to be able to prepare some things in advance (such as maps). But *also* the need to be able to improvise due to the second point, that the TRPG gives players more freedom of choice than any reader, viewer, or video game player, can ever obtain, thus making them impossible to fully predict. While an omniscient narrator cannot be surprised by characters, a GM can be (alongside with players being surprised by another player's actions, and of course the GM surprising the players). While some authors may claim to be surprised by what they write, making claims to a form of immersion where their characters seem to "write themselves," and thus surprise the author writing them, the TRPG does this literally. The players have near ultimate freedom to steer the narrative in most any direction.

In the collaborative role-play of the TRPG, "*anything can be attempted* provided it is in character" (Peterson 374). That is not to say choices will be easy, or will always work out, or will lack consequence. On the contrary, these issues will apply constantly, but when we compare the TRPG to other types of interactive media to which it is often compared, we find none can match the supreme level of freedom given to the TRPG player.

Coming to popularity around the same time, the gamebook, exemplified by, and often simply referred to as, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, stands as a common comparison to the TRPG, most frequently *D&D* for their sharing of similar settings. The basic concept of these

books is the ability to choose branching paths as the story continues until you meet one of multiple endings. Many of these endings are designed to be unsatisfactory, leading the reader to backtrack towards a better path. In this way, the book only provides a few satisfactory endings, most of which are inevitably reached through paths that loop back towards the better ones, giving an illusion of more choices than there really are. Additionally, Jennifer Grouling Cover tells us, "the interactivity seen in gamebooks is clearly selective rather than productive. The reader does not actually affect the world of the story in a meaningful way, but simply navigates through the text" (27). Meanwhile, "when [TRPG] players are posed with the question 'what do you do?' they are given the opportunity not only to make decisions but also to build their own pathways," which, as we discussed earlier, allows for actions so independently made and varied that not only can the GM be surprised by them, but the storyworld itself can be entirely reshaped thanks to the real-time play nature of the TRPG.

In a sense, the GM, who is in control of the setting and must react to the players' actions, acts as someone who is laying the tracks out in front of an already moving train, making adjustments in real-time based on what the characters have decided to do or are doing (making this the opposite analogy to the later discussed "railroading" where the "tracks" of the story have already been laid by the GM and the players are being forced along them). Thus, just as much as the GM uses the world to guide the players in a certain direction via plot hooks, the players can carve out their own path in the TRPG, ultimately creating a collaboratively made story that will be more interesting than the lone tale that would be made if either side was given full control.

To highlight this freedom, rather than premade options created in other media like a gamebook, when an encounter is had in a TRPG like *D&D*, the party is not asked, "'Do you

fight?' or 'Do you negotiate?' the DM [a common terms for GM used in *D&D*, standing for

Dungeon Master rather then Game Master] simply poses the question 'What do you do?'"

(Cover 31). This higher level of freedom, thanks to the real-time and collaborative nature of the

TRPG, allows for an *infinite* number of actions and paths.

Another common genre compared to the TRPG is the computer game, be it an early

text-based adventure like *Zork*, or a modern computer role-playing game, or CRPG. A similar

difference can be observed in these two as well. In opposition to the TRPG, these stories are

pre-programmed, with no interaction between the person who has laid the tracks and the ones on

the train ride. Due to this, it is common in these forms that, as Cover tells us, "the reader must

solve [a] puzzle in order to access the story" (22). Cover explains that these forms do "not allow

for users to directly affect the story or storyworld, only to uncover it" (23). In this case, an

illusion of choice is granted, similar to how the gamebook forces a reader to go back to find the

"good ending," thus giving false choices lest they be unsatisfied. While some may argue that

many CRPGs *do* allow the user to change the world, these options only act like the multiple

endings of a gamebook. They are all pre-made. In a game like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, you

may get to choose to side with the Imperial or Stormcloak factions in their civil war, and while

which side you assist does change facets of the game world (such as guard appearances and some

character voice lines), these changes are all pre-made, and ultimately barely affect the

overarching story. In the end, whether one player chooses Stormcloak or chooses Imperial will

have no effect on the sequel created by the game developers, who are unaware of your individual

choices and attempts at role-play. The game company will simply choose which option they want

to be the true case for the sequel's world lore. Additionally, these are pre-programmed rails. The

player has no option of "surprising" the video game with a third option. All the player can do is choose which path of quests to follow, ultimately uncovering one story or the other, but not truly taking part in crafting the world.

While a CRPG player may be able to hack the game to some extent to try and make changes as they want, and may be able to utilize community made mods to add more choices, they ultimately cannot reach the level of interaction and freedom provided by real-time interaction with a GM. Cover explains, "having the DM's ear is thus an important influence in *D&D*. Being able to negotiate face-to-face allows players actual narrative agency, not just the chance for interaction" (49). Cover goes on to explain how the GM may change the story actively to match the players' desires or the characters' actions. We saw this with my Sheruta campaign, as choices made by players led to the planning of whole new pieces of the puzzle, and new battle maps, for the players to explore. While it is true that a GM can limit player action, this is usually only done by experienced GMs whenever a character would act "out of character" (meaning acting in ways in which their character would almost certainly not), or would attempt something impossible within the setting. Some infinities are larger than other infinities, and thus, while the TRPG provides infinite possibilities in interactive freedom, it rarely allows anything and everything in one campaign. A medieval, high-fantasy game will likely disallow a player from building a cell phone, and a game set in a realistic Earth setting may disallow a character from using "magic" that does not exist in that setting; these are obvious limitations. Gary Alan Fine transcribes from a funny personal interview regarding out-of-character players that "sometimes they'll try to apply twentieth-century knowledge to a medieval situation.... They love

to invent the airplane" (189). Meanwhile, outside of comical examples, this idea of being "out-of-character" is very specific to the TRPG.

While more of the idea of being "in-character" for role-play will be touched on later in this chapter with regards to immersion, the concept of being "out-of-character" does affect available choices. Ultimately, it is the player's job to act as their character within the storyworld. Thus they are partly bound to the options their character would also choose. However, if a player starts to act as themselves rather than their character, perhaps lashing out uncharacteristically in the gameworld due to real world frustration, or the dreaded idea of meta-gaming (use of out-of-character knowledge to assist their character in-game), the GM will likely step in to prevent this. The common question of "is that really what [character name] would do?," or accusations of meta-gaming may be pointed, but they are ultimately required to not break down the 4th wall of the storyworld in a way that detracts from the narrative, or, as will be discussed later, player immersion. A serious, yet quite funny, example of handling this problem comes from a group with whom I play various TRPGs with, who, long before I joined the group, had come up with the "heart attack protocol." This is the idea that if a player is acting out-of-character to such a detrimental degree that the whole of the campaign and narrative could be ruined, and said player is refusing to change their path despite multiple mentions of their actions being out-of-character or seriously detrimental, then the GM will narrate their character dying from a heart attack before the ruinous action can be completed. Obviously this rule is an outlier, and I have only heard tell of its use once, as this rule is not made to limit the player, but rather give an extreme upper limit to what is acceptable in terms of meta-gaming or ruinous action.

This "heart attack" example is an extremity, but it highlights an important limit to ultimate freedom: the GM has final say. Cover succinctly says, "it is ultimately the DM that determines whether a narrative suggestion stands as narrative speech or whether the action must be further negotiated before entering the [storyworld]" (102-103). This means any hopeful action announced in the table fabula by a player must be recognized and accepted by the GM before it is officially an accepted part of the storyworld. Now, this sounds authoritarian at first, but it is important to note that a good GM will very rarely exercise this kind of authority. The most common occurrences of this are generally when a player was not heard and thus a statement did not get to enter the shared imagination, which is being directed primarily by the GM. However, even then, if it is a smaller detail the GM will simply let it retroactively enter the storyworld fabula's canon once they realize what the player said that they missed.

Usually, this power is rarely used to "veto" player-character actions, as the GM is not meant to be controlling, but it is generally used in high-pressure or high-speed situations as a way to hold players to their word. Cover gives us the example: "When Whisper went to open the cursed scroll tube, Nick made a statement in-character as Fletch, saying, 'No, don't do that!' However, the DM ruled that Whisper's action took place so quickly and by such surprise that the characters did not have time to react and thus Fletch's speech never reached" the canon storyworld (102). With the tenet of character freedom being upheld to such a fundamentally crucial degree, the GM will rarely deny a player their stated action (and may even force them to stick with it, preventing them from changing their mind if they decide they should not have done what they already stated aloud), so long as that action is logically possible or not immensely detrimental. The "heart attack protocol" is an extreme end to this GM veto power, and its rare

use should be a testament to the rarity of the "veto" in general. The GM is there as a mediator for the campaign, and thus is given final say over what has canonically occurred in the storyworld as a way of solving any uncertainties or disputes between players. However, player freedom is the norm, this GM control is a rare ability only used as a way to ensure coherency and that the rules are being followed. The vast majority of TRPG play is filled to the brim with player autonomy and freedom.

However, there are several other ways in which not *everything* is allowed or available, but this example comes from a more theoretical angle. Fine puts it well:

> Since these games involve fantasy—content divorced from everyday experience—it might be assumed that *anything* is possible within a cultural system. Since fantasy is the free play of a creative imagination, the limits of fantasy should be as broad as the limits of one's mind. This is not the case, as each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared realities. While players can, in theory, create anything, they in fact create only those things that are engrossing and emotionally satisfying. Fantasy is constrained by the social expectations of players and of their world. The game fantasy, then, is an integration of twentieth-century American reality [this was published in the U.S. in the early 1980s] and the players' understanding of the medieval or futuristic setting in which their characters are placed. Collective fantasy lacks the seemingly random, illogical feature of dreaming.... Because gaming fantasy is based in shared experiences, it must be constructed through communication. This communication is possible only when a shared set of references exist for the key images and a clear set of expectations exist for which actions are legitimate. (3)

This last sentence references the already touched on necessity for only the logical to be allowed. It also is executed in greater depth thanks to all players having access to the general rules, and thus they can all agree on how actions function within the game. However, the larger ideas posited by Fine are more nuanced and prove worthy of attention.

First, Fine suggests that we only make what is "engrossing and emotionally satisfying." Of course, we could think a campaign concept will be engrossing, only for it to flop and prove boring. This will likely lead to a rehaul or swift ending of the campaign to move on to something better. In this sense, as Fine tacitly admits, the other side *is* possible, it is just rarely so as we have no reason to pursue the uninteresting at great lengths. The goal of the TRPG is to have fun, ultimately. So, why would we pursue a collaborative story that does not engross us, thereby forcing a difficult immersion process as well? Fine even says that, due to a lack of drive for "winning," "if the player doesn't care about his character then the game is meaningless" (185). So if we cannot immerse ourselves, there is no point to the story.

Next, Fine suggests that the necessity of the shared imagination leads to a heavier reliance on the known or easily imaginable. He describes the needs for "a shared set of references." The wildness of dreams is hard to execute in a TRPG because the lack of consistent narrative would immediately cause everyone to fall out of the shared imagination. Even more generally, Fine believes that ideas not rudimentarily connected to our existing social ideas will be impossible to solidify in the shared imagination. He describes the need to root ideas in the known "American reality and the players' understanding of the medieval or futuristic setting in which their characters are placed." The description of a setting for such a bizarre place that no references to our existing visual knowledge can lend assistance to the shared imagination will

almost certainly fail. It is theoretically a possibility, but the GM's power of description and oral illustration would have to be extraordinary in order to succinctly impart the understanding of a completely foreign idea to all the players involved in the game.

As part of this concept, Fine mentions the need of the GM to create a setting that is not just a location but also a place which has a world view which dictates how things function. The world needs to have societal beliefs, including a folklore that they believe governs the world. Fine suggests that "unlike setting, these 'folk ideas' are typically not consciously created by the referee [meaning GM]. Rather, the American folk ideas to which these individuals have been socialized are expressed in these fantasy worlds" (76). Fine goes on to give several examples, which will be explored in one of our future chapters, but the general idea stands here as a suggestion against true freedom in setting creation. However, I would argue that as TRPGs have trended towards a narrative focus, they have also trended towards more odd and more finely established creative societies. We see this in many GMs' world creation, or more easily in officially created settings.

When a setting is already crafted, over years by many different people, as an official setting with its own wikis and books dedicated to explaining facets of its lore, it becomes easier to distance ourselves from the folklore we grew up on. There is no doubt that many of these ideas from real folklore have infiltrated facets of official and unofficial TRPG settings, but I would simply argue for a less stark statement of this influence than Fine gives. However, Fine also mentions the idea of using official sources when he draws on the common TRPG practice of repurposing "someone else's imaginative system: a game designer's world, the Tolkien myths, a science fiction novel, or a dungeon created from a knowledge of popularized medieval

mythology" (144). Thus, some settings are more original, with inspiration from elsewhere beyond our folklore; some are repurposed versions of other's work; and some stem heavily from mythos knowledge. But all of these need to be viable for sharing in the collective imagination in order to be used for a TRPG campaign. Thus, the Fine block quote helps us understand, even if I believe he puts it too starkly, that not *every* idea or setting is possible within the TRPG because the concept has to be explainable for the shared imagination. The ideas used in a TRPG have to be either rooted in something known, to ensure an ease of sharing imagination, or they must be excellently described by the GM or player.

The TRPG's collaborative, or multiplayer, nature also lends it an odd facet rarely seen in other media via its ability to pursue multiple paths at once. By having multiple player characters of equal import, "multiple pathways can simultaneously be pursued... by different players" (Cover 32). This allows even further freedom and depth of narrative via these "side" stories, or even in multiple paths pursued in the so-called "main" story. These side stories are often minor character-centric tales stemming from the PC's backstory, but they can also simply be stories brought by character circumstance or a lone character's interest. Additionally, these separate paths can often be the prime suspects for meta-gaming, as while other characters may not be in the storyworld scene, the other players are almost always in the room with the GM and the player in action, leading player and character knowledge to differ. But, despite this risk, this form of play can be extremely entertaining, as it can lead to inter-character conflict, as well as to whole styles of play that surround the foiling of other PC's plans or constant distrust and espionage against other PCs. However, this style of play is much rarer, as usually a campaign is founded around cooperation and even, as Fine quotes from an old official *D&D* brochure, has no "end...

game nor any winner" (7). In a more competitive style campaign, a winner may be more obvious, and even in regular campaigns one particular character could do so well that they feel like they won, but there is no reality of having a "winner" after the TRPG is completed.

Additionally, in modern TRPGs, there is usually an end to a campaign, as opposed to the endless stream of quests that may have been more popular in the 1980s. In there being no winner, and the ability to pursue multiple paths, we see the further importance of the collaborative nature of the TRPG. While we will talk about meta-gaming concerns later, the ability to enact multiple storylines is assisted by their being many players. And, the lack of a "winner" in TRPG gameplay leads further to a focus on collaborating to tell a great story, leaning into the narrative pole, rather than competing.

Now we shall quickly touch on some pieces regarding the idea of freedom in the rules which will be discussed more thoroughly later. Some will argue that the game system rules will limit the player greatly; however, numerous arguments can be raised against this. Some would say the limitations here help guide play and give a challenge to make the TRPG story/experience better, as is seen in the confines of poetic form creating better poetry. However, better for our purposes here, an even stronger argument is that game mechanics in the TRPG are made to be bent. Cover explains that "not only do players have narrative agency to change the story, but they have textual agency.... Players [meaning more generally TRPG players rather than the player role] can adjust the text, even the rules, to fit their expectations" (52). The rules themselves recognize their limitations and present themselves as only a loose guideline to facilitate play, allowing for limits to be set in how far something can be thrown, what power level of magic a person can handle, or how quickly someone can run. The rules are there for logical limitations

and for guiding play. The *D&D 5e Dungeon Master's Guide* even tells us that "the rules don't account for every possible situation that might arise during a typical D&D session. For example, a player might want his or her character to hurl a brazier full of hot coals into a monster's face. How you determine the outcome of this action is up to you" (5). The GM is there to mediate between system rules and character action. While in a CRPG I may wish to throw that brazier, I cannot unless it was a pre-programmed possibility. But, in the TRPG, anything within reason can be accomplished by simply speaking directly to the GM, who will reach a conclusion with you for how it can, or does, occur.

This odd situation of having rules that are meant to be sometimes bent or broken is a key component of the full freedom provided by the TRPG. Much earlier in this work I mentioned a *Legend of the Five Rings* game which bent the rules to apply the system to a 1650s pirate theme. This was an exercise in our complete freedom over the ruleset. This is one of the key dimensions of the TRPG which sets it apart from the CRPG, as while a video game's code can be modified to reach many differing results, doing so to the degree which is often executed for playing a TRPG is a rarity. Thus, the TRPG has rules which function as malleable guidelines or parameters rather than the hard code of a CRPG. And, this malleability of the rules further represents the forms emphasis on freedom. This CRPG comparison makes it clear that the TRPG has an unprecedented level of freedom offered when compared to any other form.

Another piece to note is the aforementioned idea that while this freedom allows many paths, those paths may not end the way you like. This comes mainly from the game's use of dice and stats. Cover observes that "while there is more freedom in the TRPG to come up with possible choices, there is sometimes less freedom when it actually comes to deciding which path

is followed.... Players often suggest an action that they would like their character to take, but that action will then need to be confirmed by rolling dice" (31). Much more discussion on dice rolling within the TRPG will be done later, but it is important to note that while in a novel you may simply say, "he hit the orc with his sword," in the TRPG this must be determined using the stats and capabilities of the in-game character, meaning what is really say is, "I would like to hit the orc with my sword," followed by description of either success or failure. I would argue that this does not really limit the player's freedom, but rather lends the game a surprising realism, as not everyone is always going to succeed, no matter how fantastical or heroic. Their freedom of choice is not lowered; they simply are not allowed to make the choice an easy reality. They must work for it. This is also another piece, as it most often relates to combat, which stems from our wargaming roots.

This dice realism also allows for a tone to be taken with the TRPG which would be impossible in other forms without engendering parody. If an important battle is taking place in a TRPG session, and a character rolls poorly and the result is that they drop their sword, that creates more drama. The players may roll their eyes at the bad luck, but most likely these next moments will be filled with anxiety about how to recover from the blunder and finish the battle successfully. However, if a movie's final battle included a scene in which the hero tripped and dropped his sword, the film would become parody. The film would seem like it was making fun of heroes by making them comically fallible. But, the TRPG makes it a natural assumption that every character is fallible, and will, at some point (likely many points), roll incredibly badly, and thus fail in significant ways. The narrative of the TRPG fluidly adapts to surprise failures, see the excitement in our much earlier "banishment" example (pages 23-24). While other forms would

become parody or strange if they had sudden failures or borderline-unbelievable successes, the TRPG's system of dice rolling, its integral systems of chance and luck, makes these moments a thrilling and serious occurrence rather than a ridiculous scene. Failure happens to everyone, and thus the TRPG's use of dice includes that in a way that is surprisingly realistic and unique.

Finally, for this section, it is interesting to compare the ways in which this supreme freedom is used by experienced players versus new players. In an interview with *D&D Beyond*, *High Rollers* GM Mark Hulmes, said this regarding his livestreamed campaign's start, where most players were new to TRPGs:

> Everybody was learning live on camera. Most of them were brand-new players. They'd never played before, and it was a lot of fun. I love new players. There's a couple of things. So I love new players because I often find that they really come up with creative solutions to things. New players will try different things, because they don't know how the game works. They don't look at an attack action and go like, "Well, the most optimal thing for me to do is to do this, this, and this," or, "This is the best spell for me to cast in this situation." They play, and they go, "Can I do this? Can I do that?" And I love that stuff. (Mark Hulmes, 2018)

Often, new players will discover that they have ultimate freedom and will attempt anything, while an experienced player will simply go for the option they already know should be effective. So, in this sense, new players explore their freedom more often. However, if a new player does not quickly discover and explore this freedom, they are likely to favor the exact opposite instead. Often, new players, who may be used to CRPGs and have not overcome the learning curve of recognizing the TRPG's freedom, will desire to be "railroaded." This term refers to the idea of

being stuck on a preconceived track that leads you along the story, rather than the TRPG ideal of players guiding the motion of the campaign with the GM. Often this term is used to refer to over-controlling GMs that take too much power over the narrative. However, if a player is new to the TRPG, but is used to more common narrative forms where the narrative is pre-made; they may expect and be waiting to be railroaded through a story. They fail to realize their own agency and importance in crafting the story and will simply wait expectantly for the GM to throw excitement and adventure at them. Meanwhile, more experienced players will happily break the mould established by other media forms and will drive the GM along with them rather than waiting for an "author" to push the "readers" along.

Peterson describes how "*Dungeons & Dragons* offered its players the ability to direct the action in that world, the responsibility for the triumph or shame of the hero and the freedom of agency to choose petty villainy over chivalry if so inclined, rather than merely watching over an author's shoulder as the protagonist's fate unfolds" (201). This applies to all TRPGs, and helps explain why, despite being founded around the same era, the "fan-bases" of some early interactive media, like gamebooks, "have dwindled to near extinction, while TRPGs have continued to grow and recruit new audiences, even beyond the original *D&D* game" (Cover 29).

Immersion

The idea of role-play stems directly from our childhoods of playing pretend. As mentioned, all this freedom and interest in character leads us to a place of role-play. Immersion in role-play is so crucial to the TRPG that Fine goes as far as to say that "for the game to work as

an aesthetic experience players must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a

fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game. This engrossment is not total or continuous,

but it is what provides for the 'fun' within the game" (4). We assume a role outside of ourselves

and act it out like actors in a play. But, the process of assuming role-play as a character is one of

immense depth, as is clear in even this early quote from Fine.

The differing uses of point of view in the TRPG were already discussed in our first

chapter, but here we must touch on them again due to the importance of the second-person form

for guiding us *into* character, where, once immersed, the first-person is generally used, as the

player assumes their acting role as the character. The use of second-person in the cooperative

aspect of TRPGs also sets the form firmly apart from Bal's discussion of the second-person in

more traditional formats. Bal tells us that "the 'you' is simply an 'I' in disguise, a 'first-person'

narrator talking to himself," as well as more generally proposing that the second-person cannot

be sustained without significant effort, suggesting "the reader translates it into first-person

format, which enables her to read on and process the text into a story" (22). For the TRPG, only

some of what Bal suggests here stays true. In the TRPG, the "you" of second-person format is

not an "I" in disguise, as, unlike the novel, the narrator is not talking to themselves. The

"narrator," most often the GM, is usually talking to the players. When the GM asks, "What

would you like to do?," it is not a rhetorical question of self reflection as it may seem if it were in

a novel; it is rather a very real question pointed to the "you" that is the player. A gamebook may

use "you" to address the reader to make a limited choice, but, as a book, it knows there will be

no real response, as in reality the author has already written what the supposed "you" character

will do. Meanwhile, a TRPG is an actual conversation. However, while that first piece falls away

in Bal's critique of the use of second-person, her idea of "you" being translated into "I" by the reader, in our case the listening player, is pushed to reality. While Bal suggests the transformation occurs to better take in information, for the TRPG player the translation to "I" fulfills both this concept, and the more specific idea of immersion.

Cover tells us that "narration from *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* adventures often address the readers in the second-person, pulling them directly into the storyworld, situating them in a place, and immersing them" (107). Immersion, for the purposes of the TRPG, is the state within role-play in which the player is so engrossed in the role of the character that they act as though they are the character, and additionally are completely emotionally involved within the storyworld. The immersed player is like the reader who forgets there is a book in front of them, simply being engrossed within the imagined scene and the emotions of those characters. For many GMs, immersion is the goal of play in the TRPG, as it suggests a total involvement and interest within the story, reducing any concerns of meta-gaming or of a failed shared imagination. The GM's use of second-person helps ease the player into role-play as their character (as the "you" can address player and character simultaneously, as the player acts as their character), and thus, towards immersion within the narrative being told.

Bal touches on an idea of immersion that applies better to the TRPG form than the typical novel form she intends it for, saying, "The character-effect occurs when the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so strong that we forget the fundamental difference: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh" (105). This character-effect is as immersion: the engrossment within the TRPG character and story to such an extent that we ourselves may feel similar to them, or more often, will find ourselves emotional when something

happens within the fabricated world of our characters. For example, at the end of one of my *D&D 5e* campaigns we held a funeral for a PC who had died, and in doing so we, as players, became emotional remembering all that that character had stood for and all they had done in the process of our year-long campaign.

Meanwhile, Bal's formula is proved more accurate than she intended due to a disconnect in her classic-narrative centric viewpoint. Bal mentions, "The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics that make readers assume they do and that make psychological and ideological descriptions possible" (105). This may be accurate to the novel, but for the TRPG the characters are being acted out by players in real time, all of whom are in communication with each other. Emotional connection to character occurs much more in the TRPG due to how thin it draws the line Bal gives us. The TRPG character may still be just a character, incapable of doing something on its own, but when played by a player, the character *is* practically the person in front of you. And since the TRPG is played in real time, and is ever changing, the characters too are ever changing, evolving in ways that can give them more proper psyches, changing ideologies, and other characteristics that are truly human. While all still exists within a fantasy world, the immersion that a TRPG can have allows it to produce immense emotional connections, and feel extremely real and impactful.

TRPG's are partially dramatic. Like actors in aplay, the TRPG player takes up a character role, but also fulfills the audience's role, as they are unaware of what is coming, thanks to the TRPG's unpredictability and collaborative nature, and thus are taking in a lot of the story as an, involved, viewer. The TRPG clearly has a performative aspect, like acting. However, while in

acting you may engender a role, you do not inhabit the role the same way a TRPG player inhabits their character. Some actors may be allowed to ad-lib lines, and many actors may claim to "become" their character-role (think method actors, as an extreme), but they do not get to decide the character's path like the TRPG player. At the end of the day, they still are adhering to a script, even if it is a loose one. Meanwhile, TRPG players, with their unprecedented freedom, are making all the choices, they are their character deciding things in live-time, with uncertainty ahead of them rather than the next line of scripted dialogue. While TRPG players may seem, on the surface, to be in a performative act like actors, their freedom in this "acting" is far greater, and thus they more fully inhabit their characters.

While the example given above of sadness at a character's funeral is immediately relatable, as it is in the same vein as the sadness felt when a character you have become attached to dies in a novel or film, I would argue the connection can become stronger in the TRPG, or at least can become strong more easily, as we actually embody and play as, or interact with, these characters. These connections and high emotions can relate to more than just sadness, and even go a little too far at times if a healthy disconnect between role and reality is not kept. While I do not mean to the level of wild accusations of role-play immersion leading to serious crimes that the media of yore would often suggest during the infamous "satanic panic," to be mentioned in a later chapter, I do mean uncomfortable emotions for the table fabula, such as anger.

My Sheruta *Champions 6e* game ended with character in-fighting (and later character deaths) over the fate of the boy, Nuru, and thus, when some players were less guarded in their high emotional connections to their characters than others, arguments between characters began to breach the line into arguing as players. This ultimately led to a post-session discussion where

we outlined some very real group dynamic issues, but also discussed amongst ourselves the importance of separating the self and the character while still being able to be immersed. These ideas may seem to be opposite, but it is just as an actor who can be immersed in their role but still go home afterwards without the emotions of their character strongly affecting their reality. Just the same as some actors infamously blur this line too far, some heated TRPG sessions may end with character arguments graduating into player arguments. Thus, it is always important to remember that, while it may be an important game of storytelling, it is ultimately still a game. The same as the fiction novel is ultimately just a storybook and the film is still ultimately just a movie. We can let them affect us with emotions in ways that are healthy and enduring without allowing them to rule us to such a degree as to negatively affect our reality.

Fine also recognizes this important distancing between character and self, despite the importance of role-play immersion:

> Providing contrast to identification is the ability of the participant to distance himself from his role in order to indicate that a failure of his character is not to be taken as his failure (Goffman 1961:112), and that the outcome of events affecting his character doesn't really affect the pleasure that he can derive from the game. That this role distance is often absent suggests the considerable engrossment inherent in gaming. Yet, as identification is part of the rhetoric and behavior of players, so is role distance. As one player recognized: 'To be a good player-character you have to be mellow' (field notes). (222)

While Fine goes on to explain the primary focus on the party's wellbeing over the character's, this part is less poignant today. In the early wargaming-related days of the TRPG, this was the

case. But, as narrative became the primary pole, this attitude is based more on individual

character personality than anything else (based on if the character is selfless or selfish).

However, party prioritization is still kicking around today, as even selfish player-characters will

attempt to ensure party coherence via defending a party member from death. But, the other idea

of deriving pleasure from a game even when things have gone poorly for your character is

crucial. Even when rolls are endlessly unlucky or your character's desires are foiled, we have to

be able to step back and appreciate the situation for the narrative that it is rather than become

upset by it. We see this well in my Sheruta example, as we eschewed negative feelings and

decided the campaign's tragic end, filled with all but one character's death, was still a fun and

interesting experience to look back on. This all thanks to the fact that experienced role-players

"can distance themselves more easily from acts by their characters. [For example,] since they are

not playing themselves but enacting a persona, a cold-blooded murder is not defined as a cruel

act that they have committed" (Fine 224).

On the other side of the coin, negative occurrences within reality can disturb storyworld

immersion. While more regarding this issue will come in the next chapter, it is useful to note

quickly here how distractions in real life can make role immersion more difficult. Phone calls,

loud surroundings, other players not being immersed, and many other distractions can easily

prevent storyworld immersion. Even outside of distracting surroundings, it may seem strange to

discuss immersion into a fabula when we have also discussed the constant oscillation between

the fabulae. When play is constantly moving between the table fabula and the storyworld, how

can we maintain immersion in the storyworld? This issue is remedied by numerous pieces. For

one, immersion does not exist for the storyworld fabula alone. This answer will be explored

further later, but it is important to realize that the table fabula has its own immersion as well, seen in our examples of an emotionally intense search through the rules, or the more general example of getting excited by dice rolls. Again, the table fabula is a key part of the TRPG story. The suspense built by dice is a fundamental part of table fabula immersion as it relates to the storyworld, as, while the dice rolls themselves are only a part of table fabula excitement, the results of the dice rolls affect the storyworld. Thereby, our actions outside the storyworld are generally done to affect the storyworld. This would still be a removal from character, but as role-play is already done in the table fabula through players acting to suggest their character's movements and words in the storyworld imagination, it is an easier adjustment between fabulae than would be expected. We get used to the projection of our table fabula vision into our storyworld imagination as it is the way all imagination works, like the aforementioned forgetting that the book is there and only imagining the world written in it.

This maintaining of immersion is also strangely helped by the pauses in storyworld time that happen so frequently. While pausing constantly *can* upset immersion, pausing is an occasional must in the TRPG. Thereby, we must ask how we maintain immersion when we must frequently pause to address the table fabula. Well, the pause in part helps us be able to easily return to being immersed as, if we never paused, then we would suddenly begin narrating the storyworld with table fabula terminology. For example, when a magic fireball is cast and we must pause to state this and roll damage, we do not then apply numbers back into our storyworld imagination. Instead, the GM (usually, although players will fill this role occasionally as well) will narrate the effects of the damage dice rolled, describing how the fireball appears through the characters' eyes and the effects the damage has wrought, be it a slain enemy or a burning wall.

Thus, the description that follows all game mechanic pieces helps us slide easily back into immersion as the table fabula elements are re-described in a storyworld-friendly way. This is also a further clarification of the above described use of second-person to ease from table fabula into storyworld role-play.

Interestingly, we sometimes suspend immersion on purpose to ensure a TRPG campaign can occur. While this can be avoided by amazing planning, it is rare for planning to always be perfect for reasons already touched on; thus, sometimes players must give reason for their characters to stay together. While characters can separate in a TRPG story, most of the campaign in your average TRPG includes the PC "party" being together most of the time. In most games the party never separates for significant time. However, if the characters in the party have differing ideals, it can become difficult to explain why they are still working together. Often this concern can be waved away by the often universal need for working together to ensure the end goal is reached, as battle is easier with more PCs. It can also be avoided by having different characters desire the end goal's completion for their own differing reasons. Perhaps one wants to slay the evil vampire because it would protect the innocent, while another simply wants to collect the monetary bounty that comes with the villain's death. In the rare moments when these techniques cannot be easily used, a player may have to interfere with the actions their character would most likely take in order to create a reason for their PC to stay with the party. This functions as a form of suspension of disbelief, as everyone accepts a borderline out-of-character reasoning. Thereby, this becomes a sort of "suspension of character" as the player must insert odd reasoning to simply ensure the campaign can move forward. However, as already shown in the few common ways of avoiding this, this is a rare issue. Even when this does occur, it is often

quickly glossed over as the suspension of character may only last momentarily as everyone will simply accept the reasoning for the betterment of the campaign and progress.

To help us conclude, Peterson directly tells us, "role-playing is never something performed alone: it is an interaction between more than one person" (373). And at its most intense form is immersion, which Peterson defines as "the state in which a player experiences the game in a vivid, impactful manner comparable to real events" (375). When everyone is immersed and invested in the TRPG, the stories and memories crafted are not only important, but are equally shared by all. Those memories belong to all involved, as Mike Mearls's above-quoted preface suggests. Role-play can both act as a powerful tool for narrative, but also a powerful tool for the people themselves to live a different life. Cover tells us, "Co-creator of *D&D*, Gary Gygax is quoted as saying that the appeal of role-playing is that average people, who may not have power in their own lives, 'become super powerful and affect everything'" (123). Immersion both creates an intense narrative full of memorable moments, and a place of escapism for those who wish to be immersed in a whole new world and life for a while.

- Chapter 4 -

Unique Issues for the TRPG & How Many Are Actually Benefits

The following transcribed clip comes from the live-streamed show, *Critical Role*. This clip, having been uploaded to *YouTube* by a fan, has garnered over 290,000 views. I highly suggest watching it to fully appreciate the moment—and to avoid a transcription that covers about two minutes of video.

"Caleb's Counterspell | Critical Role Highlight | Campaign 2, Episode 43"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrHrbDmN3cM

> [Playing D&D 5e]
>
> MATTHEW "MATT" MERCER (GM): ...Avantika's up [denoting a powerful enemy, Avantika, about to start her turn in combat initiative. The scene features the characters on a boat within a dock where they have just blazed walls of magical fire across the deck to block the opponents from reaching them.]
>
> PLAYERS, as a whole, make noises of fear and worry.
>
> MARISHA RAY (Player of Beauregard "Beau" Lionett): Ohhh, I could've done Patient Defense, I should've done it.
>
> TRAVIS WILLINGHAM (Player of Fjord): She can't see, she can't see in here, I think.
>
> MATT: She cannot see, but what she can do... is Control Water.
>
> SAM RIEGEL (Player of Nott the Brave) lets out an "Ohh" while everyone waits nervously.
>
> MATT: So, seeing these flames happen she [he then acts out Avantika guarding her face and making a pained sound] pulls back, closes her eyes for a second and raises her scarred hand [all the while using his own hand for visual reference] where the sphere that she unlocked Uk'otoa with, raised up. At that point you watch as the water from the ocean begins to [vocalize a pillar of water growing as motions with his arms] rise-
>
> LIAM O'BRIEN (Player of Caleb Widogast): [Cutting off the spell's narration] Counterspell.
>
> EVERYONE turns to him at the table as Matt stares with surprise. The rest of the group's eyes widen with excitement.
>
> TRAVIS: O-Oh, Got 'em!
>
> MATT: Alright, it's a fourth level spell, so I need you to roll.

LIAM: I know, and it's at disadvantage. [Rolls dice while the other players get more excited, until, looking at the dice, Liam gasps loudly, prompting other nearby players to jump up to lean over and look for themselves.]

MARISHA: [Rapidly] What'd you get? What'd you get? What'd you get?

LIAM: I rolled a 14 and a 19, she fails![Pointing triumphantly, hand visibly shaking from either emphasis or thrill]

MATT: She does.

EVERYONE throws their hands in the air as a collection of thrilled "Ohs" and "Yeses" sound off, alongside much laughing.

TRAVIS: [Pointing to Liam's forehead] Look at the veins! [Liam looks around with an immense grin, breathing dramatically hard.]

SAM: That was two weeks of tension being released.

TRAVIS: Orgasms all under the table right now. [Laughter, noted above, still having not died down, is added to by Taliesin Jaffe uttering a relieved "Oh my goodness."]

MATT: Holy shit! So you watch as the ocean begins to swell upwards; Avantika raises her arm.

MARISHA: [Laughing] I'm shaking!

MATT: But you said the walls were- the walls are opaque. Can you see through the walls? [Meaning the Walls of Fire may block the ability to cast the Counterspell in the first place due to lack of sight-lines.]

LIAM: Can I hear her go [makes magical chanting sounds]?

MATT: Um, make a perception check?

LAURA BAILEY (Player of Jester Lavorre): [while everyone groans, concerned once more] Oh goodness...

SAM: This is a fair point. [Which Matt repeats.]

LIAM: [Rolls the dice] Two natural- oh, natural 20 and a 16 plus... uhh... [Scrolling through a tablet to find his bonuses to add to the roll, while Marisha jokes by mimicking his shaking finger trying to do so while nerves ride high.] Oh perception, perception, perception, uh, the lowest roll [as he still has disadvantage] was a 19.

LAURA: [Jokingly] I like how you don't know where your perception is right now.

MATT: [Using his phone to check spell rules] Yeah, it doesn't require to- to- to have seen the person, you know the spell is happening, you know the direction of the person, you rolled a high enough perception. I'll allow it. [Travis immediately high-fives Liam, while the rest of the players yell with excitement and relief once more.] I'll allow it, I'll allow it. So, as you hear her chanting beneath her breath, and you hear the wave rising, you glance over in the direction and you, having an instinctual affinity with flames and fire, can just barely see the darkened shape of her on the opposite side of the flames, being warped by the light. Using that moment you [mimes the spell being cast] put your hand forward and release the destructive

pattern of your Counterspell, and with that the swelling ocean [vocalizes and mimes the water collapsing] splatters back down to the surface.

TRAVIS: [While Liam holds out his hand to show his shaking fingers] Oh my god. Now you can die happy. [followed by everyone laughing, as Matt moves forward with the end of the enemy's, Avantika's, turn, and progresses onwards with the battle.]

(*Critical Role*, Campaign 2, Episode 43, "In Hot Water")

This moment wondrously illustrates many pieces to be discussed below, as well as the high levels of suspense and catharsis to be found in the TRPG. While the TRPG's unique form brings many strengths, especially in the emotional realms, it still carries a swathe of issues to be addressed. These "issues" being weaknesses or limitations of the TRPG form, as all forms, especially those consisting of unique qualities, are bound to have limitations. Readers may, at this point, have doubts about the form due to the inability to perfectly pre-plan the narrative, or the inherent randomness introduced by the use of dice rolls. Some may also have doubts about the ability to consistently tell a narrative that is collaborative around a game. Perhaps you question this ideal of "immersion" as was discussed last chapter, questioning where the GM fits into the concept, or how one can stay immersed in the first place when the form goes between fabulae so frequently. Well, as this chapter's title suggests, many of these drawbacks or weaknesses are, upon further investigation, positives in disguise. Or, at the very least, many of these weaknesses prove avoidable, thus making them not a concern. So, it is in this chapter we shall see some of the form's limitations, while also proving many should not be labelled as "limitations" at all.

The Inability to Perfectly Pre-plan

Adding to the above transcribed moment, a while later in the game, Matthew Mercer comments, "that's two hours of online research about Control Water and Wall of Fire and interactions completely moot. That is awesome." This short insight into his preparation as the GM highlights for us the earlier mentioned impossibility of being fully prepared as a GM. Much of this comes from the afore-discussed idea of the players' supreme freedom, as we see Liam surprise Matt with his Counterspell. As TRPGs are collaborative, and players have immense freedom in their characters' actions, Jennifer Grouling Cover explains, "the DM [or GM] often has to adapt the narrative to follow what the players decide" (49). This can be gotten ahead of, as the GM can try to predict where the narrative may be going and can thus prepare a wide net of possible directions, but ultimately there will be moments that are unpredictable. The above Counterspell shows us how GM Matthew Mercer spent hours preparing for something he foresaw would matter, only for the player to shock him with something he had not expected. This can happen on much larger scales as well; for example, the reason the battle above is happening on a boat covered in magical fire is because at the end of the previous session, Liam's character, Caleb, had cast it, to the surprise of everyone.

Thus, we know that the TRPG is unpredictable to all involved, meaning even the GM, the one who prepares the most (and often is the one setting up surprises for the players to discover), can be surprised themselves. It might be assumed that, due to the lack of ability to pre-plan where the story is going, the story would be weaker. After all, without careful planning many of the greatest novels would be lacking their careful nuance or intricate plots. But, instead we see that the TRPG story is made immensely more exciting, as *everyone* can experience surprise. A

writer may surprise their readers, but they themselves cannot have that same kind of visceral shock that the GM and players can have, thanks to both the live-play and collaborative natures of the form. This is why, when Mercer jokingly mentions his hours of wasted research into an interaction that was cancelled out, his immediate follow up is, "That is awesome." The surprise and thrill of the moment made for a better storytelling and playing experience than if things had gone how he had imagined they would in his pre-planning. The surprise that comes with the living fluidity of TRPG play *is* "awesome," for all involved.

Part of the supposed weakness in this inability to pre-plan the narrative is due to the live-play format. Bal explains of the novel, "the events are arranged in a sequence that can differ from the chronological sequence" (7). But this is not the case for the TRPG. The TRPG must be told sequentially, for the most part. Some chronology can be broken within the TRPG via flashbacks. However, these often clash with the live-play format of the TRPG and thereby are generally avoided in favor of simply always moving forward in time. If something happens within a played flashback that would have affected how the present has already been played, there is no going back to rewrite. This does mean that some narratives become extremely difficult for the TRPG. Narratives that follow a heavily non-sequential format, jumping back and forth through the narrative timeline, are nearly impossible to act out in the live-play form. Thus, while the live-play aspect of the TRPG has many benefits regarding suspense, malleability, and unpredictability, as well as much more mentioned elsewhere, it has, bundled in with this, the very real limitation of forcing the TRPG narrative to be chronological. As most stories are chronological anyway, this rarely becomes a blistering issue. Nonetheless, this chronological necessity is still a drawback, making it largely impossible to have some types of story formats

(or even just some types of stories; time travel can become very awkward to handle in the TRPG, and thus it is often just avoided (see pages 143-144 for a rare break from this general rule)).

Furthermore, the combination of live-play and collaboration with players who have freedom leads to the long-aforementioned issue of being incapable of perfectly pairing setting and action. The GM may try to align the two, but ultimately, when a dialogue occurs, or even when many fights occur, is up to the players. Thereby, the capability for space to be "thematized," as Bal describes, becomes much harder to achieve (127). Many times a GM can ensure where the enemy NPC is, and thus the party will almost certainly have to meet them there, in the pre-prepared setting, if they wish to fight them. But, while this allows for the clever set up of a fitting setting, the players may still decide not to go after the enemy there. They may wait out the enemy to avoid a fight that could be on the enemy's terms. They may enter this place to battle but do something, like using some spell, that ends up changing how the setting appears. The list could go on forever, and so while it is important to realize that a fitting setting can often be reached by having it be the most *likely* choice for the characters to travel to, it will always be possible that it is avoided or changed. However, I would argue that the immense freedom that is, for many, the main draw of the TRPG, far outweighs the loss of sometimes lacking a themeable environment.

Further, if nothing can be pre-planned to the fullest due to unpredictability, then one might worry that the end of the narrative may not be as high in quality as other forms, as it cannot be fully pre-planned and built towards. While it is true that an ending may not be able to be reached with every little narrative touch that the GM may have planned for it intact, it is nevertheless likely to be far more fulfilling for the group as a whole, GM included, as the players

will be taking part in the end's forging and thus the GM will have surprises to experience, rather than knowing how everything will play out. Although, foreshadowing is still a common TRPG tool to build up the ending while simultaneously giving players hints to muse over regarding what is loosely planned ahead. Nonetheless, the uncertainty of what comes next in TRPGs makes finales all the more exciting. It is as though everyone involved in writing a film could somehow experience the midnight release showing themselves as their first time for viewing and learning of the end. The GM likely knows a web of possible finale directions, but ultimate knowledge of the ending is impossible. This can be seen in other sections, where I have discussed the endings of my own games, involving players surprising me with in-fighting characters, or having to stitch together rolls and rules to not end up banished from the final battle.

Even if a story ends poorly for an *individual* character along the way, Cover explains why this is not much an issue, either:

> The group structure, along with the DM, usually prevents unsatisfactory endings from happening. It may be that one particular character meets an unfortunate and untimely end, that their story does not continue, but the story does not end there for the player. If the session is part of a larger campaign, the player will usually draw up another character and continue.... A good DM will not only compensate for situations like this but he or she will let players add to the world and story that surrounds them... (30)

So, even if a player's character dies, the story does not end for them: they simply introduce a new character to the party. Additionally, while Cover discusses unsatisfactory endings on the small and inter-campaign scale, it is generally true that unsatisfactory endings are uncommon in grand finales as well.

My *Champions 6e* game, the one set in "Sheruta," concluded in character tragedy. In-fighting and unlucky rolls ended the campaign's final moments with the player characters' slow deaths, as an immense power was unleashed and began to nullify their physical life force, making them all slowly disappear into nothing. This led to four of the five player-characters dying, and the end of the campaign. Some may think this would be an unsatisfactory ending, the idea of losing to an enemy rather than conquering, but we all agreed, after the game, that it was a narratively amazing moment. I do not deny that extreme bad luck or poor pre-planning can create an ending that feels anti-climatic or generally unsatisfactory. But with a decently experienced GM an unfair ending is unlikely, and more importantly, with the power of improvisational narration, even a sad or sudden ending for the characters can be made meaningful.

The ending of my *Champions* game was tragic, but like many tragedies, it was still beautiful. One character who had great ambitions to overthrow their boss in a sect of the Yakuza, and to restore his ideal of honor to it, was instead reduced to nothing after he finally gave up. We saw him fall to his knees as others ran, finally breaking under all the stress, laughing maniacally and shouting, to ears that were not there to hear, about how he tried and tried, but could do nothing. Of course, as players we knew this fate was avoidable, but with incredible role-play from the player we saw the desperate man (the character) beneath his facade as he mentally broke after seeing his actions were not enough to make what he wanted. Another character, whose actions were the last straw to causing this malevolent power to be unleashed, spent his final moments trying to stop it, or at least slow it enough that his allies could escape. We saw him sacrifice himself, in a move that likely saved the one who survived.

These characters met an end that may seem, on the surface, unsatisfactory, as goals were left unmet, stories untold, and our "heroes" did not "win." But as players, we talked afterwards and all agreed that, while of course they would have loved to survive and reach a "happy" ending, the ending they got was narratively fitting, and many even said they were happy and had no regrets as to it not ending in a more jovial way for the characters. Random chance may have made this ending come about, but it was brought to random chance by player action, not just GM planning. And then, when random chance did help to bring about the eventual tragedy of the ending, everyone simply utilized their improvisational skills of narrative and created wonderful scenes of character loss.

While issues of the kinds mentioned above can be mended by either great effort and luck or amazing descriptive improvisation, these are fixes that may be difficult for those not as skilled as some of the great GMs. Thus, it is important to note these struggles for the TRPG, as all forms have their challenges. However, some issues, such as this discussed inability to pre-plan, end up bringing benefits instead. The moment of Liam's Counterspell would not be nearly as memorable if the GM, Matt, had not been surprised by it as well. A key part of the collaborative nature of the TRPG is that both players and GM enjoy all the facets of the game, including being shocked and experiencing emotional rollercoasters right there with the players. Cover gives an example surrounding an orc encounter by saying, the GM "had planned what would happen if we defeated the orcs through battle and what would happen if the orcs were allowed to pass, but the actual pathways in the adventure were left up to the party" (31). So, while the GM's role often consists of preparing so they can more easily improvise, or have better narrative opportunities available,

it is the ultimate choice of what the players do that can create the greatest and most memorable moments via their ability to surprise even the GM.

The perfect game is one in which all are working collaboratively to create a story partly through improvisation; thus it is important that the GM cannot prepare or foresee everything. Gary Alan Fine admits that "although the referee [GM] is supposed to be in charge of the game, in fact he can only create a meaningful fantasy world with the support of the players" (80). This conclusion follows nicely, in regards to planning, from an interview Fine recorded:

> The question is how much of a good scenario can you plan in advance, and how much has to happen along the way. And it seems to me that it would be very difficult to plan. . . . A game is made out of a long-term theme or quest, and it's possible to plan that in advance, but the real nitty gritty of the game, the building blocks of the game are the adventures along the way, and it seems to me it would be impossible to plan real adventures and then make them seem to the group that they really were interesting and alive. I think the secret is just for a referee, is make the game have as many possibilities as possible and be as free as possible, and just move it along, and fill it with what the player wants and what comes naturally. [Personal interview] (80) [sic]

Thus, the GM should plan what they can, but always be receptive to what the players begin to do, what surprise turns they lead the story towards. While planning is important to having a realistic setting and nuanced plot hooks or NPCs prepared, good improvisation is also crucial, as the players will always surprise you with their use of their own freedom and narrative power.

Inherent Randomness of Dice

An apparent deviation from the TRPG's ideal of freedom comes in the rolling of dice. One would expect the introduction of random chance to contradict the form's interest in unprecedented freedoms, or would disrupt the narrative. However, Cover accurately states:

Interestingly, while there is more freedom in the TRPG to come up with possible choices, there is sometimes less freedom when it actually comes to deciding which path is followed.... Players often suggest an action that they would like their characters to take, but that action will then need to be confirmed by rolling the dice. Dice rolls are made in either/or decisions where an action either succeeds or fails. The player may be able to propose any action, but the factor of chance contributes to whether or not the player is allowed to progress down that chosen path. (31)

This is a natural conclusion, as a player's character is not meant to be unstoppable nor a master of all trades. They are, as real mortals are, fallible. You may state as a player that you wish to strike the enemy with a sword, but ultimately a combination of luck, from a dice roll, and your related bonuses, representing your character's skill level, will decide if that desire becomes a reality in the storyworld.

It is important to note that these either/or rolls are not always as black and white as Cover suggests. They depend on the system being used. While most every system has the black and white of a roll either failing or succeeding, some are more nuanced. Many systems also have "critical success" and "critical failure" at the extremes, often meaning success or failure no matter what the bonuses may be, as well as an additional positive or negative effect on top of what usually comes. These are normally brought about by rolling the extremities on the dice

(such as 1 or 20 on a d20, or 20-sided dice), thereby representing an immense stroke of luck, or

unluck, occurring. Then, some systems have degrees of success, creating a spectrum instead of a

dichotomy. Some systems even have a middle ground in partial successes, where the activity

may succeed but something negative accompanies it to make the results of the action more

50-50, or to create the grey area between the black and white. However, this does ultimately still

mean that *chance* is playing a heavy role in the completion of action, even with nuanced systems.

A player can arrange their stats and abilities in such a way so as to help them be better at certain

actions than others (a natural part of Classes and an important narrative feature to relate to how,

in reality, we all have varying skill sets where we are better than others in a certain field of

"action," often due to training), but even a high-level swordsman can miss due to a bad roll, a

stroke of misfortune.

While a high-level swordsman may miss, the idea of chance applying to all skills all the

time may seem odd. High skill bonuses often lead to chance not playing into all rolls. For

example, if you are skilled enough at an action you may always succeed in completing that

action to reflect your skills. This is reflected in the bonus you add to your roll being so high that

there is no chance of failure (except perhaps on a "critical failure," as described above,

depending on the system). This may be like the master carpenter always being able to create a

simple chair without failure (if they are given ample time and resources). To address this, there

are some systems that implement rules for completing actions, which may usually require rolls,

without rolling a dice. One of the main oddities with rolling is if you encounter a situation where

you must roll to do something, but you have no time limit for the task. Thereby, you may need to

climb an eight feet high wall, and you may fail on your first roll, but as a fall of that height likely

did not seriously injure you and you have no time limit, there is no reason against trying again. This can lead to awkward moments where a PC keeps trying over and over, failing roll after roll until they succeed. Often GMs will not allow this endless rolling, suggesting that the character would believe they simply are not skilled enough and should find another solution, as otherwise the chance factor no longer matters. With infinite rolls you will eventually succeed, like the famous concept of monkeys with infinite time and a typewriter eventually writing *Hamlet*. So, some systems create a way around this, a prime example being *Pathfinder*'s rules for "taking 10" or "taking 20."

When a PC is not in danger or pressed for time in *Pathfinder*, they can choose to "take 10," meaning they act as though they had rolled a 10 on their 20-sided dice check. This average roll of your skill represents your ability to complete tasks of a mundane level to you with ease when not being distracted. This "taking 10" choice, however, prevents the character from simply completing a task that would be hard for them, as it has the qualifier of needing peace to be used and it only grants an average result. "Taking 20" is similar, with the added necessity of having plenty of time to complete the task. Also, it requires that there be no disruptive penalties for failure. When this option is taken, it assumes that your character tries the task over and over again, failing many times, before eventually rolling a 20 on the dice, just as though you had sat there as a player repeating the attempt yourself with rolls. However, as it is assumed that the dice is rolled many times to obtain a 20, any penalties that would occur on a failure, including on a critical failure for rolling a 1, will also be applied to the character. This is why rolls with significant penalties are usually not allowed with this option, because if the rolls are simulated via "taking 20" then we do not know if a serious detriment occurred before you could reach the

simulated 20 roll. Thus, if this detriment could prevent the theoretically coming 20 roll, via preventing more attempts, then the success of taking 20 would not have occurred. On tasks with detriments of this sort, the character must risk themselves with every real attempted roll rather than skipping the rolling phase. For example, the disarming of a trap cannot be done by "taking 20" as a critical failure may mean setting the trap off, meaning the player needs to roll for themselves over and over to see how the task resolves.

The immediate assumption is often that the use of dice restricts freedom in some ways. We see from the Cover quote above that rolling does not affect freedom of choice. Rather, it is a cut back on individual power to a more realistic level for their character. The GM too must roll when playing NPCs, as all characters need to be held to the same, established, realistic set of rules and chance-rolls to assist the shared imagination. If any player could declare an action and simply have it occur, then the game could easily become chaos, with players obtaining exactly what they want, and what every player wants may not be exactly the same. Thus, diminishing the power of characters via incorporating chance helps bring everyone to meet in the middle. If actions only needed to be declared to occur, then every player would have the power of the lone novelist, the collaborative aspect would be lessened, and every moment would be a triumph. We need rolls to facilitate chance, and thereby to create the stakes of loss, and the chance a character may fail where the player hopes they succeed. If everything said becomes reality in the storyworld, there is no challenge or narrative progression for the characters. The vast majority of narratives need growth, fallible characters, and a sense of possible failure in order to be meaningful and satisfying. The addition of chance through dice rolling helps bring that to the TRPG.

So, we see that some examples of rolling, which may give pause to an outsider's logical approach, can be taken care of by nuanced systems which implement rules like "taking 10" and "taking 20." We also see the more logistical use of the die roll in helping restrict character power, as well as, as we will discuss further next chapter, to help us gauge a character's growth. The frequency of rolling in the TRPG also adds excitement and uncertainty, adding even more unpredictability beyond the players' freedoms. Dice rolling enriches the TRPG experience with heightened emotion on the table fabula level, as well as assists with the creation of a more realistic world for the group of players to inhabit.

If rolls did not temper character power, then lessened too would be the thrill of playing a TRPG, as the gaming aspect would be completely removed. The above clip of *Critical Role* would be far less exciting without dice. Rolling is what causes the players to shake with suspense and leap up with excitement. It touches us almost like gambling, but gambling with the weight of narrative investment behind it. It is a kind of gambling that allows partial control via bonuses and some control over when it occurs, as rolls are either due to character-started actions, or they are asked for by the GM when the character ends up in a situation prompting it. A roll may be prompted because a player states that their character is going to do something, or it may be prompted by the environment, as the GM asks for the roll to be done. We see this in our *Critical Role* example, as Liam's Counterspell must be accompanied by a roll due to the fact the spell he is trying to stop is of significant power. Therefore, he must roll to represent his character's own force overcoming the targeted spell's power in order to stop it. Being a Wizard, he has many bonuses to facilitate this, but chance still factors in, allowing for the thrill that we see to unfold. He even must later roll due to the environment, determining if his character can see or hear

through the magical flames. This is prompted by the GM, but many rolls are still prompted by

player action or request rather than the GM's own interest.

Where these rolls come from, and how they are put before the rolling player, is a

significant part in how they shape the emotions surrounding the gameplay. In the *Critical Role*

example, the other players are on edge watching Liam roll because they know what the roll is

for. They understand the stakes that surround this roll of the dice, and so they are filled with

suspense. However, this suspense can be stretched even further. We see this a little in this

example, although the roll is quite high, so the players assume a success. But, even when a roll is

made where the stakes are known, players may still not know what level of success they need in

order to achieve the desired effect. In the first roll for the Counterspell, Liam is familiar with the

number he needs to reach to succeed, and thus excitedly declares his success. With a more

mysterious roll, the player may know what they are rolling, and for what effect, but they may not

know if their number was high enough (or in some systems low enough). This creates another

microcosm of excitement, as the players must wait in suspense for the GM to tell whether the

presented roll is a success or not. We see this in the *Critical Role* example via the perception test,

as the players do not know how high Liam must roll to successfully hear/see the enemy.

However, this is a small example due to his roll being quite good, leading the players to assume

success before the suspense can reach its height (for that particular roll).

A secondary kind of roll, counter to this, are rolls in which the player does not know the

result. A character may hit an enemy and inflict damage in hopes of killing them, but the health

total of the enemy is secret to the player. This creates another level of suspense, between the

damage roll and the result in the storyworld. *Critical Role*'s GM, Matthew Mercer, has made

famous the phrase "how do you want to do this," as a statement that an important enemy has died, and the player may now narrate how they have slain them. Countless moments of this show are filled with suspense while the GM, Matt, calculates the enemy's remaining health total to see if they are yet dead, and when they are, saying this phrase, leading to an uproar of celebration as the suspense is released in jubilation. This is similar to the aforementioned idea of not knowing how much a roll must be in order to reach the desired goal. Since this rolling situation carries more unknowns—both the unknown of what number will be rolled on the dice, and then a further mystery as players wait to hear the effects of the number rolled on the storyworld—it carries more excitement than our previous, more known, roll.

Another example of unknown rolls comes in the ever-frightening idea of being prompted to roll when seemingly nothing has happened. It has become a joke that when a party of characters is in a seemingly normal location, but are then asked for a sudden perception roll, or a sudden saving throw of some kind, that the players look around in concern. These rolls classically represent moments where players, and their characters, are surprised by something, or may not be noticing something of importance. These are when a character triggers a trap that they now must suddenly roll to avoid falling into, or when the characters *may* notice something strange, but if the rolls fail the GM will simply say nothing. These rolls bring great fear and suspense as they live completely in the unknown. However, they create their own issues with immersion.

Should a player be asked to suddenly roll something like a perception check, and then they fail and are thus told nothing else, they are likely to meta-game slightly in having their characters be more guarded than they otherwise would be, as within the storyworld the character

has experienced nothing. Meta-gaming represents the use of out-of-character knowledge, or player knowledge, to unjustifiably affect the actions of the storyworld character. Thus, this breach in character vs player knowledge represents a breach between the fabulae, and a break in immersion. If a player knows a roll request happened, but they were told nothing because their roll was not high enough, they may be tempted to meta-game by having their character be unjustifiably alert, despite the storyworld character having no reason to be (after all, they just *failed* to notice anything peculiar). This can break immersion, as characters act oddly due to a player's breaking of the wall between fabulae knowledges.

However, these situations can be cleverly avoided in systems utilizing the idea of "passive" skill checks. For example, a character's passive perception will represent how perceptive they are when not alarmed that they should be looking at anything. The rolling then represents when they are *actively* looking around, while the passive, as the name suggests, represents when they are just *passively* existing but may still be naturally observant enough to notice something. These passive scores can help prevent some meta-game knowledge. Nevertheless, there does still seem to exist a natural break between the rolling of dice and immersion.

The use of passive checks may be one strategy for avoiding meta-gaming, but it is not the only one related to surprise rolls. Instead, a GM could playfully trick their players with fake rolls or leading statements. For example, Fine mentions that "by giving the players information, even if it has no significance to the game at that point, the referee can direct the players. A referee who suddenly remarks, 'You hear nothing in the forest,' leads his players to think about what is in the forest they might *not* hear and thus to prepare for it" (117). Fine gives this particular

example in the context of leading the players purposefully to something. He gives other examples of this, like allowing something to easily succeed, or planting rumors for them to hear, leading towards a quest destination, but we want this example here for another reason. We desire it as an anti-meta-gaming tool. If a GM often says there is nothing to be heard in the forest, even after a good perception roll (because in that moment there was nothing), then when a player rolls poorly in the future and the GM asserts they hear nothing, then they will have less reason to be suspicious. If a GM occasionally has a player roll suddenly, but the result is that nothing happens because the roll was unmotivated, the result is both a lack of future meta-gaming on surprise rolls, and a reorienting of the players' attention, as they must snap-to and roll with some concern.

A less disruptive form of this trick is simply rolling dice, as the GM, and pretending to take notes for no reason. As Fine puts it, "The continual rolling of the dice prevents the players from discovering when the important events will occur. One gamer comments:

Always keep your dice rolls secret and roll the dice often, even if not needed, to keep the players guessing what you're rolling for (and to prevent them from knowing when you are rolling for wandering monsters, traps, and secret doors). [Crane 1978:7]" (118)

This idea achieves the same goal of keeping players on their toes, as they will likely stop to pay attention when they hear dice rolled by the GM, but this does so without having to directly interrupt gameplay with a misleading surprise roll request. Thus, it can be a correctional device against lack of immersion as a player's concern that something is happening, even when nothing is, will force them to stay immersed. Even when they become accustomed to fake dice rolls meaning nothing, this will simply mean they could be caught off-guard when a real dice roll

occurs, thus achieving the same purpose of requiring players to be consistently immersed in the table fabula in order to know for sure.

However, this fake asking, or fake rolling, could also lead to misguided meta-gaming. Although this is a concern to a lesser degree, as a character being unnaturally alert because a player fell for a fake roll request will have no obvious negatives and will be comical once the player realizes they started acting cautious for no reason. Thus, it works as a decent learning tool, albeit one fairly heavy handed and debatably manipulative. Another option, with today's availability of digital rolling, is the option to roll without any player knowing you have. This lacks the corrective measure of forcing re-immersion (but that need for "forcing re-immersion" is rare with experienced players), and a purely secret roll can completely avoid meta-gaming. With applications like Roll20 offering online play where the GM can roll secretly so no one else can witness the dice, the avoidance of meta-gaming becomes easy. Moreover, if the GM wants to roll publicly to be dramatic and let the players in on the suspense more often, then they can roll publicly and risk the meta-gaming opportunities. Mixing both options leads to a happy middleground where rolls that lack heavy meta-gaming possibilities can be made public for suspense and the rest can be made privately without a trace.

In all these options we see another way to avoid a supposed weakness. We worry that meta-gaming may harm immersion and storyworld realism, but there are numerous options to trick, or teach, your places out of meta-gaming, or ways to simply avoid the issue altogether. Thus, this deficiency or issue with the dice rolling system can be avoided (or utilized for minor comic effect).

In the *Critical Role* example we see minimal role-playing. This largely comes from the scene being combat, meaning the wargaming pole of the TRPG has become the primary side for the scene. But we still see some role-play. After the moments I transcribed, we see Avantika curse and begin yelling orders to others before her turn passes. However, the question arises a second time: if we so highly value immersion into the character role, and shared imagination, how can we have play be constantly broken up by game mechanics?

While immersion in character for role-play is incredible, it is not the only immersion we see. As has been discussed much earlier, the TRPG oscillates between the fabula of the *storyworld* and the fabula of the group of players sitting about the table, the *table fabula*. When we use the term "immersion," we usually apply this to role-play. However, immersion also exists in the game elements. In other words, there is immersion in *both* fabulae. If we exemplify immersion as meaning investment wholly in a story, then the existence of immersion in our wargaming elements as well is obvious in the *Critical Role* example. After all, I have claimed multiple times before that the table fabula, too, is part of the TRPG story. Players are heavily "immersed" in their concern for the outcome of this combat. Even the moments of looking up rules are made suspenseful with how much the players care about the level of import riding on them. Cover explains, "in some ways the greatest temporal immersion and the greatest suspense does not come from the story surrounding the TRPG, but from the gameplay itself.... The most suspenseful situations in *D&D* involve dice rolls" (110). The player's suspense watching or awaiting the dice roll that will determine the outcome for their character, within the storyworld, is in itself a level of immersion that brings many of the most memorable moments in the TRPG. As well as is where, like most good games, we can most easily lose track of time, losing

ourselves in the emotional highs and lows of both the storyworld's narrative and the table

fabula's enrapturing gameplay.

Rather than game mechanics and dice being a detractor from immersion, they instead are

another layer of immersion, a layer that we flow back and forth between, in the same way we

flow between fabulae. This flow may be more apparent and less fluid, but for experienced or

invested players, the emotions their characters are feeling are likely matching their own as they

worry over their characters' safety, making this back and forth natural to them. Combine this

with POV and other aids to slipping between the different fabula immersions, as discussed in an

earlier section, and the ease of flow becomes more apparent. There may be moments where the

player's emotions due to game mechanics are so high that they need some seconds to recover

before re-assuming the role of their character. But, this is a small price to pay, considering that

this heightened emotion is an incredible sign of players' being invested in the game and loving it.

When the players cannot stop laughing in relief and have shaky hands, as we see in the *Critical

Role* example, it becomes hard to claim that this heightened emotion poses considerable

detriment to role-play immersion—especially when compared to the benefit of having said high

emotional state in the first place.

Logistical Issues with Game Sessions: Meta-gaming & Immersion

With the round table style in which the TRPG is played comes further logistical issues

which bring further difficulty to immersion. It is easy to become immersed in a novel's story

when reading alone. But anyone who has attempted reading *with* someone can attest that it then

becomes much harder. The other person may get distracted, or be a slower reader, forcing you to stop and wait, losing your immersion. These issues rarely occur for novels, as people can simply read alone, but the TRPG cannot be played alone. Consequently, issues that come with relying on others to navigate a story become a strong logistical problem for the TRPG.

To begin with our example problem of two people reading from the same book, in which one is a much slower reader, there is the analogous issue of having players of different experience levels. If one player knows a system of play inside and out and has plenty of experience with role-playing a character, but another player has no experience in role-playing or how the system works, then there is a chasm between skill levels. This difference causes play to be further in-depth or quicker for the experienced player, while the inexperienced player lags behind. This may cause issues where the experienced player ends up taking the lead while the inexperienced player ends up contributing little, as they feel their own inexperience and allow it to hinder their involvement. The experienced player too may experience drawbacks, as more pauses are implemented to assist the newer player, or they become self-conscious that they may be leading the party too often (or perhaps they do not want to *have* to take up a leader role in the first place, but are placed there naturally due to their experience). However, these concerns for the experienced player prove less of a problem, as TRPG players are often *seeking* ways to bring new players into the fold, and thus will not mind the extra waiting or the necessity to take lead. They may even try to help the new player assume a leading role, or may assist in explaining rules while the GM is busy with other concerns.

Luckily, the issues for newer players rarely become serious as well. A part of the GM's role is to help facilitate play by being the middle between rules and players. While the

experienced player may know what to roll and what is best to do, the inexperienced player can simply say what they imagine to be the best course of action or what they wish to do, then the GM can guide them towards what to roll or otherwise how to do what they want using the game system's mechanics. Some GM's even suggest that newer players can bring greater creativity to a game, as experienced players may fall into the trap of doing whatever action seems best and mechanically easy (seen in an earlier section with our Mark Hulmes quote (see page 74)). Meanwhile, a new player will experiment and push limits as they figure out what they can do, experiencing the supreme freedom of the form, likely for the first time. Some who already have experience in storytelling or improvisation will likely saddle into the role faster, thanks to the related skills. Additionally, those with improvisation or acting backgrounds may more easily get into role-play. Many starting players struggle with role-play, uncertain how to narrate their character, either first or third person, and often feeling awkward about adopting a voice and acting like an imaginary character. This in part comes from the TRPG's roots in childlike playfulness. Most children role-play, and thus while the TRPG can touch a natural instinct in all of us to role-play, it carries with it a stigma of being childish. Some find difficulty in overcoming this barrier, struggling, as Picasso suggested, to stay an "artist" as they grew up. This is a bit grandiose, but it does apply. Luckily, the TRPG sits between "playing pretend" and playing a boardgame, thus generally having an easier "awkward barrier" to surmount as opposed to other related activities, such as LARP (live-action role-play).

This distance from immersed role-play, which some newer players adopt, even appears in how they speak. It is touched on in an earlier chapter, but to quickly reference phrasing again, Fine tells us "a player may say: 'I go, 'Who goes there?'" rather than simply saying 'Who goes

there?' This of course minimizes confusion as to which level the action is on—the real world or the fantasy level—but it can also be taken as an indication that the player has not become deeply implicated in his role" (213). Thus, while an experienced player will simply speak as their character most of the time, being familiar with distinguishing what fabula is being spoken within, a new player may avoid full role-play with language that both distances and clarifies.

Another issue, often caused by newer players, is *staying* immersed within the game. A newer player may treat a TRPG just like a board game, and may spend time getting up to do something else, or scrolling through their phones during play. While occasional breaks from the game are fine, they can become disruptive if constant, or more importantly, if they come in moments when that player's character is meant to be a significant character in the scene. Getting up when it is not your turn in combat is common practice, especially for necessities like a bathroom break, but doing so constantly can cause the player to break from the shared imagination. They may become confused and unaware of how the combat has been progressing. They may also break from the table fabula immersion, becoming uninvested in the suspense of rolls due to being uninvested in the moments leading up to them. This not only reduces that player's enjoyment of the game, but all the others' enjoyment as well. When one person is acting as a weak link within the collaborative form, others will be pulled from their immersion as well. Humans are naturally social, and thus when a suspenseful roll is happening but some are not immersed like others, it becomes difficult for those who are really trying to be immersed to stay immersed. Additionally, the GM and other players may begin to resent playing the game, due to their preparation and work being put in a situation where they receive a much diminished reactionary effect, and even are sometimes totally ignored, by the less involved players. When

some players care deeply for the game while others do not, those who do not force those who do out of their immersion by interrupting game flow with uncertainty or simply not paying attention and participating. This causes the players immersed, as well as the GM who likely spent hours preparing, to feel disrespected by the player who is not trying.

This disrespect should be avoided, but TRPG players are aware that sometimes breaks are needed, and in emergencies there may even need to be a break in immersion at a poor narrative time. Fine explains this approval with breaking with, "there are few aversive consequences to breaking frame. Frame switching is considered legitimate as long as it does not overly affect the continuation of the game:

> When one player takes time out to answer the telephone, the play may be stopped in mid-air, being transfixable for any period of time, but not the social affair, the gaming encounter, for this can be threatened and even destroyed if the absent player is held too long on the telephone or must return with tragic news. (Goffman 1961:36)" (197)

Thus, the breaking of immersion is alright to do, but when your character is key to the scene and you break immersion for a long time, the story will have to stop for everyone else as well. This can lead to everyone losing immersion, and the tempo of the table fabula could fall apart, thus hindering the storyworld tempo as well when the game is finally resumed. Thereby, while TRPG players will recognize the occasional need to break away from the game and are proficient at re-entering immersion, breaking constantly, or for long swathes of time (or at poor times), or generally for poor reasons, will ruin the experience for all involved.

Now, I said earlier that this often comes with new players. This may be a part of them simply finding that the TRPG is not the form for them, or it may come more innocently from not

understanding that the TRPG carries more weight than a simple board game. It is crucial to note that a newer player is *not* inherently a weaker link. A new player that is learning to be, and trying to be, invested and immersed in the storyworld and game mechanics is not one who is hindering experienced players. Even if the newer player must break up a scene to ask questions about how things work, the experienced players will have already well-honed the ability of jumping in and out of the storyworld fabula, thus making the interruption a tiny inconvenience (and any other newer player may benefit from the question being asked as well). This inconvenience is something that pales in comparison to the benefit of introducing someone new to the form. While the TRPG was once seen as something gatekeeped by some, it has grown a community that has more and more emphasis on inclusivity and growth, to the point that, with an easy to grasp system, anyone can be enjoying a TRPG with speed.

Let us also keep in mind our much earlier Mark Hulmes quote, in which he explains, "I love new players because I often find that they really come up with creative solutions to things." A new player will enter the form with fresh eyes, suggesting new solutions to problems faced rather than the tried-and-true methods which experienced players may fall back on over and over again. While every campaign is different, thus ensuring that there is alway excitement in the form, even for long-time players, one can never recognize their unprecedented freedom as a player for a second time. That is a privilege of the new player, and thus the new player can bring in an emotional enthusiasm for more basic elements of the form which may have long dulled in the experienced player. A new player can be like a new class of students for a professor. They may have read the novel they are teaching dozens of times, but when their new students bring fresh eyes to the text, they then bring new interpretations and reactions, which can reignite the

professor's interest or love of the work. Above all, new eyes and approaches help to break

routine. Like we quoted Hulmes saying earlier, new players "don't look at an attack action and go

like, 'Well, the most optimal thing for me to do is to do this, this, and this,'" they break the

tried-and-true routine, and thus bring a new excitement to the game.

Furthermore, to end any other concerns regarding new players, TRPG fans are known for

playing well with strangers. The form has related to it numerous large scale events where

players, and those just curious, gather and play. See conventions such as GenCon, Gary Con (the

convention based around D&D Co-Founder Gary Gygax), parts of PAX East & West, and many

others.

Sometimes, the issues surrounding gathering around a table to play come not from

outside distractions or failure to be immersed, but instead from scheduling. The idea of

scheduling a TRPG group's regular game is classically a nightmare. Many games end due to

schedule changes, causing the group to no longer be able to meet regularly. This makes a longer

campaign difficult, but this is simply a universal problem of any collaborative form or project. A

smaller issue comes when only one player cannot make it to the session. Sometimes, a player can

usually attend the game but an outlier situation, such as a doctor's appointment, may make it so

they miss one session. This can usually be covered by the GM stringing their character along,

sometimes acting in their place for combat, but usually the player's simply guide the story in a

way that means that that person's character is not interacted with much until their player's return.

Sometimes, a GM may arrange some kind of plot reason for that character to miss the events of

that session. This can sometimes be a benefit, as Cover gives an example from one of her own

games:

When Mary could not attend the Blaze Arrow session she decided that her character,

Maureen, would go back to town. At this point her character entered an alternate plotline

that none of the other characters had access to. Scott [the GM] talked with Mary

separately to work out the details of what happened to Maureen in town while the rest of

us were dealing with the orcs. (32)

Thanks to the ever-changing narrative that the TRPG form can have due to live-play, this GM

was capable of working in an additional side collaboration to turn what seemed at first to be a

negative, a player missing a session, into a whole new narrative opportunity, giving a

coincidental-negative a positive outcome for the storyworld. This is yet another power from the

TRPG's live-play format, which here is used to make benefit out of the (also live-play caused)

issue of a player missing the scheduled session.

Because of the struggles that come with arranging a whole group's schedules to align

regularly for significant swathes of time, it is common for TRPG groups to stick together for

long periods, playing together in campaign after campaign for years or decades. This is of course

also brought on by the group perhaps already being friends, or having become friends, or

otherwise being well acquainted through playing, and thus they would prefer playing with those

they know rather than constantly playing with new strangers. It can also suggest that these

players share similar TRPG preferences and understandings, leading to an ease of playing

together with maximum enjoyment for all. Thus, an interesting habit occurs where the same

groups will stick together for long periods of time to avoid the struggles of forging new groups

while also enjoying the benefits of playing with those who you are familiar with, learning each

others TRPG habits and tendencies and understanding very well when each-other are

role-playing rather than speaking in the table fabula. This close knowledge helps eliminate many of the more rudimentary concerns of the TRPG, as everyone likely shares opinions on how the game works or is preferably played and are used to how each other play. In this case, the long-term TRPG group is like the seasoned acting troupe, or improvisational theatre group. They have become used to how eachother play or act, and their various tendencies or cues for when they are talking in character (or are about to talk in character) or are speaking on the table fabula, not acting. Additionally, as we will cover in a later chapter, long-time TRPG groups can have a whole subculture of in-jokes stemming from their previous campaigns together.

Finally, another complication comes from the table setting, a problem that is often the source of meta-gaming: the issue of acting out dramatic irony. When everyone is sitting around a table together as players, then those players are aware of everything that is happening aloud there. However, their characters may be nowhere near the storyworld scene, thereby creating a schism between character-knowledge and player-knowledge. This means, to avoid meta-gaming, or the use of outside knowledge to help the character, they must act out the idea of dramatic irony (a concept explored in much greater depth in our next chapter). The player must pretend they know nothing when role-playing their character, creating a strange subset of dramatic irony. Most will agree that this type of irony is inferior to the true form of both the player and character sharing in their lack of knowledge (which also better assists immersion). Therefore, many groups will break the table format for such moments.

The GM may ask those not involved in a smaller scene to leave the room for a while. This is often used for secretive, one-on-one, involvement. This is seen on *Critical Role*, most often when a character alone experiences a foreboding dream sent to them by a greater power. So

as to assure that this knowledge is that player's alone, to both prevent meta-gaming and to

heighten the eventual surprise for the other players, the GM will ask everyone else to leave the

table for a while. This can be a useful tool to fix this issue, but many times, when large numbers

of the party are involved, or these situations are happening often, or the knowledge is not hugely

important, then players will simply have to use their ability to separate character-knowledge and

their own knowledge in order to maintain the storyworld's consistency. This issue is thereby

rarely seen in experienced players, and is often even an amplifier to more playful emotions. For

example, players of characters not privy to the knowledge of what is happening may laugh and

jokingly swear at players whose characters are planning something nefarious or more generally

against their character's wishes. While most would consider the lack of any meta-knowledge to

be preferable, it is a difficult goal to obtain, and so it is important to note the benefits that can

come even with this usually negatively perceived issue.

GM Immersion

With all this chapter's discussion around immersion across fabulae and the surprising of a

GM due to live-play, character freedom, and lack of full-planning abilities, it is useful to take a

direct look at how the GM enjoys the TRPG. Of course, they are witnesses, being surprised right

alongside players (although usually less often surprised than players, as GMs have the most

information available to them), and thus they enjoy the TRPG just as you enjoy any narrative, in

the learning of how it unfolds. However, in light of our discussion on immersion and how it

becomes a key part of connecting to characters and of play in general, we must ask how the GM

becomes immersed when they are playing many NPCs or none, depending on what the player-characters are doing.

For starters, as we have two key fabulae and both have immersion, it should be noted that the GM shares in the table fabula immersion with the players. The GM is excited to see the rolls and is involved in figuring out the rules and thus, as is seen in Matt Mercer's excitement in our example, the GM shares in table fabula immersion. The only differing piece here is the GM's interest in table fabula immersion comes primarily from the interest in narrative and in characters, but their interest is not always in characters of their own. A player is easily attached to their character, and therefore the game mechanics that surround them (although naturally a player can grow attached and interested in another player's character as well, if not all other player's characters, albeit usually to a lesser degree to the attachment to their own), but the GM rarely plays the same character for long periods, leading to lessened character immersion. However, the GM is invested in all the PCs, seeing all they do and having more knowledge of an individual player's character than another player would, due to the sharing of backstories with only the GM. Thus, the GM is invested in the players on a reader/viewer level, but also the GM wants to see the narrative progress and be interesting; otherwise, all their planning of it and crafting of the setting will be wasted. So, through desire for their campaign to succeed, the GM is invested in the players and what occurs. Finally, sometimes an NPC will be encountered frequently enough that the GM becomes particularly attached to them, or more often the GM, having planned and made all the NPCs, will have a few that they think are particularly compelling, and thus they hope those NPCs will fare well in occurences and will hope the players like them too. This list of reasons to be invested may seem somewhat jumbled, and at

points obvious, but this is because it is easy to see all the reasons why a GM would be invested in the storyworld fabula, as well as obviously immersed in the table fabula. Consequently, the question becomes how the GM's immersion differs from that of a player's.

Regarding the table fabula, most is the same. Players and GMs have the same access to the rules, unless the GM has homebrewed a rule to surprise their experienced players or to just more generally implement something that the players did not need the details of. The GM also has no idea how a die roll will come up ahead of time. However, the GM is the one who knows how high of a roll is needed for success or failure, and knows what that success or failure entails. Often, as mentioned before, everyone knows what the roll is for, but in the times when the player lacks knowledge of what will happen after the roll or even what the roll is in regards to, the GM knows those answers. This can lead to an enjoyment of dramatic irony for the GM, a concept to be delved into further in the future.

In the storyworld fabula, the GM's immersion differs much more. The GM immerses primarily to share in, and often establish, the shared imagination. The GM gives most of the descriptions, describing what the characters can see to the players, as the GM is the storyworld's interpreter. To do this a GM must visualize the place themselves, and therefore encounter limited immersion through this. However, this is only immersion in visualizing a place; it is not role immersion. The GM must immerse into various NPCs to portray realistic and in-depth characters across the whole campaign, attempting to be the one in charge of creating a whole living world around the characters. Thus, they simultaneously must bounce in and out of immersion in characters frequently, but because of this, they rarely get deeply immersed in any single character. While a player can remain immersed in their one character the whole time, the GM is

forced to have shallower immersions, as they must be ready to answer any player's questions, to prompt some roll to be made, or more generally be ready to start voicing another different NPC. Thus, while the GM mostly shares in table fabula immersion, gaining a lot of joy watching players/characters progress through and react to what they have outlined, they lose out on almost all character immersion in the storyworld fabula.

Fine touches on these differences astutely when he explains:

Identification does not mean the same thing to referees that it does to players... typically [NPCs] are only pale representations of selves, do not exist for long periods of time, and often are killed by player-characters. Identification sometimes occurs, but it must be guarded against because of the nature of these nonplayer characters:

There will be many times that you will develop a kind of attachment to one of your human or inhuman monsters but one cold, hard fact that every referee must face is that all your creatures will eventually die. [Krank 1979:3]

.... The referee has several choices in the game: he can identify with the player-characters in the game, the enemies of the player-characters, or attempt to balance the two; he can suppress all identification and be neutral; or he can attempt to create the most aesthetically pleasing story line possible. (224)

I believe the modern norm of the TRPG tends towards a mixing of these, aligning with both the players, as the GM, and having a fondness for your villains. I do agree with another point that Fine clarifies for us: some NPCs are lesser than others. The GM is highly unlikely to become attached to the improvised NPC who happened to be walking down the street when a player asked if they could ask somebody nearby a question. But the GM will likely be attached to their

nuanced, and more pre-planned, characters who play key or fun roles within the campaign, be them villains that are likely to be slain or allies the PCs will meet along the way. Generally, a GM desires to see their planned campaign be enjoyed to the fullest by all the players, and for it to achieve a completed and satisfactory storyline. Thus, that is where much of their enjoyment stems from.

However, as an important aside given the large number of characters a GM plays, it is crucial to realize GM's must avoid meta-gaming as well. The GM must assure their large bank of information does not influence the knowledge or decisions of the NPC they are playing, nor can they allow one NPC's knowledge to change how a separate NPC is played. Thus, the lesser level of immersion that the GM is allowed can, in some ways, help their constant need to avoid meta-gaming as they juggle a multitude of characters. Often this GM meta-gaming is less detectable as well, as players cannot know what the NPC knows or what the GM knows, and so cannot easily call the GM out for meta-gaming. Thus, this type of meta-gaming is less discussed. However, I will suggest that it does occur less, as the GM is most often reading their prepared notes and stays ready to enter or exit NPCs on a whim, creating an often cautious and alert air against meta-gaming. The GM also has the added motivator of not having a significant goal besides having a smoothly running, enjoyable game. Thus, they have a lessened desire to cheat their knowledge with meta-gaming. Players may be tempted to do anything to help their characters, but GM's primarily desire a good story, and have few characters they can really become attached to, and so have little drive to meta-game.

In a sense, the GM is the prime describer and communicator of the storyworld fabula to the players, being everything that is not their characters, and thus is immersed in the storyworld

fabula, not as a character, but as a sort of third-person limited narrator. They know all the surroundings, and all the thoughts of NPCs, but for our protagonists, while they may know more about a player's character than another player would, that does not mean they know everything that player may be thinking, as seen by the GM still getting surprised, as no one in the TRPG is fully omniscient. In a way, this combines third-person limited (although knowing far more than one character's knowledge) with a story where the narrator is a character, as the GM plays so many NPCs (although they too must avoid meta-gaming whilst role-playing NPCs), although these characters are rarely as important as the PCs and are often not there for all the adventures of the PCs.

Thus, while for players storyworld immersion and table fabula immersion are often intertwined, we see them differ more for the GM, whose role in the form/game displays more differences between the fabulae. With players, as discussed in early areas, we see how the two fabulae compliment each other, as they relate and allow for ease of oscillation. With GMs, we see a person who is usually in the table fabula, dealing with rules and reading through their prepared notes, even when the players have returned to the storyworld fabula. When PCs are interacting without the GM in the storyworld fabula, the GM may be in the table fabula, listening but checking their notations of what is to come. Of course, little says everyone must always be on the same fabula together. As mentioned, if characters try to interact with a PC whose player is distracted out of the storyworld fabula, then there is a problem. But when some PCs are interacting in the storyworld, but another player is not directly involved in that moment, they can easily listen while checking their own abilities or notes on the table fabula level. They may even, as suggested above, take an opportunity where they are not directly involved to respectfully slip

to the bathroom before returning, so as to minimize the chance they must step away while their character is directly involved. However, the GM spends more of their time in the table fabula, being prepared to field questions from players, unless they are fully in the storyworld themselves role-playing an NPC.

The Struggle for Interiority

Below is a short moment transcribed from campaign 2, episode 26: "Found and Lost," of popular *D&D 5e* livestream *Critical Role*. The following scene takes place during a nightly watch as Caleb Widogast, a Wizard played by Liam O'Brien, is the only character awake during a rest in order to keep watch:

Can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEhftLmZbNw

LIAM O'BRIEN (Player of Caleb Widogast): Okay, so, sitting in the silence, are any of these people awake- [gesturing to the other players, referring to their character]

MATTHEW "MATT" MERCER (GM): [voicing an owl's hoot]

LIAM: -as I can tell?

MATT: They all seem pretty asleep.

LIAM (now *speaking as Caleb to himself*, all the while acting with his hands, using gestures and nervous movements as he looks across towards, and often points to, the other players, making frequent pauses between sentences): Look at the lot of you. Look at these people. I should go right now... I don't know you at all... Look at this one, he is like a walking rainbow, what is this? Why are you with him? It makes no sense. He's a circus performer; he's not going to help you... This one you told everything to, to try to get into a library and you learned nothing! On your gamble, you failed. You are stupid. Smart as you are, you're stupid... with this... She could've gave them

everything. These three that have been stolen. Yeah, they're nice, two of them, one's weird. One of them tried to kill you, the other one she's adorable but what are you... it's stupid... This one here. What do you- what do you expect to do with-with her? How is she going to help you do what you want to do? Is she gonna watch your back-

MATT: [voices the sound of Caleb's magical animal companion on his shoulder, a light hoo-ing like murmur]

LIAM: [turning to look at his shoulder, where the imagined animal companion is perched] Yeah, I know, you are- don't worry about- you're fine... She's as much a liability as anything else. Oh, you know you are fucking mad when you're gesticulating this much. [Liam then lowers his hands below the table as some of the other players giggle at the joke, then *Caleb* sighs]. You should just go. You have told too much. Told too much, you-. I'm going to go... It's time to go... [Now changing back to speaking as himself, Liam, rather than the character Caleb] He'd sit there for a solid five minutes... two hours. Wait for everyone to wake up...

While the above moment may be hard to grasp fully without the context leading up to it, this is a gleaming example of a rare way to organically give interiority in a TRPG. There are several other ways as well, but it is a difficult task. This soliloquy still moves me when I hear it, and thus it weighs on my memory as an immensely impactful way to deliver something so rare in a TRPG game: a character's inner thoughts. Like in film, or drama, interiority is hard to express without the written page. Here, Liam takes a page from the drama in utilizing the soliloquy to give a wonderful examination of his character as he chastises himself, telling himself he should leave, only to stay, and say nothing of it in the morning; he simply moves on with the party, having evidently either decided to stay, or been too afraid to act on his leaving instinct. This strategy of soliloquy is extremely rare in a TRPG, and I can only remember this example, but it

is a powerful one. The particular form may be more of use here thanks to their being on a live-streamed show with a large audience, making the insight into his character's troubled mind all the more useful, but it is still a way of expressing interiority nonetheless, and I see no reason beyond nerves for it not occuring in an average game. Still, I would certainly avoid doing it too often, as it is generally better to have interiority come out through action and role-play with other characters, so it is both informing more of the narrative and is collaborative. If the soliloquy was used too often, I could see it growing old fast, annoying other players who wish to speak as well. Plus, the other sleeping characters in the example must act as though they as players have not heard the soliloquy, so it also creates a meta-gaming opportunity.

This preference for expression through role-play includes the most obvious example of lending interiority: Doing so with dialogue in the same way a novel does. Of course, this dialogue interiority would differ in it being a real manifested conversation via role-play, making it an improvisational acting moment. It is this difference that makes converting interiority through subtle dialogue so difficult. Making interiority obvious through dialogue is easy in role-play; one can act panicked or angry and the task is complete. But for more subtle emotions, and more hidden ideas, the role-play would have to be cleverly crafted, a difficult feat when everything is done in live-time and improvisationally. A player may be able to make some plans before a session of something they wish to say or do to hint at interiority, but they cannot guarantee the situation will come as they want. Thus the issue behind the inability to carefully craft subtle themes into the setting due to uncertainty of where the players are going, as we saw in an earlier chapter, becomes the central idea against subtle dialogue. An experienced player may be able to pull off some great subtle dialogue, but it will be much harder to do so than if one

was writing dialogue in a novel, as the player will have to come up with this dialogue on the spot, with no ability to back track or stop completely to think. Even in a moment that was clearly partially planned, such as the above soliloquy, the moment is obviously largely improvisational, stumbling through half-joking descriptions of the other characters. Through this, it is easy to see how difficult it is to give more subtle interiority through live dialogue with another character.

If not soliloquy, or the obvious dialogue, then what? How does one express interiority in the TRPG? Well, as mentioned above, the most beneficial and accepted way is to slowly make it clear through exterior actions; a sort of slow exposure through hints, although perhaps a character breaking down and making their interiority obvious could spawn great roleplay as well. This kind of "show don't tell" interiority is often true of third-person novels, and most films, as well. Recalling a much earlier point regarding the TRPG being sometimes reminiscent of third-person limited narratives, in terms of player or GM knowledge, and this similarity makes sense. Particular when this thought is combined with our many analogies to theatre or film for the performative aspects of TRPG role-play.

But, outside of these options of soliloquy or dialogue, outside of acting, there also exists the flat-out explanation. While, generally speaking, roleplay as a way of expressing character is preferred, it is common practice, albeit to differing levels of acceptance, to simply state what your character is thinking or feeling. A player might be struggling with what to do or say and have a moment of simply stating, "[my character] doesn't know," or something like "[my character] feels pretty betrayed so they're going to sit over in the corner." The combination of character action with the statement can often make it more accepted, but it still feels as a moment of telling rather than showing. If the character feels distant, then simply acting so should inform

the group enough, assuming they are attentive and immersed as you are. This is a sort of miniature narration, and while a full-blown explanation of character emotions in a narrative style is frowned upon for lacking, or denying, role-play, these short explanations tend to be accepted by most groups, so long as they are not what the player always uses rather than role-playing. Further, these direct-tellings of character emotions coming from players usually originate from those who are newer to the game and thereby are simply uncomfortable, or otherwise less experienced, with role-play, and thus avoid it by being direct as the player rather than character. Of course, moments of direct telling occur in other forms as well, even little moments in novels and the like. But it is still usually preferred across forms to let the reader/viewer see things for themselves through showing or general subtlety.

Often, players will talk casually about how their characters are feeling after the session is finished. This can also be frowned upon as something to be saved for next session's roleplay, but most are relaxed enough to allow it, and most players are not going to casually state something that could make a great roleplay moment later, as they want to see those character interactions as well. Yet, overall, interiority is difficult to display in mediums that are live and consist of, at least partially, improvisational acting. But there are some subtle, and less subtle, ways of conveying interiority, and thus, ways for better exploring your character and roleplay as a whole. The difficulty of executing these more subtle ways of interiority can create great moments and skills, like applauding an actor's subtle touches to convey emotion. And even if this subtle form of interiority proves too difficult, there are always more on-the-nose options available which still do a fine job of conveying inner-thoughts, like our introductory soliloquy example.

With all discussed here in this chapter, it becomes clear that the TRPG favors heightened emotion over formal precision. For the losses of the easier intricacies that come with a form that is made in motion with numerous people, the TRPG gains suspense and surprise for everyone involved and a group role-play experience that heightens our bonds to characters, even if sharing those characters' interiority can sometimes be difficult.

Ideas like immersion are practically antithetical to high-art formalism, as we abandon the carefully crafted for colloquialized role-play and attached emotions. This, in many ways, brings the TRPG more towards Romanticism. But oddly, while being a form that lacks focus on easy narrative intricacy, the TRPG comes with a complex set of gaming rules that introduces chance and randomness even further into the form. This leads us down a more Modernist path of thinking, where we do not have all the control. The randomness of rolling can feel like Dadaism, and we embrace a form with collaborative live-play writing which touches the tenets of stream of thought or spontaneous writing in many ways. Oddly, the TRPG form combines a game full of rules to an ethos that prefers breaking the rules to develop your own way and build the narrative you and your fellow players want to make. This game, that became tied to counter culture in its early years, stands as a sort of counter culture in art, using random chances, no way to go back to edit, and no way to meticulously plan, to make a form that instead benefits from emotionally realistic characters. Characters who then become extreme emotional poles to make you attached to the story. In this, the TRPG embraces many of its supposed limitations as beneficial characteristics to stand apart from the crowd as a unique narrative form.

- Chapter 5 -

Literary Devices and Tropes Made Better or More Common in the TRPG

Having now peered at the flaws of the TRPG style, albeit many of them proving to be valuable or avoidable "flaws," now it is time to consider some benefits of the form. Primarily, we turn towards some ways in which common literary devices are made more frequent, different, or simply better by the TRPG form. This being a topic after which, and often within which, we will discuss the TRPG's common tropes and tools as well.

Dramatic Irony in the TRPG

While the concern of meta-gaming has been explored in previous chapters, it brings yet another dimension with it to the literary analysis of a TRPG session. From the perspective of immersion, meta-gaming is an ever present issue to be avoided, and easily so with practice in one's own immersion and ability to flip between the different narrative fabulas. However, when meta-gaming is non-disruptive to the narrative, when it functions only as part of our thrill, hilarity, or tension in the table fabula, then it is a benefit in giving us dramatic irony. As defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, in its origin as a noun used to refer to literature, theatre and film, dramatic irony is "the situation in which the audience of a play knows something that the characters do not know." However, dramatic irony will be encountered in many different forms in the TRPG due to the multiple fabulae and more complex dynamic between audience, GM, player, and character. This leads to a need to discuss them one by one. And, as we will find, it

leads to the more frequent use of rare forms of dramatic irony, further establishing the unique benefits provided by the TRPG's distinctive form.

Our first, more traditional, form of dramatic irony is very similar to the style found in staged drama: the dramatic irony between the observer and the actor. This form of irony can be seen constantly when a TRPG group consists of some veterans and some new players, as the new players may make choices that stem from their not knowing the system being played, while the veteran can view this and appreciate it, as they know the system well. If a new player makes a choice based on being unaware of a common side effect of, say, the spell they chose, then the veteran participants will enjoy dramatic irony at their expense. The new player may cast a fireball, being unfamiliar with the side-effect that it catches loose objects ablaze. Thus, as they are relaying their desire to cast it, the more experienced players might interrupt to tell them of this side-effect, or they may sit back and enjoy the chaos they know will soon follow. It is likely the new player could be upset from not knowing what was coming, not being warned by experienced players, but if this is left to occur in a less crucial moment, then the player is likely to enjoy the comedy at their own expense after being surprised by the result. I often suggest that people try playing different systems, not only because of the differing applicability of systems to different settings, or the general use of learning more or experiencing new things (they may find a system they prefer, or otherwise enjoy), but also to be unaware again. When you do not know exactly how a certain spell or mechanic interacts with another, you will have a great sense of tension in that uncertainty, and any who know, most often the GM or a veteran player, will enjoy the dramatic irony as the audience to your suspense.

It is commonplace in moments of uncertainty that a player may try to ask what the outcome of an action will be, only to be met with a common TRPG phrase: "You don't know." Or perhaps, in another phrasing, the common: "You can certainly try." While this may initially seem cruel, or unfair to the less experienced person playing, this is a tactic to prevent meta-gaming (making this like an early teaching method, as this uncertainty disproportionately affects newer players). A character would be unlikely to know more about the interaction in question than the player, thus it makes sense not to inform the player, thereby keeping their knowledge level closer to their character's. In the case a character would likely know the information while the player does not, a quick roll or applicable check or short explanation is common, although sometimes still avoided in the name of having suspense. However, this can feel like the player is being punished for being unlike the character and can be a point of contention, leading to this refusal of information in favor of suspense to usually be utilized only for trivial matters.

This disconnect between character and player knowledge, from the side of the character, is particularly interesting. Gary Alan Fine nicely touches on the struggle of having a character with differing abilities to our own:

When one's character's traits are notably higher than one's own, it is in the interest of the player to use these traits, even if he is unable to play the character because of his own "inferiority." This is particularly evident with regards to intelligence and wisdom, since a character can be only as wise and as educated as his player—one can pretend to have high social standing or speak as if one were extremely strong, dexterous, or handsome,

but since intelligence and wisdom are known primarily through their verbal

representation, the character is limited by the insight of his player (Axler 1980). (209)

Hence the need for skill rolls to both help the player and the character. If the player has an idea

and wants to see if the character would have the same prerequisite knowledge to execute it, they

may decide to roll to see. If the player lacks knowledge the character likely would have, they can

roll a check to see or simply ask the GM and be told what they would know. Sometimes a GM

will immediately tell players what they would know, as the character may make a mental

connection that the player could not, but this is often avoided, as it can suggest that the

information, having been given unprompted, is necessary, leading to an over-focus on its import

in the storyworld and thereby some meta-gaming. This general idea of mental characteristics

being difficult to align between fabulas leads to many players preferring characters with mental

or verbal skills similar to theirs, while other players enjoy acting dumber or more tongue-tied

than they really are, while some enjoy being able to roll for information they do not know

themselves. Our differing attributes in life vs in the storyworld can lead to both fun and

frustrating moments of play.

But returning to the general idea of uncertainty, this is a dramatic irony dynamic that

occurs even to experienced players. As discussed before, choices within the TRPG are infinitely

variable: a player cannot know how all interactions will play out when acted on. Or, perhaps

more common, the player cannot know all that the GM does. A player cannot know all the

repercussions of kicking down a door, as they know not what is on the other side, creating

tension for them and dramatic irony for the knowing GM to enjoy. Will there be prepared

enemies on the other side of the door? A trap to trigger? Or simply an empty room with nothing

to worry about (a result that makes the dramatic irony all the funnier for the GM if the players spent time carefully preparing to enter the room)? These mysteries are for the GM to know and the players to find out, should they choose. Or, for us here, they are for the GM to know, and the players to experience suspense over.

Most dramatic irony occurs solely for the GM, who knows more of the storyworld than the players. A common feeling among GMs is the need to show a poker face when players are soon to do something that will cause unforeseen consequences. Like the audience seeing Romeo drink the poison, the GM may know the player-characters are near to something, or have made a decision without knowing what is soon to come because of it, or any other possible form of dramatic irony, but the GM, like a theatre audience member, cannot go shouting out to warn them. This would be a complete breach of fabulae separation and destroy the risk involved in doing anything as a PC. It would also remove choice from the players, as the GM would intervene whenever a poor choice was made. Thus the GM is often the one-person audience to the dramatic irony, and must attempt a stony exterior to prevent careful-eyed players from realizing their plan is about to go unexpectedly. The "poker face" is a necessity for GMs. Luckily, after all is said and done and the dramatic irony's source has been revealed, the rest of the players can retroactively appreciate the situation. Yet, in the moment, they will enjoy the other side: The side of being just as unaware of the future or truth of a situation as their characters are, a feeling that is, ultimately, extremely realistic.

However, a further, and extremely rare, form of dramatic irony occurs often in the TRPG, and it is this form, more then any other, that stems from our meta-gaming concerns. A TRPG session can hardly be had without encountering a meta-gaming opportunity, and thus a session of

a TRPG will always include dramatic irony. Whenever the player at the table is aware of anything their character would not be, dramatic irony occurs. The effect of the dramatic irony may vary greatly, but it is endlessly occurring throughout a TRPG session. When player A hears another player, player B, and the GM act out a scene in which player A's character is not nearby in the storyworld, player A acts as the audience. Player A is like the off-set actor waiting to return later in the scene—waiting to return to the storyworld via inhabiting their character once they are in a scene again. When the actor of Romeo drinks the poison, he knows that this action is foolish: he is just playing the part of the character who does not know what is really happening. This actor then experiences an extremely rare sense of dramatic irony, as they fulfill both ends: the unaware character and the actor who knows just as much as an experienced audience member. The actor performs the unaware character while being themselves aware. In theatre, this then creates a multipart system of dramatic irony between the character's knowledge, the actor's knowledge, and both the experienced audience member's knowledge and the first-time viewer's knowledge. Similar to how the TRPG player is themselves within the table fabula but act as their character within the storyworld fabula, once the actor steps offstage, they fluidly change fabulae to their real self again, and can begin watching from the sidelines while they await their next part. Like a TRPG player that must separate player and character knowledge, the actor has read the script and can watch many scenes unfold without his character, but once they re-enter the stage they must be their unaware character.

In a TRPG session, perhaps two characters secretly plan a prank on a third character. Now, all sitting at the same table in the real world, player three hears the planning of player one and two, but must act as though they do not know anything when playing their character. This

means player three is aware but must pretend not to be, and must not let their awareness affect

their character, also referred to as our frequently mentioned concern of not meta-gaming. It is

this internal need to not meta-game, in order to uphold our storyworld continuity, that creates an

entirely *internal* dramatic irony. Of course, other players of the TRPG are aware of what is

happening, and thus act wholly as audience to the character alongside player three, but it is only

player three that must embody both sides of the dramatic irony, at once, in this example.

It may seem that internal dramatic irony would be in natural opposition to immersion. It

has already been discussed how meta-gaming is a consistent issue to be monitored lest

immersion be ended. It is, naturally, harder to be immersed when knowledge differences between

character and player are higher, but it is in no way impossible, especially as these differences are

likely to only occur substantially in experienced players. These players, by their experience,

already have a firm grasp on separating themselves from their characters, all the while inhabiting

their characters in immersive role-play. They keep their own thoughts separate during role-play

so that, while they can appreciate the dramatic irony, they can still assume the mind of their

character and act as them without interference.

To turn to another's work to further explain our many types of dramatic irony, Mieke Bal

lays out four possibilities for reader vs character knowledge regarding when a question is asked.

Bal's first example is when "neither the reader nor the character can answer it" (149). For Bal,

this is exemplified by the detective novel, and for the TRPG it is similar. At the start of any

mysterious quest, the character and player will both lack knowledge. They may have to find a

missing amulet, but at the start, neither player or character will know where to find it. However,

all these examples from Bal are made more complex with a GM. Like the author in a detective

novel, the GM will know before the players or characters know, i.e., the GM knows where the amulet is hidden. There may be moments when all share the same level of ignorance, but the GM will likely devise an answer in preparation long before the players reach it.

For the next category, Bal writes, "it is also possible that the reader does know the answer but that the character does not. The tension, in this case, is different. The question is not what the answer will be but whether the character will discover it for itself in time" (149). This is also the root of dramatic irony, as we have been describing, but a four-levelled system of knowledge, including viewer (as in those not involved at all in the scene, be they another player or a literal viewer who is watching the game), player, character, and GM, adds nuance again. This second situation is applicable to the GM in the amulet example. They know the answer, but are in a state of suspense over whether the characters will find it themselves before, say, another NPC group does, or the reward for the amulet's recovery expires. This dramatic irony type, as Bal describes it, is rarer for players to feel towards their characters, but it is possible. It is less that the player may worry if the character learns something in time, as they are the guiding force towards that learning in most situations (although they can have similar suspense if the learning is reliant on dice in some way), and more that the player may worry about a threat they know is approaching via meta-game knowledge but which is unavailable to the character. A quick example of this can be the previous chapter's described situation of the GM asking the player for a perception roll, only for them to fail and be left with little information why that roll was necessary. This leads to dramatic irony between players and characters, as characters must act clueless as the roll dictates, while players will grow nervous that a roll happened at all, assuming a cause behind it. This is tension which Bal describes as follows: "There is something standing behind it with an axe. Will

it turn around in time?" (149). In our case: will a perception check be good enough to notice the possible danger in time?

A third Balic situation is applicable, but oddly so, to the TRPG. "Conversely, it can also be the case that the reader does not know the answer and the characters do" (Bal 149). This situation is nearly impossible between player and character, as the player embodies the character. The only example comes in the aforementioned occasional need for the player to be told something their character would likely know. For example, a character has lived in the storyworld all their life, and so may know more of its history than the player. Or the character may be studied in something different than the player, and thus the GM will need to explain the character's knowledge to the player in order to help the player better embody the character. All of this is easily seen in various systems' knowledge or lore-related skill checks. This tangential version of what Bal describes lacks the suspense illustrated by her examples. However, the GM does make this example apply on rare occasions.

For example, a player may have a plan that they have kept from the GM, as the GM does not *need* to know it, until the player springs it into action, surprising the GM. Sometimes this practice can be frowned upon as preventing the GM from properly preparing a session, and even for promoting a player vs GM mentality, but it is generally accepted as a fun side-aspect to the game to be used on occasion, often to grand effect. Some players may even want to catch their GM off-guard as a sort of flipping of the table, as it is usually the GM's role to spring surprises on players. An example of this can be seen in a previous chapter's example, where player Liam O'Brien surprises GM Matt Mercer with a counterspell his Wizard character was ready to cast.

This dynamic between GM and player fulfills Bal's third example, albeit in a fashion more akin to shock rather than the slow picking away at the mystery by the reader over the detective novel.

The final instance for Bal is when "reader and character are both informed of the answer, there is no suspense" (149). This is true in the TRPG as well; when all know, there is little suspense to be had. Although, while all may know, in a situation where the game calls for the use of dice, there can still be suspense. The GM, viewers, players, and characters—all may know that there is an enemy behind the door, but when a roll is required to determine how stealthily a character slips into the room, suspense will still be alive. While many kinds of literature attempt to heighten themselves by meticulous craftsmanship, foregoing life-like chance for high-form, the live-play format of the TRPG, with its uncertainty through dice, allows for even this example from Bal to be suspenseful and exciting. While dice rolls themselves cannot be dramatic irony, unless it is the case of the GM knowing the number required for success but players not (or characters being completely unaware of table fabula rolling), they do introduce great suspense to even this Balic example of knowledge, showing a unique and great advantage of the TRPG form.

Having just completed Bal's grid of character/reader knowledge, it becomes interesting to explore a similar grid of experienced/inexperienced players, as party dynamics apply to meta-gaming and dramatic irony. With a group of all experienced players, the risk of meta-gaming is decreased, but the amount of meta-knowledge is increased. Experienced players know more about how the game works, and thus encounter less suspense and are on the unknowing side of dramatic irony less often (as mentioned above in another example). The trade-off for their knowledge in a system is their ability to play more smoothly and with more advanced uses of game mechanics. A generally experienced player will also meta-game less

often, as they are used to preventing the issue, on top of making the game flow faster by decreasing the pauses needed for rule discussion. Thus, a situation of two choices appears. While experienced players will always be better at avoiding meta-gaming, one must choose between experienced players playing a system they are unfamiliar with so they can be subject to dramatic irony in their uncertainty in the rules, or experienced players in a system they are familiar with, which will cause the game to run smoothly with fewer or shorter pauses. Of course, experienced players are still subject to many forms of dramatic irony no matter what. However, their knowledge of game rules can prevent some irony from that source, as well as their more general knowledge of TRPG tropes helping them from falling for more obvious GM story beats. As a final note, this lack of dramatic irony surrounding rules can be reintroduced to experienced players via simply homebrewing a few rules of the system the players' already know (the GM creating their own rules to add to the chosen system, or changing the system's existing rules to some extent), thus creating original moments where the players may be uncertain of the rules despite knowing the overall system.

When a campaign consists entirely of inexperienced players, the pauses for rules and the examples of meta-gaming will both increase, as the players are not yet used to how the form and system works. However, instances of dramatic irony of all types will greatly increase, as uncertainty surrounding rules, common TRPG tropes, and more will often appear in the players. The GM themselves, if they too are new, may be surprised when a rule is looked up, discovering what it actually does. Thus, dramatic irony from a lack of system rule knowledge can affect everyone more often. While this leads to stunted play, filled with pauses, the fun of dramatic irony (as well as more generally the joy of a new experience) can often balance the issue.

Next, there are games which contain a mixture of experienced and inexperienced players. Interestingly a game could also include experienced players but an inexperienced GM, but this is rarer as a GM's responsibilities are much greater, and thus they will usually have to be more familiar with the rules than the players. That said, there can be times where a player knows more of the rules in some regions, leading to them correcting the GM, or otherwise using some ability or combination of skills to obtain a result the GM did not realize was possible, creating a microcosm of dramatic irony in which players are aware but the GM is not. However, returning to player focus in this example, by having both experienced and inexperienced players, a campaign can have the best of both worlds. The inexperienced players will still need pauses for rules to be explained, but with more experienced players there will be fewer pauses and those who are experienced can more easily help explain things to the newer players. Then, while a new player may also be less guarded against meta-gaming, their being surrounded by players who are showing a more experienced distinction between character and self could assist in their role-play (as the experienced players act as role-models). Even if they do meta-game, there are more experienced players there to point it out, so it is avoided more swiftly in the future. Finally, while having all experienced players can stop rule-based dramatic irony, as mentioned above, having some inexperienced players means this rule-based dramatic irony will still crop up occasionally. All this combined leads to a middle ground of swift teaching for inexperienced players and occasional enjoyment of dramatic irony for the experienced ones. This quick learning can be immensely helpful, as even generally experienced players learning a new system from experienced players of said system can ask the fellow players for explanation when the GM might be busy preparing something that is soon to occur.

Across examinations of experienced vs inexperienced, GMs vs players, players vs characters, and with the uninvolved audience complicating things as well, the TRPG is filled to the brim with unique instances of dramatic irony. By having a more complex form via the roles of character, player, and GM being separated on top of the always existent and overlapping role of audience, the TRPG stands out as being far more complex in the realm of dramatic ironies. This leads to dramatic ironies that are rarely, or never, seen in some other forms being on display constantly in the TRPG, further cementing the form's fascinating uniqueness.

Some Literary Devices Made Necessary in the TRPG

While dramatic irony is so frequent and bizarre in the TRPG that it requires its own section, there are many other literary devices or tropes which are inherent in the TRPG but may not be dense or strange enough to warrant an entire header. Among these, which we will discuss below, are some ideas we have already touched on elsewhere, such as a focus on character, the present tense, and descriptions. But there is also new ground to cover, reating to those very ideas as well as to concepts like character growth in the TRPG, which is made uniquely literal.

A good example to start with is individualism. Jon Peterson tells us, "*Dungeons & Dragons* characters are so radically individual that it would be unthinkable to represent them in groups," as they do with units in wargaming (370). This is, of course, true of all TRPGs, and thus would suggest that a theme of individualism would be natural to the TRPG form. While this has its merits, the TRPG is also founded on the party, or group of player-characters acting together as a sort of squad to achieve their shared goals. This often creates a natural theme of found family,

or general close-knit unity. Of course, "found family" and individualism are not mutually

exclusive themes, but their mixing in the TRPG can bring interesting dynamics. Some campaigns

may have characters who are more agreeable, while others have characters often at each other's

throats, but all of them will have characters that are growing, in some way, together. Thus,

another innate part of every TRPG game is character growth.

The system of a TRPG generally forces growth upon us as characters level up. Jennifer

Grouling Cover succinctly explains, "players continually get to outfit their characters. As

characters progress in the game, they gain levels and abilities" (114). This is a part of nearly

every TRPG system, be it called ranks, levels, or just plain experience points that are spent on

abilities without the need for a laddered system of levelling. The idea of characters constantly

increasing in ability is innate to the TRPG. Thus, character growth is practically forced upon the

TRPG, lest a campaign be so short as to not require a "level-up," such as in a one-shot, or an

extremely short campaign finished in one sitting. However, most TRPG players love this

element, and desire to see their characters grow, not just within the system's mechanics, but

emotionally as well, as they bond with other player-characters and experience more in the world.

The growth of a character is a key interest in role-play. The idea of a coming-of-age-story, or

bildung, sometimes in terms of literal years, other times in an emotional sense, is very common

in TRPG stories, as the system naturally suggests it.

However, it is interesting to note one small oddity that can occur in the "levelling up" of

most TRPG systems. While discussing breaks in logic across the fabulae, Cover nicely gives an

example of this oddity:

When a character goes up a level, he or she gains additional abilities. Yet, these abilities are usually not a direct consequence of anything in the narrative world. A rogue may suddenly be able to pick locks better even when he or she has been adventuring in the forest far from any chance to practice lock picking technique. This increase of skill makes logical sense within the logic of the game world rather than the narrative world and thus is accepted by most players. (99)

So, this growth is sometimes odd due to the game system being unimpacted by the narrative it is being applied to. However, some players do not so simply accept this and move on. Most do, out of ease and sometimes necessity, as Cover suggests, but sometimes a narrative explanation may arise. For example, perhaps Cover's rogue has been travelling in the forest with a small lock kit, practicing during the group's downtime despite never actually needing the skill while there. Another, more radical correction of this, beyond simple narrative excuses, comes from a solution one of my GMs has been tinkering with. In a *Pathfinder* world of his, he has been trying out the homebrewed rules change of giving characters most of their level-up abilities when they reach a standard milestone, but not all. The abilities which reflect a specialized skill or training, such as many feats in the *Pathfinder* system, will be stockpiled but not applied. These will then be "unlocked" by the characters going to a master or trainer of some kind where they can be taught this skill, thus removing the oddity of very sudden skill learning without reason. However, this particular solution is more extreme and generally makes the campaign more difficult by delaying power increases.

No matter which way you utilize the "levelling-up" idea, it drives forward character growth. This constant character growth, being literalized mechanically by level or experience

point increases, also acts as a forward tug for narrative interest. A printed narrative often must devise ways to ensure a narrative tug forward to keep the reader's interest in reading, to keep them turning the page. A same kind of narrative interest can act in the TRPG to keep the players intrigued in unraveling the next steps of the stroyworld's tale. However, the mechanical interest in levelling-up, the (war)gaming pole interest in achieving the next step of power, and thus being granted fun new abilities, spells, or simply being able to boast or find gratification in your increased bonuses to rolls, all act as another, more physically presentable, tug to keep playing. Often, especially in the earlier, more dungeon-centric, days of the TRPG, this was the primary interest driving players to continue playing. Meeting week after week in order to level-up and thus have a more impressive character. While now, a more typical narrative tug is likely the focus, the mechanical interest in levelling-up is still a TRPG advantage, lending another plane on which to keep the players' desire to continue.

In general the idea of character is crucial to the TRPG, although much on character has already been said in earlier chapters. A TRPG story cannot be solely about a place, or idea, as some experimental novels may be. A TRPG also struggles to switch between characters, as the players want to be immersed in the characters they created and want to see them grow, they do not want to be endlessly switching between characters. While a novel may be able to pass from one family or group to another between chapters while still giving the overarching tale, a TRPG very rarely leaves the core party of characters, as it is through their eyes that the players experience the world. Like all rarities, however, some exist, as experimentation with form will always occur. I myself have played in a game where we departed from our characters for a couple sessions in order to embody other characters on the other side of the nation to fight as

generals in a war that would partially affect our main characters when news of it reached them. For us, this functioned as an entertaining break to try doing mass-army combat rather than our usual individual-person based combat, but it also informed the storyworld setting and proved to be a fun experiment regarding how TRPG stories can function.

Another element already much-discussed here is the necessity of description to create the shared image within the collaborative imagination. It is interesting to touch on again here, as while some novels may almost wholly avoid description, the TRPG cannot. In fact, dungeon maps, as described earlier, or general maps and visual aids made common in TRPGs, make the afore-discussed ideas of description and space much easier in the TRPG. Because space must be quantified for rules, and the description must be clear for the shared imagination, both of these literary pieces become all the more powerful in the TRPG. Should you need a setting described in an understandable manner, ask a TRPG GM before most other artists.

Finally, reaching far back to discussions of time, the TRPG must be played in the present-tense. Thereby, through constant use, the TRPG veteran becomes an expert in present-tense tales. There are rare systems that try to embrace a more fluid timeline, such as *Dusk City Outlaws*, a newer, simple, TRPG system designed around heist missions. In *Dusk City Outlaws*, players have tokens representing planning they have done before the heist begins. As play goes, and the heist unfolds, the player may run into an "unforeseen" issue. For example, a guard walks the path they are on, and they are about to be spotted. Then, the players can, should they choose, spend one of these tokens to claim that the problem that is about to come to fruition does not do so. The players then retroactively explain what they "did" the days before to stop the guard from causing them an issue. They can claim they bribed the guard, or threatened him, so

that when, in the present, he walks by, he ignores them. This retroactive scene can even be played out, making for a rare example of narrative time dilation in the TRPG form, but a key component of *Dusk City Outlaws*. It is unlikely that this is a sustainable way to play for telling longer stories, hence why *Dusk City Outlaws* is a system designed for short campaigns, often of a single session. It is, nonetheless, an interesting break from the mould of the TRPG system being almost always in the present due to its live-play nature.

Here we have given some snippets of concepts innate to, or required within, the TRPG. However, for clarification, we break now to a new section on similar ideas, ones that are enhanced or common but not necessary in the same way as the above. Nonetheless, just like this section's ideas on time, description, individualism, and character growth, the below ideas discussed will further expand on literary concepts and the ways in which they are made unique in the TRPG form. As well as ways that show how these concepts are expanded upon or made better within the TRPG's unique approaches to them.

Some Literary Devices Made Stronger or More Common in the TRPG

Along with the difficulty of leaving the present tense comes a strange relationship with the literary device of foreshadowing. Foreshadowing is common in TRPG campaigns as a way to give hints to the future of the campaign in a *loose* way. This looseness allows for it to be possible at all, as we have already discussed the unpredictable nature of the TRPG. Additionally, this foreshadowing gives the players something to puzzle over, trying to figure out what is happening behind the scenes that only the GM knows. This puzzling helps immerse the players in the story,

making the eventual ending of the campaign, assuming it reaches where the GM loosely expected, feel like it occurred naturally rather than being out of nowhere. Thus, while the future of the TRPG campaign is always uncertain, the expected architecture it may move through, according to the GM's predictions, can allow for foreshadowing as a way to involve players in the plot. Perhaps the foreshadowing is even going past characters, to players directly, as players want to puzzle out what the GM's plot is before it is upon their characters.

Foreshadowing is such a common practice in the TRPG that it is generally seen as crucial, as an ending that feels "out of the blue" is more likely to be unsatisfactory compared to an ending that explains all the hints that had been occurring regarding background activities (or things occuring in the game world outside of the perception or knowledge of the player-characters). While it is not, strictly speaking, a necessity, its commonality highlights its importance for a better campaign.

A GM could even keep the foreshadowing for their world events vague enough that if the players disrupt them, they could be cleverly re-used for another event. While this, if done poorly, can be seen as sort of cheating the story, it may prove a useful tool to appear as though you have prepared some grand foreshadowing when really it is still partially undecided. Opposite to this, foreshadowing can be more easily executed if it is more certain that the thing occurring cannot be prevented by the players, but rather avoided if they cleverly catch on to the foreshadowing. For example, a volcano erupting is likely unstoppable, but if the players realize through the clues shown to them that this is about to happen, they may be able to evacuate.

Another piece that is practically crucial for a long TRPG campaign is lore. "Lore" is a built up history within, and regarding, the setting itself for players to explore and learn about. It

roots everything into a setting that feels real; that feels lived in. Outside of the TRPG, lore exists

for many different settings, and they each gather their own sizeable fanbases: the *Star Wars* or

Star Trek universes, *The Elder Scrolls* or *Fallout* worlds, or, perhaps most famously and most

directly connected to the history of the TRPG, Tolkien's Middle-earth. Many of these settings

have been reappropriated for playing with the TRPG, usually due to their having rich lore to

utilize, as well as their having many established fans. Lore is a natural component of the TRPG,

as not only does the form tend towards having expansive storyworlds where players, who have

free choice, can explore wherever they wish, but also because the game mechanics require it.

You may need to know how far apart cities are, or where a mass grave may be, for the casting of

a teleport spell or to hunt down where a necromancer may be working. These things come from

the world's lore.

Outside of maps, creatures have to be mostly consistent in lore to solidify the shared

imaginations of everyone who plays in that world. Peterson explains, "as the distinctions

between fantastic creatures grew more precise, and their characteristics became more definite,

they gained a certain amount of realism: *Dungeons & Dragons* needed to render fantastic

creatures realistically enough to be simulated.... A monster needed to be carefully ranked against

its peers and visualized thoroughly enough" (157). While early *D&D* had miniatures and art in

mind, the solid facts of a well-made and concrete lore for a world can be an invaluable way to

root your game in a setting that all can research as thoroughly as they wish and all can

imaginatively share more easily. *D&D* contains many officially crafted and expanded universes

that are full of lore. Other systems often have just one, but all allow for you to change how the

official one stands, or to craft your own entirely. Some systems seem to lack lore, but only in the

traditional sense. For example, *Champions* does little to specify a place other than generally being played on a realistic earth setting. Thereby, in *Champions*, our real history becomes a lore, often mixed with the conventions of comic books. Even the statistics *Champions* suggests for a shotgun can be construed as representing the world's lore, just as a monster's stats being properly solidified and ranked does for *D&D*. And as mentioned in an earlier chapter, with the idea of campaigns having sequels, the lore is often fleshed out by the actions of players' previous characters, creating another level of realism and involvement to flesh out the world.

A few other pieces of intrigue come from TRPG's status as an oral form. At least, the narrative of the TRPG is communicated orally; the rules of a system are read from print and the preparations of the GM are often made as notes. Also the backstory of a character is usually written, and lore may be written out for reference as well, similar to how battle maps are physically illustrated for referencing. However, with the majority of the TRPG's narrative interactions happening verbally, some interesting developments occur. For example, players often roleplay their characters with special voices referred to as "character voices" as a way to both immerse themselves in their character and to better differentiate themselves, as players, from their character for the convenience and immersion of other players. This leads to the use of differing levels of diction, and differing accents, to create a greater realism to the storyworld and characters. In the ongoing second campaign of *Critical Role*, played entirely by voice actors, the voice work is masterclass and often used in a way that tells you more about the world or characters. For example, the Wizard Caleb Widogast has a "Zimnean" accent, which is based on the real world German accent. This is both representative of his character's first language, Zimnean, but also tells people immediately where he is likely from. His character voice roots his

character within the world's lore and thereby makes him feel more real, as there is information to be had in his voice alone.

Diction is a big part as well, as expected when compared to the real world. Just as authors like Charles Dickens wrote out different diction to highlight a character's level of education or where they were from (or like an actor's choice in speech), so too is this emulated in character voices. It becomes easy to spot a Wizard by their use of scholarly words, while a rogue may speak more colloquially to show their connections with the city's various gangs or fences. A high diction could inform of a character's snobbery, or a simpler tongue could point to a character's distaste for politicking, preferring to get to the action.

Another side piece of the TRPG's verbal nature is the common use of onomatopoeia. Some can be seen in an earlier transcription of *Critical Role* (see the introduction to chapter four, pages 85-87). It is often joked about how TRPG players cannot help but verbalize sound. While being a habit perhaps connected to a natural tendency, as children are often heard voicing swords, guns, or lightsabers in their role-playing, it also has a great use in the TRPG's shared imagination. All sensory information of the storyworld has to come from outside of it, and thus, even making sounds with your mouth to echo nature can be useful for maintaining the shared imagination. This connects to a desire to enact the "show don't tell" ideology of storytelling, as so much of what a GM does is description, and thus often we rather have something "shown" via sound effects. However, the concern of over-describing comes more from the GM than the players, as they can rely on their role-play acting to give hints in dialogue as to their real feelings.

Between these lists of the necessary and the common, we receive a whole bundle of literary ideas or interactions that become highlighted or utterly unique when we see them in the TRPG form. Be these devices concepts that are being reworked in new ways, or they are simply seeing the spotlight when they are usually much less common in other forms. Ultimately, the TRPG lends some fascinating twists to our usual views of many literary concepts.

Common Tropes of the TRPG

Alongside every form or genre, the TRPG has a multitude of tropes which have developed within the community. Many, if not most, of these tropes stem from how the form functions. A few of these ideas have been touched on above in this chapter, such as the existence of "the party" leading to frequent "found family" themes. However, there are plenty more tropes which stem from the TRPG's form, notably some specific character tropes which become far more common in the TRPG due to game mechanics, such as Class: your character's role or occupation as it is defined by the system's mechanics.

Various system's settings come with their own stereotypes of peoples, and many system's contain common fantasy races such as Dwarves, Orcs, Elves, etc., all of which come with their own assumptions and stereotypes as well. However, many players, especially today as freedom has become more of a TRPG focus, prefer to break these racial stereotypes, embracing a freeing individualism more focussed on nurture than nature. But, while many racial tropes are discarded by more progressively interested modern players, tropes surrounding Classes still exist. Of course, many enjoy breaking these loose molds as well, but due to how various systems prioritize

certain skills or abilities over others for certain classes, certain presumptions will naturally arise about how someone belonging to a certain class acts or is statted.

If we were to go through every class of every system these pages would be endless, so instead we will focus on but a few examples from the ever-popular *D&D*. Due to classes being tied to certain assumed roles or occupations, they are thereby assumed to relate to certain attitudes. For example, the Paladin is a divine servant to a God, usually donning heavy armors and taking military leadership roles. Paladins are often assumed to be righteous, and, just like their fellows, the Clerics, are assumed to be devout, often praying or constantly evoking their God's name. The Paladin in particular is usually stereotyped as a righteous defender who will rush to anyone's aid. Of course, some Paladins are not lawful or good, and thus there is, in reality, a great range of Paladins. But, nonetheless, this is a stereotype which accompanies the Class. Similarly, the Warlock's servitude to some greater being, often a devil or a greater, unknown evil, leads to an assumed "edginess." People assume they have the dark, brooding attitude of one who has bargained away their soul for power. However, Warlock's can have all sorts of patrons, and all sorts of attitudes towards their contractual arrangement with them, and thereby Warlocks can be played in most any way.

Classes are also tied to statistics. Statistics, or "stats," being the attributes used for the game, including (for *D&D*) Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma, as well as other numerical bonuses which further relate to various rolls in the game. Because certain classes rely on some stats more than others, often characters of a similar class will have a similar statistical focus. Thus, because Fighters and Barbarians tend to rely on Constitution and Strength (or Dexterity in some fighters' case), they often neglect their mental

stats. This leads to many Barbarians or Fighters with low Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma scores. This creates the stereotypical "big, brawny fool" character; the kind of fighter who rushes head first into glorious battle without realizing it is not the time nor place. This is the Class stereotype being the powerful warrior who disdains politics and cannot easily handle their math. On the other side is the Bard, a Charisma-focussed class. The Bard's status as the most performative class, stereotypically being musicians and speakers relying on good looks and suave talking, has led to the class having one of the most infamous stereotypes: The seducer. There are endless online jokes about the Bard who attempts to sleep with everything, the big enemy dragon included. While funny, this can cause the concept of the class to be crowded by the assumed stereotype, as is the case with many of these tropes. However, most experienced players understand that not all Bards are comically lust driven.

Finally, the more commonly associated backstories to a Class can create stereotypes as well. The Wizard likely having some wealth to afford all their studies and thus perhaps being a snobbish noble is one stereotype. Or, more common, the Ranger who, being a class so in tune with nature and survival skills, is often paired with a backstory of isolation in the wilderness. This creates the stereotypical character trope of the wilderness-favoring character who lacks any social awareness. They do not get jokes, taking them literally. They do not understand the purpose of money, nor how much is a lot of it. And they feel uncomfortable, or perhaps excitedly overwhelmed, by the cityscape, being only used to the wild. Character tropes like these can be immensely fun to play, and occur naturally out of an exaggeration of the usual statistics. However, they can also be great to subvert, surprising players who have grown used to the

tropes, by being an alarmingly well read Barbarian, or a Cleric who is lackadaisical in their worship.

Once these characters, stereotypes or not, are together as a party, they will begin doing various missions or quests. These "quests," as they are often called, frequently stem from stereotypical story beats within the TRPG form. Often a sudden attack occurs while the party is travelling, and upon a body they discover a note leading to a greater conspiracy. Or, they hear someone asking for help as they enter a town, but the local guards will not listen. No matter how they obtain their quests, tasks which will often lead to some form of dungeon, they are completing the mission, most often, due to a need for money. Of course, if the quest has enough gravity on its own, such as saving the world, the characters will follow it for that reason alone. Additionally, wealth in the TRPG often comes from magical items, rather than just currency. However, the draw is most often for either the assumed treasure to be found or the monetary award for the completion of a task. This causes a necessity for each subsequent quest to offer a higher and higher reward, leading to a growth in wealth after each quest, mimicking the character's growth in power from level-ups as they defeat creatures or complete objectives. But thusly, the characters begin to accrue wealth.

To facilitate this growth, leaving room for it, characters usually start off quite poor, unable to afford most of the "cool" items they would want to purchase to increase their character's power or intrigue. Jon Peterson describes this "rags-to-riches storyline" trope:

> Characters begin with little power, but through trials and perseverance, they become rich and powerful. From the original 30 to 180 gold carried by a starting character, one can expect to deal in sums of thousands of gold relatively quickly.... The focus on personal

enrichment is, however, one of the most addictive aspects of the game, and an element

that helps maintain the game's open-endedness... (191)

Peterson speaks of this open-endedness in terms of an older *D&D* style in which games would go

on nearly forever, with no ending to the campaign unless all the characters died. In this case, the

endless accruing of wealth and power would drive the group towards adventure after adventure.

This draw should sound familiar as it connects again to our above-described narrative tug of

desiring a level-up. These also contribute to the desire for character self-fulfillment as an obvious

draw. However, self-fulfillment would likely require an end to the campaign. Luckily, most

groups end campaigns now, like any story would end. But, the openness of wealth, which allows

for a character to travel further and purchase more things, adds an incentive of further freedom.

The rags-to-riches trope enters the TRPG so often because players want to accrue wealth so their

character can purchase more interesting and powerful items and thus become stronger and

thereby less likely to die and more likely to do amazing things. The freedom lended to a

character who has successfully fought their way to treasure, accompanied by it being an award

for a difficult task, is something that hands the player more freedom of choice in their character

now having the means to act on more desires. This idea should seem plenty relevant to our real

lives (wealth lending further freedom and opportunities), as so many TRPG themes tend to be.

More of these life-like tropes can be found if we pry further at the common TRPG

mindsets. Gary Alan Fine does this nicely, albeit for the *D&D* of the 1980s in mainly just the

U.S.A. Fine builds on his idea that themes often seen in the TRPG setting come from our

American-centric folk ideas. The first of which is "the image of unlimited good" (Fine 76). Fine

explains this concept with:

The principle of unlimited good in American culture (Dundes 1971:96-97) has been contrasted to the prevalent attitude in other societies, such as Mexico's, where one person's success implies someone else's failure (Foster 1965). The structure of dungeons and fantasy worlds reflects the American image of a potentially unlimited supply of treasure.... Further, finding these rewards did not mean that others would suffer misfortune or would have fewer advantages as a result. (76-77)

Again, much of what Fine says relates to an older idea of *D&D*. This concept from Fine aligns with the above mentioned idea of the endless campaign, constantly accruing an endless supply of wealth. However, this also stems from a less narrative focussed time more generally. Today a more socially conscious GM may make their game more nuanced by having drawbacks occur for the treasure taken if, say, it was treasure gathered by bandits who stole it from a nearby village. Thereby, if the party did not return the gold, keeping it for themselves instead, the village may fall into economic ruin. Nonetheless, some of Fine's points remain, including this treasure taking idea, as most treasure hoards are designed to be taken by the party without any negative consequences. They are a reward. Additionally, as such, the rewards seem endless. A party will almost certainly never complete a dungeon only to find the treasure room empty, having been taken by another group long before them. While this could be an interesting plot idea, leading to further adventure, or at minimum a funny surprise, most GMs want to reward their players for their work, and most players desire to see that reward, otherwise they may feel cheated. Thus, Fine's general ideas hold, even though *D&D* has changed dramatically since the 1980s.

However, tropes are not only existent in the monetary realm. Fine next suggests the trope of having a setting with a "sharply defined oppositional nature" (76). Albeit stemming from an

older, more black and white *D&D* than most play today. While the below quote stems from a very Fantasy genre idea, and the TRPG form has generally shifted towards more nuance as time has passed, some systems still hold many of the ideas that Fine outlines:

> Most worlds are conceptualized as battlegrounds between good and evil with no middle ground. Although neutral characters and settings exist, these are to be *used* by the forces of good or evil to achieve their ends. This oppositional aspect of the world is endemic to the game structure. For example, TSR Hobbies ["Tactical Studies Rules," the original *D&D* game publisher founded by *D&D*'s creators] claims:
>
>> *D & D* . . . furnishes a world in which everything is categorized and labeled; there is no mistaking good and evil. . . . [TSR Hobbies 1979:1-2]
>
> This view, however, is not a necessary part of the game since ambiguity is structurally *possible* within a referee's world, but this ambiguity rarely occurs. Since players can select (or roll up), evil characters, "good" does not always emerge victorious, but the oppositional structure always exists. Contributing to this dichotomy in the game between alignment types is the fact that characters typically know each other's alignments, and referees often express the alignment of nonplayer characters though stereotyped facial features or symbolic colors. (77)

The higher subtlety preferred by most TRPG players today often leads to a lesser focus on alignment choices (being your character's being of one of nine moral/ideological slots, made by the grid of Lawful, Neutral, or Chaotic vs Good, Neutral, or Evil).

Figure 6. A visual example of the *D&D* alignment grid.

Although, often the lack of focus on alignments leads to an openness about them with little thought, as they tend to affect so little in contemporary *D&D*. Thus, also, role-play is not as stereotyped, as NPCs are made less obviously evil or good. However, some systems, notably *Pathfinder* (being based on an older system of *D&D*) still maintain a significant focus on alignment.

In *Pathfinder*, as opposed to modern *D&D*, alignment is crucial and brought up often. Many spells or abilities refer to alignment directly, such as the ability to "detect" if someone is of an Evil or Good alignment (or Chaotic or Lawful) via spells. This creates an interestingly different atmosphere surrounding the meeting of an NPC. When I played *Pathfinder* with a

Paladin in our party, we attempted to Detect Evil on anyone and everyone we met. This would give us extremely useful insight into their possible motives, but could also lead to some trickery. *Pathfinder* also comes equipped with spells and items for masking your alignment against spells like these, and further, sometimes someone who is Evil may still be aligned to your specific cause and thus, while you may be Good aligned, they may actually be placed there by the GM to assist you. Thus, while the TRPG has generally leaned away from moral labels like alignment, some systems still use them in fascinating ways. Consequently, I want to make clear that this section, nor others, necessarily wish to discredit the alignment system as anti-freedom, nor as simply a relic of the past. The alignment system has been modified and implemented by systems like *Pathfinder* to both be crucial and intriguing. It creates mysteries or reveals when it comes up, and is made part of the game in ways that reward an alert and prepared player rather than simply being something that forces categorization (especially considering alignments can change based on occurrences in-game, as it is ultimately a reflection of your morality or tendencies).

But, beyond just alignments, the tropes surrounding good and evil, and their endless battle, are played out in other ways as well. Fine suggests the type of evil expressed in the TRPG belongs to a specific ideology or preference:

> Evil can be described as any action outside of the moral boundaries of a society. Since moral action tends to be rather tightly constrained, this, in theory, leaves a wide latitude for evil. Yet, in these games, as is true generally in Western literary tradition, evil is reflected in greed and hunger for power, and not in other forms of degradation.... A gentlemanly evil is reflected in these games—a wholesome evil, in which murder, rather than debasement or mutilation, is the primary weapon of evil. The fantasy worlds reflect

this attitude towards evil, in that monsters unintentionally behave evilly because it is in

their "genetic" makeup, and in that wordly forces compete for control, power, and wealth.

(77-78)

Most of this holds true today. Although, with so many systems to choose from, and different

player groups having different storytelling preferences, there are certainly those who enjoy a

story which faces up against the grotesque kind of evil that Fine describes. However, generally

the evil within a TRPG game, particularly among a newer group, is quite tame, as no one wishes

to cause a player to become uncomfortable with the subject matter and thus be forced out of

immersion due to their distaste for the evil being showcased, be it visually or mentally

distressing. Some may desire the gritty details of a villain tearing the guts out of a man, but many

would prefer a simple stabbing to establish the evil and move on.

This idea of genetic evil is very much still with us in the TRPG today. While many

players prefer a more grey idea of morality and thereby more freedom, systems like *D&D* still

widely rely on the existence of naturally evil beings, be they mindless or otherwise. *D&D* still

has their innately evil devils, their innately good celestials, and plenty of other creatures who are

assumed to align one way or the other en masse. However, *D&D* prods the player towards

breaking these molds, to have a character from a race who breaks the expected alignment or

tendencies of the rest of their race. To play the devil who is oddly kind, or the celestial who's

idea of good is far too strict and vile. *D&D* sets out the expected so that the characters have an

idea of what the setting usually looks like and how these creatures usually interact, but the

system's creators want the players to break said molds and craft their own interesting stories,

often thereby (nowadays at least) pushing towards a trope of individuality in morals rather than

an assumed moral identity for all creatures of a certain race. Often the nurture half of the nature vs nurture duality is what is now pushed by modern *D&D* players who want to see a game that relies less on stereotyped fantasy characters and more on freedoms.

But, to return once more to rewards, we shall now finish our journey into Fine's themes drawn from American folklore and beliefs. Fine finally points to a deemphasizing of luck, based on the players' ability to choose, and the rewards vs danger dynamic they are often making said choices about:

> Although the events in role-playing games are based on chance (the roll of the dice), this structure masks the thematic importance of courage as a folk idea. The notion is that success comes to him who is prepared for it, is willing to work for it, and that "no guts, no glory." Referees construct their world in line with this theme, and there is a positive correlation between the danger in a setting and its payoff in treasure. In most dungeons each level downward increases in danger and in treasure.... This is an attempt to put potential rewards and costs in balance, to provide a situation of equity—part of our belief in a just world (see Lerner and Simmons 1966; Rubin and Peplau 1973).... Although chance is not entirely eliminated from the game structure, the decisions of the player-characters are more important. Thus luck is deemphasized; effort and courage are seen as more important criteria for success. (78)

While I would add that smart play and Fine's aforementioned preparedness should be added to this final sentence's list, the general ideas hold true. Generally, this progression of more danger and thus more loot is balanced by the player-characters' gradual power increase through levelling. While a party could risk taking on a challenge above their ability for higher reward,

they will usually stick to things that are more manageable when possible. However, plenty of

parties are ambitious (or misguided) in their aspirations. Or, perhaps they may be led to a

difficult battle by a perceived necessity through time limit or other cause. But, as Fine says,

TRPG's emphasize character choice over pure chance, the chance simply plays in as a check to

see if their risk succeeds or fails.

It should be noted that all forms seek to minimize and downplay randomness, instead

tending to favor design and meaning. However, the TRPG's integration of chance, albeit

tempered by player choices and statistical bonuses, is far more than most forms. After all, flux is

antithetical to form. Nonetheless, the TRPG makes randomness an innate part of its play.

Modernists would often try to add randomness to their work; The TRPG succeeds in this by their

systems of game rules which add dice rolling to the narrative. A narrative, which in itself

promotes guided randomness, being largely improvisational. The TRPG sacrifices some of the

more nuanced designs available to carefully pre-made works in favor of the heightened emotion

that comes with unpredictability and randomness.

So, we have seen many of the tropes of the TRPG, especially *D&D*, unfold before us. It

should be unsurprising that such a unique form causes the creation of so many new, or otherwise

expanded upon, tropes. With the earlier discussed complications added to dramatic irony,

drawing out extremely unique versions of it, alongside the various needed or made-stronger

literary devices that play into the average TRPG, the form's uniqueness should be crystal clear.

And of course, this chapter is only the beginning. There are likely many other literary devices

which are twisted in new and exciting ways when they appear in this form, and there are

certainly more fascinating tropes to explore across all the many popular TRPG systems and

settings. Thus, the uniqueness of the TRPG is only just being uncovered; it still holds so many

fascinating specificities to explore once more scholars pile on to this outstanding form.

- Chapter 6 -

The TRPG's Popularity Boom & Adaptation to Other Forms

The vast majority of TRPG stories are only consumed by the players, or occasionally the friends of the players via the re-telling of stories outside of gameplay. Most of the time these conversations would be had with friends of the players who are also already acquainted with TRPGs, so as to ensure ease of explanation and inherent interest in the subject matter being summarized in casual storytelling. However, the TRPG is not always a product shared among a small audience of those who create it and their immediate circle. Some seek to publish their TRPG-related work for a wider audience. Sometimes this expansion to a wider audience is achieved through the changing of forms, often very contemporary forms that utilize the vast capabilities of the internet.

As we will cover, this adaptation to other forms leads to interesting analyses regarding what must be minimized while changing forms, as well as what is added when the TRPG is adapted into other forms. Furthermore, these adaptations, as well as more direct TRPG sharings (such as the livestream and podcast), form a symbiotic relationship. As we will see, the popularity growth of the TRPG is in part thanks to these interesting adaptations, which have an audience partly because of the TRPG's fan base, but also feed back into the TRPG by introducing the audiences of other forms to some of the concepts of the TRPG. This reciprocal relationship, combined with a discussion on the TRPG-specific form of the "campaign module" publication, will help further prove the TRPG's uniqueness, and help explain why the TRPG form has had such a sudden boom in popularity.

For starters, the shift in both culture and capability brought by the internet has helped

bring forth the mass revival of the TRPG that we see today. Jennifer Grouling Cover explains:

> [Fine (1983)] estimates in 1979 that the TRPG base was 500,000 people, enough for its
>
> own subculture (p. 27). Wizards of the Coast [publisher of *D&D*] estimates that as of
>
> 2006, four million people in the United States play *D&D* each month, with the worldwide
>
> numbers being even higher (www.wizards.com). This number also does not include
>
> gamers that play other TRPGs besides *D&D*. (149)

A more recent number, from a 2019 *Washington Post* article, tells us that "[Satine Phoenix is]

now Wizards of the Coast's official community manager for the 40 million people who play the

game world wide" (Alimurung). This number, too, only tells us those who are playing *D&D*, and

while it is hard to know how many are playing TRPGs at home, around the table, we can take a

different look at the current success of TRPGs via one of the most popular online services for it,

Roll20.

I myself mostly play online, using Roll20 in place of a tabletop, and various voice chat

services in place of the usual face-to-face discussions. This proves incredibly useful for defeating

the all-too-common issue of scheduling, as well as allowing for interesting map effects that

would be difficult to do by hand on the table. In a 2019 Orr Group Industry Report, Roll20 is

stated to have "4 million+ accounts" with the following breakdown of how many users have

played what systems using their service:
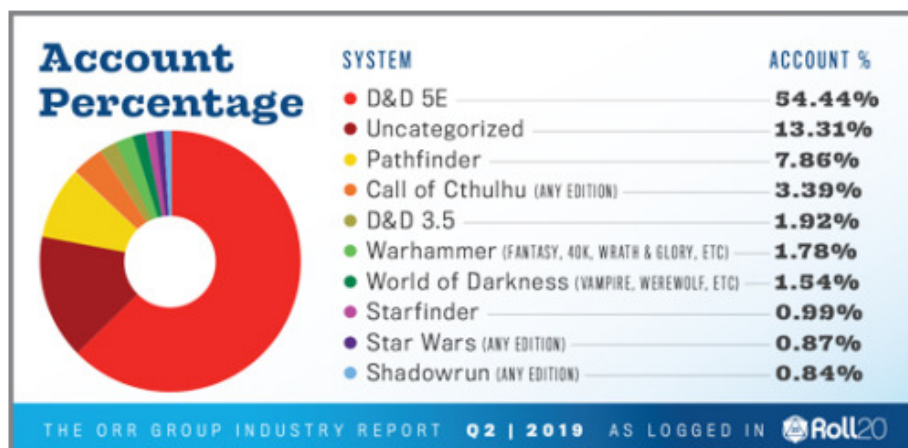
Account Percentage: How many Roll20 users play this game system.

Only games with at least one hour of playtime are counted in these results.

Figure 7. A graphic displaying percentages of Roll20 users playing various TRPG systems.

The lead of *D&D 5e* is unsurprising, as it is widely considered to be the most popular of the

TRPGs as of this writing. However, it is important to note, as a *Polygon* article on these stats

explains, "Roll20 also has a close publishing relationship with Wizards of the Coast. New

content for D&D drops in stores around the same time that it shows up on Roll20, so they're

likely to have more D&D players for that simple reason alone" (Hall). Additionally, as a Roll20

user, I can attest that the site often advertises their compatibility with these *D&D* publications,

possibly causing an inflation of their numbers for the *D&D* category. Furthermore, these

numbers only tell us who is playing online using Roll20, they do not tell us how many more are

playing online using other services. Thus, the number of TRPG players can only be higher than

the numbers given, suggesting a massive audience.

Again, in regards to *D&D* specifically (although this is indicative of TRPGs as a whole as well), the rapid growth of popularity we are seeing is not simply a flash in the pan of history. A *CNBC* article explains:

> "DnD has been around for 45 years and it is more popular now than it has ever been," said Greg Tito, senior communications manager, at Wizards of the Coast. In each of the last five years, sales of "Dungeons and Dragons" merchandise has grown by double digits. (Whitten)

There are many contributing factors, many of which will be discussed in both this chapter and the next. However, one undeniable reality of this popularity is that it is not going anywhere. The same *CNBC* article continues, explaining this unprecedented and continued growth in popularity as follows:

> The fifth edition was so well-received by fans of "Dungeons and Dragons" that sales that year grew double digits. And that growth has continued, Tito said....
>
> "When a new edition for a game like this releases, there is that flurry of activity, people get really excited about it and then, historically, that excitement has waned," he said. "The fifth edition has completely blown that model out of the water. With the release in 2014, it has grown and only continued to grow. Every kind of statistical model we've been able to to [sic] use from the history of 'Dungeons and Dragons' has been broken at this point. So, we are in uncharted territory." (Whitten)

Again, these sales only apply to *D&D*, but as the frontrunner of the form, it leads the whole pack forward into new popularity.

While the universality of these numbers as a representation of all TRPG players is partially debatable, a clear underlying trend shows a surge in the TRPG's popularity in recent years, and with a surge in community size comes more creators. Some creators are likely contributors to this growth as well, as fans breed more fans via the sharing of their interests with friends. And those who are fans of a TRPG livestream, podcast, etc. are much more likely to begin playing the game themselves if they have not already, as we shall soon see. So, the TRPG being a collaborative form, seems to be growing exponentially in popularity. This should be expected, as when people become fans of the form they will then spread the hobby to their friends, otherwise they may not have anyone to play with in order to run a campaign. While we will talk about how people first become fans of the TRPG below, as well as in the next chapter, it is important to realize that livestreams, podcasts, adaptations, etc., which we are to discuss in this chapter, act in symbiosis with the TRPG form. These shared TRPG experiences help bring in new players, as well as satisfy a content-hungry TRPG fan base.

Once someone is a fan of the form, even if they have introduced the game to their friends and thus have a TRPG group established, they do not stop there. Not all consumers will simply *keep* to playing TRPGs in their small group of players. Many have, and will, expand out to the aforementioned broadcasting forms of the internet, other web publications, and even to creating novels based around TRPGs. Companies themselves, like Wizards of the Coast, have long recognized this, publishing some of these novels, hosting their own livestreams or podcasts, and creating their own additional content to help give *D&D* players more to play with, and even stories for them to make their own in the form of campaign modules.

This expansion of the TRPG community into more widely accessible, and more media diverse, content has been integral to the forms growth of popularity. Not only have other media forms allowed for there to be more TRPG fans than could sit around a table with a GM, but the growth of the community has become reciprocal. When new people learn of TRPGs through the many new forms that we will discuss here, they become interested in playing themselves. While other forms may inspire their audience to create, the TRPG is one of the most accessible to become a creator in, and it more generally draws people into being creators far more often than we see in other media forms. Novels and shows may spawn fanfiction writers and artists, but the TRPG does this *and* creates new GMs and players at far greater rates than novels or films spawn new writers or directors. Sarah Whitten's *CNBC* article quotes Greg Tito once more in explaining how livestreaming in particular helps to create more TRPG campaign creators and players:

> "The way streaming has affected 'Dungeons and Dragons' is like sports," Tito said. "You didn't learn how to play basketball or baseball by reading the manual about what the rules are. You watched the games, you listened to the commentators, you found a few icons or aspirational figures that you wanted to emulate and that's what's happening with streaming. (Whitten)

We will talk much more about livestreaming below, but for now it is simply important that we recognize the reciprocal, symbiotic relationship that these shows or publications have with creating new players and creators.

Other forms do not need as many participants as the collaborative TRPG does, and with a growing online community for swapping stories and character builds (the combinations of race, Class, items, or more that create powerful or interesting character abilities or strategies) or

character art, the community wants to grow. It is a community of creators more than it is just an audience community because every TRPG player is a creator within the form. The collaborative nature of the TRPG means *both* the player and GM are creators, working together to forge the overall story, while the GM also prepares descriptions, maps, and the lore, and the players create their characters, those characters' interactions, and their backstories. The GM's work and preparation may be greater in size than the singular player, but neither can create the TRPG on their own.

Of course, fans of a particular livestream, like the ones soon discussed, are not necessarily contributing to the show they watch, but they generally go off and create their own TRPG stories, starting up games with friends after being inspired or introduced by the media they watched (as Tito suggests in the quote above). These new forms allow the TRPG to spread far faster than before, having previously needed to invite people to the table to see how it worked. The internet has helped allow for a new explosion of TRPG popularity, and thus a new explosion of TRPG creators. These new forms for sharing TRPG stories allow for a wider audience for TRPG stories, and for more creators in the forms of new players and GMs. Thus, the cycle feeds back on itself, growing the community quickly as show-watchers get into the game, then make their own games (and possibly shows or publications), which thereby gets even more people into the game, and, finally, those new players will be more likely to consume TRPG related content, like livestreams, because they now understand the system and identify with the community. So, shows create players, who can create more players or shows themselves, and then players who were not watching shows (now being TRPG fans) are more likely to seek out

the shows. This cyclical growth proliferates the size of the TRPG community, and thus the audience of the form.

Livestreams & A Coming Animation Adaptation

Below is a quotation from Mark Hulmes (GM of *High Rollers*, a *D&D 5e* actual play livestream) while discussing *D&D*'s popularity and livestreaming more generally for a *D&D Beyond* Interview:

"And then you also have the people that just watch the other games, and they want to feel that intimacy with the cast and the characters. You know, they fall in love with these characters, and they want to hear more about these tales and these stories. It's what we love as storytelling and what we love as humans in stories, you know? It's the characters. I think that that's a big part of it."

(Mark Hulmes, 2018)

The most direct form for consuming TRPG content, outside of playing yourself, is watching "livestreams," meaning the live, online broadcasting of the game. In their live nature, they deliver live-play as it happens. This, coupled with their tendency to be "actual-play," or to present what it is like to truly play a TRPG (a showing of the usual experience as it mostly is when in a non-streamed setting), make livestreams easily the most true to the playing of a TRPG of the popular media we will discuss here. There is no editing; you are simply watching a TRPG game as it unfolds as an outsider, albeit with varying levels of production quality to make it

easier or more pleasant to watch. This filming of the table fabula, the playing itself, means that the table fabula is obviously included. This makes the above-mentioned tendency for TRPG newcomers to learn the game systems through watching livestreaming make a lot of sense, as they are watching experienced players really play the game, in real time, on their screen. Many popular livestreams exist, many being official *D&D* livestreams partnered with (or created by) Wizards of the Coast. The most popular is *Critical Role*, but others exist too, like the above-mentioned *High Rollers*, the later mentioned *Girls Guts Glory*, *Force Grey*, *Dragon Friends*, *Acquisitions Inc.* and the many more beyond my limited ability to watch, especially due to the commonality of smaller livestreams disappearing or going on long hiatuses after campaigns wrap up.

While I myself am a fan of both *Critical Role* and *High Rollers*, the most popular of any TRPG livestream is *Critical Role*. With a *Twitch* channel (the service they use to livestream) where they consistently garner over 250,000 views, even while being already 80+ episodes into their 2nd campaign. Their *YouTube* channel shows even more, with over 500,000 views on recent episodes (episodes 70+), accruing more over time to reach near to, or well over, a million views in the span of a few months, as fans use the VoDs (or videos on demand) on their *YouTube* channel to catch up on the show if they are behind, or simply missed the live version due to their own scheduling conflicts. As an aside, this popularity also means *Critical Role* is often credited with explaining why the TRPG has exploded in popularity. While one show being the source of so many players' first introduction can cause a few problems (discussed below), it overall has an enormously positive outcome in growing the community rapidly, and doing so around a group of famous players who cherish inclusivity, creativity, and kindness within their community. To see

how much *Critical Role* alone helps to grow the community, we can look to a *CNBC* article

which quotes *Critical Role* GM, Matthew Mercer, as saying:

> "We are constantly meeting people at events and conventions and live shows who tell us
>
> 'I never played, I never thought that it was something that I could get into and enjoy and
>
> now I play in three campaigns,'" Mercer said. "It's been unexpectedly wild to see people
>
> engage with the game. I never expected to find such a widespread and growing
>
> audience." (Whitten)

I myself learned how to play primarily through watching the *High Rollers* livestream, and only

later jumped onto the *Critical Role* train. However, when *Wizards of the Coast* themselves credit

Critical Role as having a hand in *D&D*'s popularity, as "The company, owned by toymaker

Hasbro, attributes this massive sales boom to the launch of the fifth edition of the game in 2014

and to 'Critical Role,'" it is clear the livestream has had a serious effect on the overall growth of

the TRPG community (Whitten).

Critical Role, being the most popular and one of the best produced livestreams (with a

cast of professional voice actors), has been widely credited as being a part of the TRPG's revival

via creating a compelling show that brings in even non-TRPG players as fans, who later, as

suggested above, take to playing the game themselves, having been inspired by the show. In this

way livestreams, especially *Critical Role*, have been a catalyst to the TRPG's boom in

popularity, and the growing number of similar livestreamed TRPG shows. For *Critical Role*, the

GM, Matthew Mercer, has even worked closely with *Wizards of the Coast* on making his own

homebrewed classes official, most notably his Blood Hunter class. Mercer also worked with

Wizards of the Coast on their own productions, such as the campaign module for *Waterdeep:*

Dragon Heist, described further below. Additionally, the self-made world that *Critical Role* is set in has become a product for others to use as a setting for their own games there via the *Critical Role: Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting* book published in 2017, and the 2020 publication, made in conjunction with *Wizards of the Coast*, of *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*. Creations of this kind that are self-made, and generally unofficial in the eyes of the company-made rules of the TRPG (although some of Mercer's have become official, as noted above), are known as "homebrew." However, more regarding homebrew and setting publications will come later in this section. For now, it is important to simply note the public reach that *Critical Role* has managed to obtain.

In early January, 2019, the show was popular enough to establish itself on its own, leaving the network that previously hosted them, *Geek & Sundry*, to pursue their own creative space to expand what kinds of shows they were producing for fans. In their time as a popular stream, *Critical Role* has had numerous guests appear on their main show, or other side shows, "including Vin Diesel, Chris Hardwick, Felicia Day, Wil Wheaton and Phil Lamarr, to name a few," as a 2016 *tvweb* article does. In 2019, *Critical Role* created a *Kickstarter* campaign, or crowd-funded project, to raise money in hopes of creating an animated show based on their first campaign. In an interview for *popmythology.com*, a player on the show, Travis Willingham, explained that "when we set our target goal of $750,000 for a single animated special, we hoped we were picking a number that was achievable in 45 days" (Kirk). The uncertain expectations of the *Critical Role* cast were swiftly obliterated by an outpouring from their fans. As a *syfy* article explains, "it took just 40 minutes to reach their initial goal, and three weeks later, they've raised nearly $8 million" (Zakarin). According to their *Kickstarter* page, the 45 day campaign, having long finished, has final numbers at "88,887 backers [who] pledged $11,385,449" in total. Having

needed to swiftly come up with new goals to utilize all the money raised, the originally expected

couple of episodes became a 10-episode series. Now, after becoming one of the most funded

Kickstarter campaigns ever, a November 5th, 2019, announcement stated:

> Our friends at Amazon have partnered with us to broadcast *Critical Role: The Legend of*
>
> *Vox Machina* exclusively on Amazon Prime Video! And that's not all… This partnership
>
> has allowed us to create TWO ENTIRE SEASONS and an additional TWO episodes per
>
> season. That's a total of 24 episodes of animated Vox Machina goodness that we cannot
>
> wait to share with you.
>
> What's more, Amazon is throwing their support behind the show, allowing us to improve
>
> on the quality of the animation, the score, the special effects – you name it...

This announcement follows up with an explanation that those who backed the project will have

free access to the first season, as the show explodes to heights never-expected. One only has to

watch the cast's numerous update videos to clearly see the surprise and joy they all held at this

result.

Of course, an animated series will be a different form than the TRPG livestream. Being a

series based on an already completed and recorded campaign, the process will be "similar to

adapting a novel into screenplay format," as cast member Travis Willingham explains (Kirk).

While adapting from a TRPG game to the screen will clearly be different from adapting a novel,

as the novel is a very different form, as should be obvious from previous chapters. Adaptation of

this kind will allow for both benefits and drawbacks, many of which will be discussed below, but

a large one will be the loss of the table fabula. The story of playing around the table is lost for,

instead, only the storyworld fabula's information. The table fabula, as we have discussed before,

is constitutive of the TRPG form. However, adaptations often must lose elements that otherwise are crucial for the story's original form. A movie adaptation of a novel will likely lose the novel's crucial interiority, while gaining positive visual elements. Thus, while the oscillation between two fabulae, the table and the storyworld, is integral to the TRPG, most adaptations drop the table fabula in the process of changing forms. A large loss to be expected when adapting such a unique form. However, this delves more into the seperating of the adaptation from the TRPG, which will be explored further below. For now, we shall return to the livestream form itself. What are the differences between a livestreamed game and the average TRPG that is simply played at a table, with no camera's involved (other than, of course, the viewer not being a collaborator as players are)?

In a 2018 interview with *geekdad*, GM Matt Mercer explained some of the ways in which the experience of streaming a TRPG campaign to a large audience differs from playing a game with just a small collection of friends. Regarding the streaming of the show to hundreds of thousands of fans, Mercer says:

> It has certainly changed how detailed and interwoven I attempt to make it! It's one thing to be developing a world and story for a handful of friends who aren't sweating the details, and another to have thousands and thousands of people delving into your lore and world with a fine-toothed comb. I'm liable to miss things or mess up as often as anyone, but I've definitely put more effort into general cohesion.... I'm still primarily making the world for the players, so as long as they're happy, I'm happy.... I kind of appreciate the chaos and messiness of the whole experience, so even the missteps are part of the charm to me. (Yule)

Alongside the need for higher quality, and details to create a lore for a hungry and attentive audience, comes a much more performative aspect to the show. While players might be asked to step out for private moments to avoid meta-gaming, the audience sees nearly everything. This situation can make it difficult to truly avoid players knowing things they should not, as they will inevitably learn of what happened when they were out of the room from seeing the fanbase discuss it between episodes. However, this performative aspect, in terms of how players must play with further suppression of meta-gaming, how the GM prepares more carefully and in greater depth, and generally how one acts when you know thousands are watching live, leads to both a higher quality than a usual game and a difference in tone.

As a fan of livestreams like *Critical Role* and *High Rollers*, I see that they are very close to what a home-played TRPG session is like, but the players are all aware of an audience watching them, and thus may direct some things towards them. Out-of-game jokes, funny glances to the camera (the breaking of the 4th wall), and more are added for the direct enjoyment of the *outside audience*. And, naturally, the added pressure of a large audience morphs how the players would act, as no one is *wholly* themselves when before a live-broadcasting set of cameras.

Finally, relating directly to the exceptional quality that *Critical Role*'s GM Matthew Mercer pursues, is what the TRPG community calls the "Mercer effect." This is the concept that, due to the shows immense popularity within the community, and its being a large part of inspiring or creating many new GMs and TRPG players, many newcomers to the game will expect this high level of quality from their own GMs, or expect a gaming style similar to Mercer's. This, while an inherent compliment to the incredible GM-work of Matt Mercer, can

cause problems within the larger community, as not all games are prepared to be so extremely detailed, and not all GMs run their games in Mercer's style. Thus, it becomes important to remember that, while a livestream is a good showing of what a TRPG game is like, it can be deceptive, as it is important to note that every TRPG group, or GM, will play the game in their own style. Some players and GMs lean more towards role-play immersion, others to game mechanics, some are more casual, while others may be as extremely detailed as Mercer. While livestreams very closely show what a TRPG session is like, they have their quality differences, and one group should not be taken as a representation of the whole.

Nonetheless, livestreams, especially *Critical Role*, have played a huge part in growing and shaping the TRPG community, and have done so in more good ways than bad. Furthermore, the ability to livestream a story's creation is very unique to the TRPG. Thanks to the TRPG being made with live play and improvisation with a group, the ability to set up cameras around it and broadcast it as it unfolds a story is fascinating, due to this being much harder or pointless to try to do with other forms. We do not see authors livestreaming themselves as they type out a book, but we see many TRPG groups broadcasting their story so as to show it to more than just those around the table. And, livestreaming works to show the TRPG in a holistic way, rather than recounting stories after the fact from memory to a friend or a message board online. This interest in the sharing of the TRPG story outside of one's immediate group of friends is a key driving force behind the growth of the TRPG community, as the more TRPG stories that are shared, the more others will be inspired to try the form themselves.

Videos Games (CRPGs)

A large collection of TRPG-based video games exist for consumption. They too help

expand the community, primarily by branching out to video game fan bases. *Wizards of the Coast*

themselves publish a multitude of video games around *D&D* such as *Neverwinter*, *Neverwinter*

Nights and *Neverwinter Nights 2*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 2*, *The Temple of Elemental*

Evil, *Sword Coast Legends*, and many more. There are even more beyond what we will discuss

here, as there are many games that depart almost entirely from the narrative aspects of the TRPG

that we are analyzing, such as *Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms* which draws from *D&D*

as a setting source, but is not itself an RPG (Role-playing Game). There are also many games

recently announced, and plenty more from the past, so we simply cannot discuss them all

individually. Many of these CRPGs (or Computer Role-playing Games) are based on popular old

TRPG stories, such as the infamous *Temple of Elemental Evil* which, as a campaign and story,

has been recreated over and over again, as will be seen more below, as we take it as a key

example.

Now, for exploring how the TRPG becomes a CRPG, we can first turn to some

differences outlined by Jennifer Grouling Cover. For example, Cover says the face-to-face

interaction with a GM "allows the TRPG more flexibility than the computer-mediated CRPG.

However, the visual design might be an affordance of the digital medium of the CRPG that is not

found in the TRPG" (56). Thereby, as has been discussed before in this work, the CRPG is not as

open and free as the TRPG, but it can allow for the display of greater visuals than a TRPG can

afford. This also plays into the CRPG not needing the shared imagination, instead having a

concrete visual world for the singular user to experience. The lack of collaboration with the game

designer leads to an inevitable limit to choice, but allows for time to be spent rendering

wonderful worlds, or even great, albeit more static, stories beforehand, thus being a more

traditional narrative form (being singular and pre-made). This lack of flexibility does lead to

another difference for the CRPG, as well as the novel, in "the narrative details [being] more

deeply embedded in the structure of these tales" (Cover 65). While in an adaptation, like *The*

Temple of Elemental Evil, it may be that many locales remain the same, it is impossible to adapt

a TRPG that has been experienced by players before into a CRPG that matches all those

experiences. This comes once again from the limitation of choice, as every TRPG, even if using

the same module (further described below), will be different due to the immense freedom players

and GMs have. Thereby, the CRPG, which lacks this ultimate freedom, can only deliver an

experience that is near and reminiscent of the TRPG. The ability of video game RPGs to allow

for limited choice makes them nearer to the TRPG that inspires them than a novel on the same

topic, but they are still rendered smaller in available scope.

However, benefitting the CRPG is this middling ground between novel and TRPG. A

CRPG can reap some of the benefits of choice, allowing players to feel more invested, as though

they have made the game their own, while also indulging in more traditional presentations via

cut-scenes, or uncontrollable visual scenes that deliver information of story to the player before

the player is lent control again. To do a cut-scene in a TRPG would be extremely taboo, as it

would mean the moving of player-characters without the permission of the players. However,

cut-scenes are an ingrained part of how CRPGs work, and are thereby accepted as a way to

progress the story, even if the actions in a cut-scene do not come fully from player-made choices.

Of course, these cut-scenes, being story driven, may be affected by player choices beforehand,

but there can only be so many pre-programmed cut-scenes and paths, and a player cannot suddenly decide they wish their character to go elsewhere when a cut-scene is playing out. The only thing a CRPG player can do is choose to skip the cut-scene to return to gameplay more quickly. This middling ground also allows for the CRPG creator to better guarantee that information is given to the player. Often a player can simply skip information, or may even somehow accidentally bypass it, but the CRPG creator has the capability of forcing story information on the players, while the TRPG GM needs the players to take a more active role in uncovering story information in order to impart it.

While CRPGs struggle to have the same level of ultimate narrative freedom, or collaboration, that a TRPG can have, they can emulate the game mechanic side of the TRPG quite well. This is an important inclusion, as we have said before that while the TRPG has generally been shifting towards a more narrative focus, the (war)gaming roots and elements of the form are still constitutive of the TRPG (see our two-poles diagram on page 52).

Most CRPGs will have the ability to choose different Classes, races, weapons, and abilities as the character grows and levels-up with whatever experience system the game uses. If rooted in the TRPG's lore, these Classes, races, weapons, and abilities are all likely to be inspired, or even taken directly from, the TRPG system's game mechanics. While a CRPG cannot simulate infinite possibilities to provide freedom for the narrative pole of the TRPG, it can pre-program dice rolls, ability affects, and incremental health or stat increases to mimic the TRPG's wargaming origins. That said, some CRPGs may abandon parts of the original TRPG wargaming pole to make the game's battles different. While some CRPGs, like *Divinity: Original Sin*, may have many narrative and game mechanic options, as well as multiplayer for a

collaborative element, not all games will emulate the TRPG's combat as *Divinity* does. *Divinity* uses turn-based combat with a limited amount of actions possible per turn, very much like TRPGs such as *D&D*. However, many CRPGs are likely to only take ideas from TRPG combat and implement them in live-combat, without all the pauses for taking turns. In this, and in general, CRPGs can emulate the TRPG's wargaming pole of game mechanics, although they will often separate from the TRPG's mechanics somewhat to provide a more common CRPG experience that is simply set in a TRPG's story, setting, or lore. However, this is to be expected, as all adaptations inevitably magnify some portions of the source material while minimizing other elements.

Interestingly, in these examples of adaptation, when the same story is being told in many different mediums, all stemming from the original TRPG medium, we find that some who have less TRPG knowledge may become somewhat confused as the creators of the CRPG or novel may assume that the consumer is already familiar with the TRPG they are basing the work on. In discussing the CRPG form of *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, Cover says, "the game draws on previous knowledge of... both the antecedent genre and the story and seems designed best for those who want to relive the *Temple* adventure in digital form" rather than those who are newcomers to the story, or *D&D* as a system in general (70). In this case, rather than creating an entirely new experience, the new form is made primarily for the enjoyment of those who have already experienced the story, or, more generally, are already TRPG players. This creates a lesser likelihood that this example will grow the fanbase of TRPGs, but not every piece of media needs to. Furthermore, one could argue that a more near-TRPG CRPG experience could reinforce existing players' attachment to the TRPG form, deepening their appreciation for the original.

It is fine to have some things which are just for the enjoyment of those who are already within the community. However, the more openly enjoyable adaptation of TRPG to CRPG will have the possibility of bringing video game players towards becoming TRPG players by interesting them in a TRPG's lore. While the CRPG will not embody the most important TRPG features of live-play, collaboration, and full freedom, it does represent the game mechanic pole decently well, and can get people interested in the lore of some more popular TRPG universes.

Novel Adaptations

The novel, as a form, has been contrasted with the TRPG throughout nearly the whole of this work, but here we bring them together in discussion of novels that emulate the TRPG, or are otherwise derived from it. Like the CRPG above, the novel, having more reach than the TRPG, can introduce new people to some of the ideas or lore of TRPG systems. Furthermore, being a form which we have so often contrasted from the TRPG, the existence of so many popular TRPG-based novels is a fascinating development for us to loop-back around to.

The immediate inclination of one who is trying to compare the TRPG and the novel is to lean towards gamebooks, where some sense of choice is preserved, but enough has been said on these in earlier pages (and the contemporary audience for the gamebook is negligible). Here we will simply add them to our quick list of TRPG novels that exist, as many gamebooks that are set in TRPG universes, or emulate TRPG rules, have been published. Within *D&D* exists the *Endless Quest* series written by Matt Forbeck, for example.

Then there are the publications that are more novelistic, pulling from TRPGs as inspiration, setting, and sometimes guide, but are nonetheless novels in the traditional sense. Once again, *Wizards of the Coast* has published many regarding *D&D*, such as publications by Ed Greenwood, set in the popular *Forgotten Realms D&D* setting which he created, novels by Erin M. Evans, as well as there being novelists whose characters become figures well known to the wider *D&D* community, such as R. A. Salvatore's (a *New York Times* Bestselling Author) famous Drow Ranger, Drizzt Do'Urden. Many, if not most, of these novels exist within the *Forgotten Realms* setting, and I should clarify that I have taken here to giving a few authors names in place of book titles, as there are simply too many publications to recount in this small section. The creation of novels based within the lore of TRPG settings such as *D&D*'s *Forgotten Realms* is immense, and only adds to reciprocate back onto TRPG games, as the novels inspire TRPG players to create, thanks to the officiated novels building up the lore for these popular settings, which can then be used by GMs at home. This makes a symbiotic process where TRPG games inspire novels whose characters enter and inspire TRPG games and back again. Famous novel characters may even appear in official modules for players to encounter when playing a TRPG campaign at home, being recognized by companies like *Wizards of the Coast*. We see many of these novel characters featured in campaign modules such as *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*, and even, to further prove its massive popularity discussed above, a *Critical Role* character is seen as a major figure in the official *Wizards of the Coast* campaign module, *Descent Into Avernus*. Thus, these other publications, especially the novels, feedback into the lore they base themselves in.

As for how the TRPG and novel relate, much has already been outlined across earlier chapters. However, a few interesting pieces remain to be discussed regarding these TRPG-based novels. For example, they are often based on the rules of the TRPG system they are drawing from. This is more obvious in the above-discussed CRPG, as most RPG video games have stats and abilities that slowly increase just as a TRPG character's do. However, Cover explains:

> As the novel is not written as a game, one might suppose that these features do not transfer. However, that does not appear to be entirely the case. A good deal of [*The Temple of Elemental Evil* novel] revolves around combat, and the characters clearly belong to a distinct class and race. In the battle scenes, a *D&D* player can recognize familiar spells and skills being used.... Of course the book does not talk about dice or saving throws, but even a casual *D&D* player will recognize this familiar game mechanic. (69)

The books exist in the novel form, but borrow the TRPG's mechanics as allusion to, and outline for, how their storyworld functions. It is similar to how a fan-fiction writer may use the world of Tolkien to tell a tangential tale. The TRPG novelists use their TRPG knowledge as a basis for writing; usually, adventure novels that tend to be then designed for a readership of other TRPG players who can recognize all the allusions to TRPG gameplay. They lose all the unique, collaborative, pieces of the TRPG, but retain the settings and lore from some of the more popular TRPG existences as a sort of allusion. These novels often feedback into this lore as well, as their solidified stories can be spread to many TRPG players and thus, through popularity, adopted as a canonical event for the particular setting they have embraced. Or, if the book has an original

TRPG inspired setting, that may be adopted by TRPG players as the setting for their own

campaigns, using the book as a lore basis.

Thus, the TRPG has progressed so far as a form as to have a long publication history

feeding back into the novel, a place where much of *D&D* originally spawned from, drawing so

much, as it did, from Tolkien and other fantasy tales. We see another symbiosis in this incredible

loop-back. The original TRPGs, notably *D&D*, took inspiration and concepts from Fantasy

novels, and now, with TRPG's popularity, TRPGs have begun to be inspiration for more Fantasy

novels. This creates a wonderful return to one of the form's origins, and thus has created a sort of

feedback loop. Furthermore, these TRPG inspired novels play a big role in creating and

expanding a popular setting's lore so as to then be used as a backdrop to campaigns by other

TRPG players who read the novels and desire to implement them into their game's history. Here

we once again see a symbiotic relationship, as the TRPG inspires novelists whose stories then

inspire more TRPG lore and settings to play in, which could then inspire more novels, and so on.

Podcasts & A Comic Adaptation

Similar in consumption to the livestream, but vastly different in creation, is the podcast.

Now, before delving into this audio medium, I will admit that there exist heavily edited video

forms of TRPG tales as well (see *Dimension 20* for just one of many examples). Some may play

a TRPG session and then take footage of it to then boil down, rearrange, or otherwise edit, to

create a product that is no longer "actual play." There may also be podcasts that exist in a

livestreamed format, or otherwise are not significantly edited so as to give the same immensely

authentic feel as an average livestream. However, the podcast form is better known for its post-editing to create its TRPG tales, while still often holding onto the charms of the table fabula, and it is this form of the podcast we progress with.

Many TRPG podcasts exist, including *Just Roll With It*, *Heart Beats*, *Very Random Encounters*, *20-Sided Stories*, *BomBARDed*, and most famously *The Adventure Zone*. In addition to actual-play podcasts like these come numerous podcasts that simply discuss TRPGs as a concept, sharing ideas or reviews. Some of these podcasts include *Dragon Talk*, *The Dungeoncast*, and *Character Creation Cast*. (There are also plenty of video creators who make edited TRPG content, including channels like *Nerdarchy*, *Taking20*, *How to be a Great Game Master*, *XP to Level 3*, and Mark Hulmes's channel *Sherlock Hulmes*. Further, there are TRPG-centered animators like *Dingo Doodles*, *JoCat*, *Adan*, *Kanekuo*, and *Puffin Forest.* There are also creators making TRPG-based skits, see *Deerstalker Pictures*, *Door Monster*, as well as TRPG character-cosplay-centric channels like *Ginny Di*). However, of the podcast list I am only an avid listener of the McElroy family's *The Adventure Zone*, and with my familiarity, and this podcast's popularity, it will be our focus.

The McElroy family is known for their podcasts. The three brothers, Travis, Justin, and Griffin, are well known for their popular comedy advice podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. Each of these brothers also have other podcasts that they do with friends, their wives, or guests. *The Adventure Zone* consists of these three brothers and their father, Clint McElroy, as they play a number of different TRPG systems, changing systems between campaigns as well as doing many one-shot liveshows as they tour the country. It is extremely difficult to determine just how many people listen to *The Adventure Zone* due to the podcast's availability across so

many different services. However, their popularity will become evident when we look to their publications, discussed further below. For now, we shall turn to *The Adventure Zone*'s form as a heavily edited podcast that still retains the actual-play feel.

While the McElroys do their podcasts, and conduct plenty of quality post-production edits like original music, voice distortions, a "previously on" call back section, and more, they also keep a lot of chatting and jokes from outside the storyworld, retaining that outer table fabula and keeping the feeling of simply listening in on a real TRPG session, which makes sense as they do actually play the game. This gives the podcast a feel similar to the higher quality livestreams, but it is ultimately not produced for live-consumption. The McElroys retain the ability to make edits, shift the story, and otherwise improve their tales in small ways that allow them to ensure the highest quality product for their listeners (except during their touring live-shows, in which case they may edit the audio before posting it online, but having been played before a live audience, the story is solidified as it happens, as it reaches an audience, making it closer to a natural TRPG game). In a real TRPG session, the music cannot always be perfectly timed with a sudden moment, nor can pacing be guaranteed to be ideal, as a TRPG session has many pauses to check rules. While the McElroys preserve their real reactions, not knowing what is coming as they are truly playing, and they leave in plenty or rule discussion, they can cut things out if it proves uninteresting or less important, and they can otherwise edit the show to give it better cohesion and narrative flow.

The original music, timed perfectly with some of the great improvised lines from the player cast, makes the moments even more impactful for a listener. We may not be a part of the creation, and this may make the listening-in less authentic than the actual playing of a TRPG, but

these touches align with one of the main benefits of playing a TRPG for a story rather than reading a novel: the heightened emotion. Small, radio-dramatic touches, like a musical climax, can add to the earlier described emotional highs of acts like rolling a crucial die. It is these highs that arguably make the fan-following of *The Adventure Zone* so large and dedicated, seen in the bountiful amounts of cosplay and fan arts created based on the show's moments and characters.

The most obvious example of the show's popularity and fanbase is the show being a *New York Times* Bestseller. The first campaign of *The Adventure Zone* is currently being adapted into comic book (or graphic novel) form by the McElroys and Carey Pietsch. Both of the first two comic books published, as the first two arcs of the campaign adapted, were #1 on the *New York Times* Paperback Trade Fiction Bestseller List when they were released (with the third awaiting publication now).

This comic book form brings with it its own differences to the original podcast, similar to those of the novel listed above. However, the added visual aspect to a previously audio-only work has allowed for a concrete shared imagination among readers, albeit while having to condense the arcs into a shorter form. This also means the form is shifting from audio-only to visual-only. Perhaps most interesting, in this example, is the inclusion of the table fabula within the comic. Rather than sticking solely to the storyworld being retold, like most novels would, the comics add new jokes, and keep old ones, in the form of consistently breaking the fourth wall. They even keep elements of the TRPG directly, as they show dice rolling on to the title page, and with the GM appearing in the corners to talk directly to the characters about game mechanics. This retaining of the table fabula in a print form, made by members of the TRPG community, supports the importance of the table fabula as an integral part of the TRPG. While other forms

may drop the table fabula in their adaptations, *The Adventure Zone* has managed to find a form in which the table fabula does not *need* to be dropped, allowing for a more TRPG-authentic reading experience. This retaining of the table fabula can be seen below, in a few pages released to the general public for news articles:

Figure 8. Two publicly released pages from *The Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited!*, the second *The Adventure Zone* comic release. Art and adaptation assistance provided by Carey Pietsch

As can be seen, the comic book retains strong, and comical, references to it being a TRPG in origin. This makes for a very unique publication that straddles the forms, while keeping the humor and story of the original podcast. Finally, the vast verbal descriptions can be conveniently minimized by the visual elements showing what otherwise must always be told. Meanwhile, the audio cues lost can be replaced with some classic comic book "WHAPS" and "CRACKS" to help supplement the lack of sounds, although the form is forced to concede the original soundtracks in favor of vibrant visuals. Nonetheless, this simply highlights the differing resources available in different formats, allowing for various benefits or drawbacks depending on the form utilized.

This comic and podcast in particular does an excellent job of showcasing the best parts of the TRPG, making it perfect for drawing in new players. We may lose the collaborative and live-play aspects (as listeners or readers), but we get the emphasization of emotional highs and lows with illustrations or musical climaxes. Plus, the keeping of table fabula in the podcast, and even retaining it in the comics, lets newcomers have a better idea of the TRPG as multi-fabulae form. Many of these other media forms can reach a wider audience than we can reach by just bringing new people in as players around a table, and thus *The Adventure Zone*'s brilliant mimicking of some of the best parts of the TRPG helps spread interest in the form surprisingly well to a possibly unfamiliar audience (while still of course being rewarding for TRPG or even *The Adventure Zone*-familiar readers to enjoy). Unlike many other of the above adaptations, the McElroys' recognize the table fabula's important role in the TRPG, and thus go out of their way to retain it even in a paper-bound form which most would assume could not accommodate such a fabula's adaptation. Nevertheless, the comic is still ultimately an adaptation, significantly

different to a proper TRPG game. This adaptation still lacks, for the audience, collaboration, and all the TRPG ideals that come with being a collaborating player (such as freedom to steer the narrative), and it loses the complete unknown of not having a next page to look ahead.

Campaign Modules

"Campaign module" refers to a pre-created campaign that is usually sold by the creators of the TRPG system. The most common occurrence of this is with *Wizards of the Coast* regarding *D&D*. While they also sell books that provide a larger array of spells, monsters, items, and settings, the campaign modules are more frequent in release and more bizarre in construction when compared to other media. Ultimately, a campaign module is an outline for a campaign. A GM may use a campaign module as a blueprint to insert the player-made characters and to guide them through a story that is partially pre-made. Naturally, the story is never set in stone, as the campaign module creators can no more tell where the players will take the tale than the GM can. Thus, campaign modules often consist of locations, overarching story ideas or motivations, suggested plot hooks, possible encounters, and more along these lines, being a blueprint rather than a tale in itself. Campaign modules can be described as the hints of a story, but ultimately the players will have to decide how they make their way through it. Thus, it should be clear that this type of publication is non-existent in other forms. People do not sell novel blueprints or film outlines to be filled in by authors or screenwriters. The only examples may be in writing prompts or in improvisational theatre prompts, but those are far less specific and less guided than

campaign modules are, hence why we do not see large numbers of those published. The campaign module is utterly unique to the TRPG.

Campaign modules have always known player unpredictability to be the case, leading to their being loose but expansive outlines. Cover details this idea with this quotation regarding an early campaign module:

> There is also a great excess of information in the module. There are areas that the players will never explore, characters they will never meet, treasures they will never find. Yet, it is all detailed by Gygax and Mentzer on the possibility that it will be a direction that the players choose to explore.... It is up to the DM exactly where and how [the collection of clues that lead to the next story arc are] obtained, allowing for flexibility in where the players go and who to talk to.... [The] module can indeed be used as a manual; a tool for creating a story rather than as a story itself. (64-65)

This philosophy around campaign modules, to a fluctuating degree, is seen not only implicitly in how they are laid out, but also directly in some of their passages.

For example, even a module such as *D&D 5e*'s, arguably quite rail-roady (or lacking in choice), *The Rise of Tiamat* tells us directly:

> This book outlines the overall structure of the adventure and presents many episodes and events with which to challenge the characters as they investigate the nefarious plots of the Cult of the Dragon. This is not, however, a script to be read aloud with stage directions that must be followed. *Tyranny of Dragons* [the name for the series of which this module is the last half] does not hold your hand and guide you step-by-step from the story's beginning to its inevitable conclusion. Instead, it presents people, creatures, locations,

and situations for the adventurers to explore and interact with in a constantly changing, lively way.

You, the Dungeon Master, play a vital role. The creators of *Tyranny of Dragons* have tried to foresee the most likely courses of action that the characters might take in the adventure. However, D&D players are curious and unpredictable... it is all but guaranteed that at some point during the adventure—and possibly at many points—the players will develop their own ideas about how to handle a situation or how to deal with the cult. And just like that, they'll be off and running in directions that aren't covered by this book. Those kinds of situations put a DM's skill to the test—but they also produce some of the greatest gaming moments and memories. (7-8)

This near-perfectly describes how a campaign module functions. While the *Tyranny of Dragons* story of two modules is often considered one of the most linear in its layout, it still leaves space for exploration around and outside of what is written, allowing for the TRPG's immense freedom to still function. Thus, this campaign module's introductory quote highlights the recognition of the TRPG's historical progression towards extreme player, and GM, freedom as a core part of the TRPG experience, even when you are utilizing a module book to guide you.

Other, more recent, modules push this ideal of what a module should be even further. *D&D 5e*'s *Curse of Strahd* starts its story description by giving the villain's history and motivations, as the rest of the module is filled with locales and possible plot hooks rather than a chapter by chapter story to follow. Some pieces are clearly meant to be accessed after others, but this campaign module alone has sparked many stories of completely different experiences, even so far as the killing of Strahd, the main villain, quite early compared to usual because of quick

thinking and happenstance. The module is designed to be a blueprint for your own experiences to play out. The GM is still there to guide the game; they simply have a large portion of their usual preparation already done for them. This module alone gives five pages for possible adventure hooks to begin the campaign, let alone all that is available to choose from, or stray from, once the adventure truly begins.

The campaign module for *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* starts out somewhat linear, only to then open up once the pieces of the story are all aligned, and even these linear pieces are hardly a roped off path, as the characters can still vary how they happen, as they are simply situations to possibly occur that can be placed in multiple different pre-existing situations the characters have created. Additionally, this campaign module exists with four different versions, as the GM chooses before the game begins which of the four villains this campaign will center around, allowing, right off the bat, for four different stories within the same module, not even including how differently all four of those could end up.

Finally, *Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage* is a module that is left almost entirely open, consisting of numerous levels (literally, altitudes underground) descending through different dungeon floors and locales. Each section simply describes what exists on the level, how it might be traversed, and the possible aftermaths of leaving it. Coupled with a few recommended plot hooks to give the characters motivation, this module hardly has any one storyline to force the players along, but rather provides a collection of pre-made locales and characters to utilize based on how the characters end up encountering them and how the GM wishes to characterize them.

Campaign modules act as a good show of the TRPG's general shift towards openness and the narrative pole. While most modules provide narrative hooks, a loose plot, and characters, some, like the above, simply give the GM maps and enemies to utilize as they see fit. The campaign module will always give the GM a prepared gaming-side of the TRPG, and, while many provide a loose story as well, they primarily leave the story in the hands of the GM and players. Modules recognize the unprecedented freedom of the form, as well as the form's growing emphasis on narrative rather than its (war)gaming roots, hence why it is the narrative side that is left in the capable hands of the GM. The modules simply provide suggested plot hooks and characters to assist; the publishers know the narrative side is the most volatile and the most interesting, so they do not try to constrain it in print.

Some modules even become famous enough to see many reiterations through the decades, being remade for both new system editions that come out and for newer generations of players to enjoy. Some among these are the aforementioned *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, the infamous *Tomb of Annihilation*, and the recently referenced *Curse of Strahd*. The *Curse of Strahd* module tells us the origins of the Strahd story and its evolution through time. The foreword explains the Strahd villain's origin in a fascination with the first modern literary foundation for a vampire from Byronic inspiration, the creation of their own game based on their Strahd lore in 1978, and the first *D&D* adventure out of it in 1982-83. In the time since, they explain:

> Since then, fans of *Ravenloft* [the original story's title] have seen many different creative
>
> perspectives on Barovia [the homeland of the vampiric villain, Strahd].... It continues to
>
> be one of the most popular Dungeons & Dragons adventures of all time. In its various

incarnations, each designer has endeavoured to bring something new to the ancient

legend of Strahd.... (4)

In this case we see how deep some of these popular settings and lores run. We also see that not

even the same story being told multiple times remains the same, always offering a different

experience due to the TRPG tenet of freedom lending a philosophy of always having a differing

experience no matter what. That, of course, on top of a creative desire not to simply release the

same-old-same-old. Nonetheless, other forms rarely have remakes as often as TRPG modules

may be remade to fit a new system. (Although Hollywood seems to be taking the movie industry

that way, the difference being TRPG players are delighted at remakes if there has been

significant time and an edition change, while most dislike Hollywood remakes nowadays).

One final common use of campaign modules that should be mentioned is the

cannibalizing of module resources for one's own campaign. A GM may be creating their own

original campaign story, they may even be using an original setting, but if they desire, they could

repurpose parts of a campaign module for their own use. Say the GM wants to create a dungeon,

they may simply take a dungeon from a campaign module publication, rename or rearrange a few

details to make it better fit their game, and thus use the pre-prepared dungeon from the module to

save time and effort. It may even be a learning experience, as the GM can see how an official

source has organized their dungeons or plot hooks without having to run entirely their campaign

module. Thus, campaign modules can be stitched together with other modules or other original

campaigns to help create the group's campaign story: all that is needed is some GM work to

smooth over the connections. This sort of Frankenstein-esque stitching together, or preparedness

poaching, can help a GM manage their time more efficiently via borrowing material prepared

and tested by another, and thereby have more time to work on their own storylines and unfolding plot (with most TRPG groups meeting regularly (perhaps once a week) this time management is crucial to GMs). This style of repurposing campaign module material is a common practice in the TRPG community, as it saves time for the GM and allows for a group to experience and utilize the official material without having to commit to running the entire campaign module.

While every module has an implied story, how they turn out is always different depending on players and GMs. Thus it could be argued that a module alone is hardly a narrative: it is simply the blueprint of one to be filled out in play, or to otherwise be taken from. They may contain areas of script to read, but this is almost exclusively for visual descriptions to start off the shared imagination of the pre-prepared locale. In general, these publications exist to help inspire the GMs who run them into explaining beyond the pages. The above described *The Adventure Zone*'s first campaign started as a module that the GM quickly edited, shortened, and moved completely out of once he was inspired and ready to create on his own. They are, in a way, half-publications: they are lore, locale, and story-suggestion providers, and purposefully little else. In this, they are a type of publication unique to TRPG players, for their use, being unlike any other form's publications.

Across the many forms of sharing TRPG stories outside of just playing a TRPG campaign, be they actual-play livestreams or podcasts, novel, comic, or video game adaptations, or campaign modules for play, the advent of sharing TRPG tales outside of physically joining game sessions has helped expand the community, add new sub-parts to the form (or bridges to other forms), and has highlighted the TRPG's uniqueness in many new ways. The scholarly

possibilities for cross-examining TRPG games and the adaptations they spawn are immense. Particularly as they lead to the same story being told in other forms, *as well as* vice versa. Even within *Wizards of the Coast* alone we see *D&D* causing book publications and official livestreams to be created, as well as other *Wizards of the Coast* properties becoming TRPG settings and modules, such as the conversion of *Magic the Gathering*'s card-game-originating universe into a TRPG setting.

We see TRPG's being inspired by settings in other media forms, to be used for making campaigns, *and* we see TRPG settings inspiring other publications as well. Then, different to simply inspiring, we see adaptations. This being the taking of a TRPG plot, not just its workings, settings, or lore, and making that specifically into another form, seen in *The Adventure Zone* comics and the coming *Critical Role* animated show. These adaptations do change things enough, making edits to the story or adding new additional content, but they generally follow the story as it occured, adapting directly rather than just taking inspiration. The adaptation of a non-TRPG tale into a TRPG campaign is less likely, as that suggests the players would need to mostly follow the premade plot of the other form's writing, which would contradict the TRPG's tenet of freedom and lead to more of a theatre situation of players acting out premade decisions than it would warrant a true TRPG experience.

When it comes to these adaptations and inspirations, the waters can become muddied as we try to determine when a TRPG story stops being a TRPG story. This is a concern for many other forms as well when they are adapted. In tackling these questions surrounding story and medium, Cover addresses several theories before stating:

> ... every story is conceived within a particular media, and thus can never be
>
> "media-independent,".... Nevertheless, we cannot deny that authors and readers have
>
> attempted to transfer stories between media and that there is often something we can
>
> recognize as common across these attempts. (58)

Cover goes on to dedicate a chapter to her cross analyzing of the various media tellings of *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, an analysis I would suggest reading if this particular avenue is of high interest to you. But, for us here, I simply desire to point to this interesting field and use some of the above outlined differences to further show, not only the TRPG's uniqueness, but how strong the TRPG community's growth has been. With adaptations flooding out of, not just into, the TRPG form, the struggles encountered when adapting highlight the TRPG's highly specific qualities, and the adaptation of a TRPG game into something else in the first place highlights the large audience that is awaiting TRPG content. This audience has changed a lot overtime, as we will discuss in the next chapter, but this market for TRPG adaptations shows a large fanbase, and creates a feedback loop of creating even more TRPG players as fans of the other forms encounter these adaptations or form-middling creations and become interested in the TRPG.

Finally, I shall note another small reason behind the necessity of these other forms. A TRPG fan who loves the lore may have an idea for a story from said lore, but it might not be one compatible with creating a TRPG campaign. Similarly, someone may have an idea for a story to tell, but they specifically want to tell it because it would make a great TRPG campaign. Some story ideas are incompatible with certain forms; this is a universal issue. The sonnet cannot easily, or as successfully, tell the same story that a massive novel can. Thus, the TRPG has spawned all this deep lore and all these popular settings, but there will be people who, having

been inspired to make a story out of the setting or lore, will realize the TRPG will not work for that particular tale. Similarly, ideas had for TRPG campaigns cannot be easily or satisfyingly done in a different form. This is due to how specific and unique the TRPG is. Thus, many TRPG-set novels, having had a pre-planned plot the writer wanted to tell, could not be done as TRPG campaigns, as then the author could not guarantee the plot they desired to tell would occur due to player freedoms and random dice. Similarly, if the story I want to see unfold is based around a desire to see how different people would react and interact with it, especially if the story wants to be dynamic and less certainly known, then we will make the TRPG tell it, rather than another form.

When adapting, or even just taking inspiration, there is a lot of struggle encountered as to how to translate the TRPG's unique properties, especially those of free choice and the table fabula. But, the end result is consistent: it proves the TRPG is a strong form, with a large community interested in its unique possibilities as well as its various established lores, and that the community is only growing larger. Even outside of *D&D*-started shows and comics, we have seen the TRPG partially penetrate popular media, in shows like *Stranger Things*, which draws inspiration from *D&D*. While the table fabula may often be abandoned for adaptation, the adoption of TRPG narratives into other forms should stand as a strong proof of concept to the form's popularity. These partial forms do not fully capture the essence of the TRPG, but they do symbiotically grow the TRPG community, and thus help to create even more TRPG creators.

- Chapter 7 -

Socialization & Evolution in the TRPG Community

In the previous chapter we discussed the TRPG's newfound explosion in popularity. This came, in part, thanks to the reciprocal nature of adaptations, podcasts, livestreams, and other forms of media. However, the games, the community around them, and the public's opinion on both, have been major factors as well. Most of our TRPG popularity boom comes from *D&D 5e*'s surge, and many suggest that 5th edition *D&D* is so popular because it is easy to access for beginners. Gendy Alimurung explains:

> More people are playing, partly, because it has never been easier. D&D used to be a nitpicky, number-crunchy affair. Then, in 2014, Wizards of the Coast released a new edition — the beloved 5th edition — that is more streamlined, more spontaneous and less rule-driven. As the longtime L.A.-based player Barry Thomas Drake, 58, explains: "No more arguing about the precise number of mouse hairs you need for a certain spell." (*The Washington Post*)

While this comical exaggeration may not be the most accurate example of *D&D*'s past complexity, and plenty of players enjoy the complexity of older systems (or newer systems that have remained complex), it does further highlight the TRPG's general trend towards a narrative focus rather than particulars in rules. Sarah Whitten, quoting Greg Tito, senior communications manager at Wizards of the Coast and a major part of their *Dragon Talk* podcast, summarizes this succinctly: "The newest edition of 'Dungeons and Dragons' centers more on storytelling than previous versions, Tito said, allowing players to focus more on narrative than the technical game

mechanics" (*CNBC*). And narrative, as opposed to the more wargaming side of the TRPG, is something we all have some understanding of long before we think about trying a TRPG system.

This ease of access and narrative focus has helped lead to there being many more players, from nearly all age groups and backgrounds. This shift in popularity would also be impossible if the public eye had not grown far more favorable towards the TRPG, in part thanks to all the new media surrounding it (as we discussed in the previous chapter). The community's growth has also been assisted by the newfound inclusivity and endless creativity of the fanbase, who serve not simply as consumers, but as immediate creators as well. Anyone playing a TRPG campaign (or planning one) is part of the creative process. Outside of TRPG playing there are homebrew creations (the making of your own classes, races, abilities, items, and more), fanfictions surrounding favorite characters from adaptations, livestreams, or podcasts, and a ton of fanart, be it of these characters who are famous from adaptations of real-play media, or of their own characters, or scenes, from their own private campaigns. The TRPG community is growing, and has been growing and *changing* for a long time, and so, as our pages near their close, it is important to point out how the TRPG community evolved over time. This includes how the community reached the inclusivity it holds today. We will also touch on the "social frame," flag avenues for future research, and think about why we play in the first place.

TRPGs as a Subculture & The Social Frame

If the community for TRPG's, like *D&D*, has been around for so long, and has been seeing so much growth, then is the TRPG community its own subculture? To answer not only

that, but how socializing and the "social frame" relate to the TRPG, we will mostly look to the

work of sociologist Gary Alan Fine. However, to begin us on the right track, we will first turn to

Jennifer Grouling Cover's succinct explanation of some of Fine's work:

> According to Fine (1983), a subculture must be distinct from other groups in society,
>
> must have common activities, and share cultural elements (p. 25). In addition, a
>
> subculture must have a network of communication for its members and both the members
>
> and those outside the subculture must recognize it as a seperate group (Fine, 1983, p. 26).
>
> Fine (1983) applies these criteria to tabletop gamers, and despite some changes,
>
> they still seem applicable.... There are still plenty of people to make up a subculture and,
>
> in fact, the hobby is more mainstream [and popular] then at the time of Fine's study. Fine
>
> (1983) went on to note that playing the game is, itself, the activity shared by members of
>
> this culture. He also shows that common references and terms indicate that *D&D* players
>
> share cultural elements (p. 29). (149)

Cover goes on to describe how shared cultural references go beyond terms so as to include

commonly known lore, storylines, or characters. Cover then addresses the expansion of ways to

communicate beyond the original magazines and conventions that Fine references from the

1980s (see internet forums, wikis, and more). I would also suggest that with the advent and

popularity of livestreams or podcasts, someone can be a member of the subculture even if they

themselves are not actively "playing the game." While it is easier than ever to find a group and

begin playing, not everyone feels comfortable doing so or has the access to do so. These people,

however, may still be within the community, within the loop of subculture knowledge, from

simply consuming TRPG media. They may even be a creator within the community with fanart

or the like, all while not being a player themselves. Thanks to the ease of community brought by the internet, many can easily enter the TRPG subculture without necessarily being an avid player, although most likely are.

To give further insight into the interesting vagueness of "common references and terms" that indicate a shared subculture, we will turn to Fine directly. Fine explains:

> Hobbyists frequently discuss the game in a highly technical fashion, attempting to resolve seemingly minor issues in the game structure. The extensive use of technical talk, much of which seems incomprehensible to an outsider, suggests that gaming has a subculture. Players discuss the best techniques for rolling dice.... Other topics are the weight of medieval armor and the economic feasibility of orbiting star bases. (30)

TRPG terminology is a huge factor in this idea of "subculture talk." I have often found myself, in the writing of this work, using TRPG jargon that is common among TRPG players, but means nothing, or something entirely different, to the outside reader. Terms like "character builds," "crits," "spell slots," and so on, act as a barrier to entry to the community. However, having literal books to help you learn the rules, as well as a community that is extremely welcoming to new players on the whole, this entry bar is easy to pass. It also helps that much of the TRPG terminology is borrowed from other games or other fantasy sources. Nonetheless, just as an outsider to American football does not know what "linebacker," "first down," or "hail Mary" might mean, a new person to the TRPG community has a small hump to get over before they can fully comprehend the language that is used casually by avid players. Furthermore, there has to be some ingroup knowledge anyway for a community to be accurately branded as a subculture. Some will even be more interested in joining the TRPG subculture because it grants an ingroup

identity via the common terms and knowledge. Thus, the TRPG gains the benefits of being a subculture, while also maintaining a low barrier to entry, noting our analogy to American football, where there are many terms and a depth of knowledge to learn, but ultimately it is not difficult to enter that subculture. A similar low barrier of entry exists for the TRPG, and with so many differing systems, giving varying levels of mechanical complexity, there is a wide range of subgroups that can be entered with differing difficulty within the overarching TRPG subculture as well.

Similar to this use of game jargon, many TRPG players will discuss events relating to the TRPG in casual ways that may confuse an outsider, but do not confuse themselves thanks to their already advanced ability to recognize fabulae, and to oscillate between them, but also their private, contextual knowledge. Fine gives an example:

> We can imagine such gaming statements as "Did you kill James?" being taken in two ways, but this confusion did not occur, partly because context and paravocal clues indicated that no "real" crime was being discussed, even though "real" names were used. The misunderstandings between frames are relatively minor—more suitable to a chuckle than to a blush" (200).

Indeed, these misunderstandings can be humorous and are sometimes seen when two TRPG players are discussing game events in a public setting, only to realize that to those around them who are hearing their storyworld plans of "poisoning Richard" or "casting fireball when I see Arthur" may interpret the conversation as alarming or odd. While this is more of a comical aside, humorous moments like these bring us to the more small-scale socialization that occurs amongst a player group.

Regarding the social interactions among a TRPG group, Fine states in his introduction, "when a gaming group exists over several weeks or months, this shared culture [created by the shared experiences of playing a campaign together] can become quite extensive and meaningful for group members" (2). This shared culture, described by Fine, is " a unique friendship culture. Players revealed opinions of others, jokes recurred and certain weekly rituals emerged" (144). These recurring jokes develop so consistently, in part, because "gaming groups have two levels of meaning from which they can construct culture. Idioculture grounded in one level may be used to comment on events on either level," as well, meaning the group can draw culture from the storyworld and the table fabula, or possibly both interacting (Fine 144).

In my own, consistent campaign groups, we have plenty of recurring jokes, some from storyworld occurrences, some unrelated to the storyworld, and others mixing the two. For example, one player-character giving the rest of the group a wink before enacting a "plan" which turned out to be poorly thought through (or more accurately, not thought through at all) spawned recurring references to that moment, via characters and players joking about "winking" before doing something unexplained or possibly foolish. Outside of the storyworld, one of our players is infamous for having to use the bathroom, or brush his teeth, right before the game starts. This has led to a recurring joke where, when we are about to begin, someone will first sarcastically ask if he needs to go brush his teeth, use the bathroom, or shower. This in-joke occurs entirely within the table fabula, unrelated to the storyworld campaign, but stems from our consistent meeting and from the session being seconds from starting.

Moments like these are arguably on their own fabula level, separate to the occurences of the TRPG all together. Cover and Fine refer to this as the "social fabula," but often use it in ways

that relate it more closely to the TRPG. They generally argue that the social fabula relates to

occurences during the game as well, but specifically those moments that do not reference the

game mechanics nor interact with the storyworld directly. I disagree, as anything occurring in

reality during a session is going to affect the storyworld, or at least, the table fabula. However,

for further discussion of the minute complications of the fabulae, alongside a critique of how

Cover handles them, see appendix A. For now, we return to our social groups and the personal

culture they form.

We have discussed a little about how "references to previous game encounters are

common," see our "wink" example, and while this may be obvious to some, it is a foundational

block of any TRPG group culture, and can thus affect how the group interacts and can even,

thereby, touch the storyworld (Fine 139). To put it as Fine does:

> Game events can be meaningfully referred to by the group as a gaming history develops.
>
> While a historical focus applies to all groups to some extent (McBride 1975), in gaming
>
> groups this historical focus is particularly salient, because the game events continue
>
> [typically] from week to week, and the gaming episode is seen as having a history of its
>
> own.... The existence of the group history distinguishes group members from outsiders
>
> (Bales 1970: 153-54). (139)

The repeated meetings that span two fabulae can cause interaction across them when these

recurring jokes appear. In our "wink" example, we have connected jokes across campaigns

because we, as players, remember the origin of the joke, and thus use it to poke fun at the

original, player/offender. We laugh on the table fabula level at the storyworld occurrences, and

we then take those jokes into other minor storyworld occurrences as a callback that only we as

players can appreciate, as naturally the characters we inhabit would not understand the references to previous campaigns in other storyworlds. Furthermore, the recurring references to this event of poor planning serve as a lesson to us. As Fine says, "players shared a fantasy culture and *used* their past histories for strategic ends. Because of the importance of shared events for the game structure, this construction of a group history plays a significant role in ongoing interaction" (141). In earlier chapters I have mentioned the benefits of playing with an experienced, and long-established, TRPG group. Fine bolsters this further, suggesting the shared culture created by a TRPG history can both create a more fun gaming atmosphere and also feed back into the storyworld in the form of recurring jokes or references, being reminders of lessons learned from previous stories.

However, there is a downside to these gaming group friendships, as is suggested above with, "the existence of the group history distinguishes group members from outsiders." Not only do inside jokes make it harder for new players to enter any particular group, but these groups can often fail to solidify friendships outside of the gaming session. Fine explains:

> It appears that these social ties often do not transcend the gaming settings; gaming friends need not be, and frequently are not, friends outside the gaming group. The interaction between one's gaming network and one's outside friendship network is surprisingly small, despite some overlap. Gaming groups, like other urban leisure activities, are a means of escaping one's social network and finding another, based on common interests, segregated from the interests that one has in the workaday world. Although members do recruit their friends into this social world, friends who do not choose to participate remain friends. Furthermore, the recruitment generally occurs individually. Although gamers

bring friends to their gaming group, it is less likely for them to bring the game to their

friendship groups. (237)

It is true that TRPGs are often a means of escape. It is further true that plenty of the people we

frequently play TRPGs with may not be our friends outside of that interaction. I once played an

online campaign with a man from Alaska. I remember his character, I remember a few minor

facts about his life, but outside of the game we did not speak, and I have not kept up with him.

He was only a part of our campaign culture, but never solidified into my "friendship network."

However, I originally became a TRPG fan because of what Fine suggests rarely happens: Friends

bringing the game into our friendship group.

Some of what Fine suggests about how TRPG networking occurs has become obsolete

with the popularity of the internet. Fine may have been correct in the 1980s, but the popularity of

livestreams, podcasts, and adaptations have added new ways of entering the TRPG subculture. I

was introduced to TRPGs when some friends of mine heard about *Critical Role* on social media,

watched it, and decided to gather our friend group to give *D&D* a try, having learned the rules, in

part, from watching the livestream. Then, as that first campaign unfolded, I watched *High*

Rollers to further learn the rules and interactions common within *D&D 5e*. I have also been

brought into TRPG groups through a friend inviting me along, but that is no longer the near-sole

way into the once secretive club that was the TRPG community. With the internet allowing

access to livestreams, podcasts and other media, we see people getting into the game (often using

readily available online resources to further learn, or even play remotely) without needing to be

brought into a pre-established fold by an already playing friend. While often people are still

initially introduced by their friends, many are now learning of the TRPG through social media,

adaptations, livestreams, and more.

TRPG culture has greatly evolved since Fine published on *D&D* in 1983. The community

has become more inclusive, and the ability to access it in the first place has skyrocketed. Before,

you needed to visit local hobby shops, attend TRPG events, or have friends who were already

playing the game in order to have an access point into the form. However, the TRPG's growing

popularity and its ease of access via the internet have made it easier, not simply to learn the rules

of the game or to meet existing TRPG community members, but to hear about the game in the

first place. While not the sole contributor to the TRPG's newfound popularity, the internet, with

its livestreams, podcasts, online playing tools, and social media, has been instrumental in

opening the gates to the TRPG community for any who become interested.

Furthermore, the concerns about your TRPG group being detached from your friendship

network are less founded today. While still a notable occurrence, the new and immense

popularity of texting (or otherwise online messaging) people within a TRPG group who you used

to be able to meet only occasionally, in-person, often at events, can now be kept up with

constantly if you choose to do so. Furthermore, while there is still this tendency to only relate to

each other as TRPG players, many people find that this leads to consistent, out-of-game, casual

conversation based on making jokes about the shared game culture. Or, even better, if this is an

anxiety of yours, you can always simply practice what my TRPG groups tend to do: Have an

hour or more before the weekly session begins where you are all just talking, be it about the

coming session or, more likely, about the occurences of the week. Regular TRPG sessions online

have been one of my primary ways of keeping in-touch with many friends who I would

otherwise not see often, and may not think to avidly text. While TRPG groups can often fail to become friend groups (which many are likely fine with), they can also lead to regular speaking with friends, a shared culture, and, with the popularity of TRPG media, the entering of a whole fansbase from which new friends can be drawn.

And what of the concerns of inside jokes and the shared culture making others into "outsiders," or making it difficult to penetrate into a TRPG group? Well, while a new addition may be an outsider, unaware of the group's culture and histories, experience has shown me that if there is one thing TRPG players love to do, it is to retell TRPG stories, scenes, or funny occurences to those who have not heard them. And TRPG players are naturally encouraged to do this, as it would mean adding another player into the fold and thus expanding the people they can play with in a world where scheduling conflicts can often break up groups. As well as, of course, there being the obvious inclination of wanting to share your hobby with others. TRPG players experience their own group subculture within the larger group subculture of the community as a whole, and as a community founded on a collaborative storytelling experiences, they are prone to kindly introducing new players into the game, while regaling them with tales of the storyworlds and campaigns they have experienced in the past.

Evolutions in Community: Public Opinion, Education, & Inclusivity

"I grew up in the '90s and it was sort of at the end of this satanic panic that surrounded

not just 'Dungeons and Dragons' but RPGs (role playing games) in general," Jeanneret,

who plays Rikki Huckster on "Relics and Rarities," said in a video posted by Geek &

Sundry Wednesday.

"Something was weird about kids getting together in a basement and discussing magic

that kind of scared the culture as a whole and it's been cool to see this transition and

acceptance both, I think, in large part to Geek & Sundry, Nerdist and Alpha and all of

these programs," he said. "We're at the forefront of making it accessible to people."

(Whitten)

It's true, as Whitten puts it, "The days of hiding away in a basement rolling dice and

playing 'Dungeons and Dragons' in darkness is over," and while this introductory phrase relies

more on stereotypes than it does reality, it has its foundations. *D&D*, and TRPGs in general, have

had a cloud over them in the past. This has been in part due to the inaccessibility of the culture

before the internet (as partially discussed above) which thus paved the way for negative public

opinion when events like the "Satanic panic" came along. While past issues like this are not the

only problem that TRPGs have had to move pass before entering their current state of popularity

and inclusivity (we will be shortly discussing the hobby's sexist past), the public opinion of

D&D, as shaped by its players and the "Satanic panic," left a lasting effect that is only recently

washing away with the form's newfound successes in other media (once again: livestreams,

podcasts, etc.) and the adulthood success of past players. We will begin in the past, starting with

the Satanic panic as well as examining the more realistic and identity-based issues of the *D&D*

community in the 1980s.

While today most parental outrage and media-blame will point, mostly nonsensically, at video games or violent movies, in the 1980s a wave of hate focussed on *D&D*. To put it simply, and in the words of Gendy Alimurung:

> During the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, D&D got a bad rap. Religious groups who associated it with the occult and devil worship feared the game's power over impressionable young minds. When two teenagers, both avid players, committed suicide, they launched a campaign against it. (*The Washington Post*)

In short historical summary, assisted by a 2016 "Dungeons & Dragons: Satanic Panic" *Retro Report* by *The New York Times*, the panic had its public founding in the disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III and the private investigator hired to find him, William Dear. Dear believed *D&D* played a role in the disappearance, but in the end Egbert was found, having been in hiding after a failed suicide attempt. Tragically, Egbert would later commit suicide successfully, and Dear would write a book in which he heavily implicated *D&D*, even titling it *Dungeon Master*. This news story's publicity led to suicides across the nation being blamed on *D&D*, and thus led to an evangelical movement to ban the game. Founders like Gary Gygax, a religious man himself, found the accusations that *D&D* taught demonology and promoted murder to be ludicrous, but concerned parents bought in. While little would come out of the movement outside of bad publicity, which would eventually fade, the attempts at banning the game did ironically boost *D&D*'s sales and popularity. TRPG players are often characterized as outcasts who were seeking an activity centered in escapism, and thus, they flocked to *D&D*.

The Satanic panic itself, and stories like Egbert's, would even spawn movie adaptations depicting what Dear had originally thought had been occurring before finding Egbert. His

original concern was that *D&D* players became lost in immersion, disconnecting completely from reality. This, coupled with the above mentioned evangelical concerns of fantasy violence becoming real violence and concerns of children engaging in demonology (due to the very presence of demons in the game), are issues we have seen with nearly every new form of media. The novel, the movie, and now, especially, the video game, have all been blamed for their supposed effects on children, only to later become a normal part of life once most concerns are debunked.

Historically the public eye, generally coming from conservative parents, tends to assume any new form to be corrupting. In our contemporary age we see this with videogames. In the recent past concern was seen in surrounding TV shows and movies. When the novel first gained popularity it was viewed as a corrupting force liable to "ruin" young women. Even *Don Quixote* was a parody suggesting the dangers of reading too many chivalric romances. Furthermore, the concerns surrounding devil worship being promoted by the game would make no sense to anyone aware of the game's common themes at the time. We already discussed the tendency for "good trumps evil" stories in the TRPG of the 1980s via Fine. But, to further highlight this, the *D&D* publishing company of the time hired psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers to explain on the radio, "There is good and evil in life, and the way *Dungeons & Dragons* is set up is that good triumphs over evil" (*The New York Times*). Thus, unsurprisingly, even the basis of these evangelists' concerns were unfounded.

Nonetheless, early *D&D*'s granted outcast status led to its mixing with other subcultures which received a similar treatment. *D&D*'s early days are often associated with subgroups like heavy metal music fans. This connection can be seen extending into today, as clothing brand

Death Saves creates apparel based around an aesthetic mixing of heavy metal and fantasy *D&D*. The TRPGs stemming from wargaming, as well as its percieved Satanic associations, led to it mixing with the outcast subculture of hardcore music, which itself had its own "Satanic panic" in the form of scares over satanic backmasking in lyrics. While the TRPG has long shed these Satanic associations, some of the original aesthetic combinations stay with us today in the form of things like *Death Saves* clothing, as many teen players from the 1980s have now become successful adults, creating entertainment, apparel, and anything else, based around their teenage hobbies, most notably, *D&D*.

Many of the TRPG players of the past have gone on to be successful writers and TV personalities: Stephen Colbert, Anderson Cooper, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Junot Díaz, and many more, including Joe Manganielo, who famously has a *D&D* themed basement where he invites any and all celebrities to come try the game. (Stephen Colbert has even recently returned to *D&D*, playing a one-shot GMed by *Critical Role*'s Matthew Mercer to raise money for *Red Nose Day 2019*). This is in part thanks to the reality of what TRPGs teach young people: not demonology, but (in the words of Fine in the *NYT*'s "Retro Report" interview) the game, rather, "provided [young players] a variety of other skills, leadership skills, negotiation skills," and general storytelling and imaginative skills (*The New York Times*). Junot Díaz further suggests that, in playing, he:

> learned an enormous amount about what it meant to be courageous, and what it meant to be compassionate, and the kind of moral, hard moral, choices that one needs to make in real life, in this kind of fake, sort-of imagined, plane of action.... It's a great thing to dream yourself in other places and it helps understand who you are, it's just nice to spend

a lot of time thinking, imagining, in a group, collaborating. Imagination is a good thing, man, very powerful. (*The New York Times*)

Díaz also highlights the game's benefits for minorities specifically, giving his own thoughts as a "young immigrant from the Domnican Republic" when he was playing (*The New York Times*):

> This was a revolution. Being a bunch of kids of color—in a society that tells us we're nothing—being permitted, under your own power, to be heroic, to have agency, to do the hero stuff, to take and be on adventures. There was nothing like it for us, it was very, very, very, very impactful. (*The New York Times*)

So, while *D&D* got a "bad rap" from concerned parents and zealous evangelicals, the kids who were playing it at the time came away with great skills and with newfound freedom. In a game where you can be anything, the opportunities to have adventures and their importance to children, who often felt like outcasts, was immense. And, as for the skill benefits granted by the game, a twist occured, described well by Alimurung:

> Today, however, the warhammer has swung the opposite way: D&D is considered wholesome, therapeutic.
>
> While parents of one of those teens [during the satanic panic] sued a school principal in 1983 for allowing her son to play, teachers now organize students into D&D after-school groups and summer camps. Some therapists use D&D to teach autistic kids social skills. And when a UCLA researcher adapted the game for a third-grade class, the students improved in areas including math, reading comprehension and conflict management. (*The Washington Post*)

In our current age of parental concern surrounding screen time, parental opinion on *D&D* has

flipped from terror to campaigns being some parents' solution for social activity. And, with the

skill sets developed by TRPGs from the above list of reading, math, and social skills, there is

also storytelling, improvisation, and many other benefits. Returning to *Shared Fantasy*, Fine tells

us:

> Gaming is also claimed to facilitate such behavioral skills as acting ability (Gygax
>
> 1978:7), synthesizing information (Johnston 1980), decision-making, leadership, and
>
> role-playing. Role-playing skills are particularly important in that they are the focal point
>
> of these games. Consistent with the belief that games perform an enculturative function,
>
> one gamer writes:
>
>> What do people do in life, other than play roles? We are the people we are,
>>
>> because we selected roles when we were children. We know how to behave in
>>
>> most situations because we practiced playing our roles in childhood games....
>>
>> Apart from the fact that RPGs [role-playing games] can be just plain fun, they can
>>
>> help us survive in our shifting cultural environment by restoring our childish
>>
>> ability to vary the number of roles we can play in "real" life, and allowing us to
>>
>> explore the nature of that "reality" through engaging in fantasy. (54)

While becoming more philosophical than I had planned, TRPGs do indeed allow us to learn

useful skills, while exploring themes and moral quandaries, that inform our real life through

fantasy.

In this way, the playing of the TRPG is much like the practice of reading novels to better

understand people. Or, the form's benefits are reminiscent of a quote attributed to Picasso, "every

child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." The TRPG, once railed against by conservative Christians as being a source of evil, has always been a source of great learning, practical or otherwise, and has thereby been embraced in the modern day as a bonding tool in schools, communities, and families. But, we have set out to track more of the changes in the TRPG community than just public opinion. There is also the question of inclusivity, an issue that, at least regarding misogyny, the general *D&D* community of the 1980s failed to reach.

While *D&D* also had some issues with availability to less wealthy individuals, thus leading to a partial culture of players who "flatter themselves by claiming that they are more intelligent than the general public [because of generally higher education levels]," this issue would be easier solved than the sexist concerns (Fine 41). More ease of availability, while not truly available to people of any economic background, has helped end some of this stigma. But the male-domination of the hobby, which still exists today, albeit to a lesser extent, is well described by Fine. In surveys and convention attendance, Fine consistently found female representation to be less than 5%, despite Gygax's estimates of "10% to 15%" (41). Fine, writing in the early 1980s, notes how strange this is: "this lack of female involvement is striking, particularly in light of the benefits claimed for gaming by its proponents, the increasing equality of women, and the decline of sex-typed behaviors. Virtually all gamers believe that women, if they became involved in gaming, would enjoy it as much as men, and comments from female gamers seem to support this" (62). But, as Fine continues his exploration, the reason becomes plenty clear. Although, living in an age where we still have some of these problems, albeit we

more often face gaming stigma against women playing modern video games, perhaps what comes next will not be surprising to some readers.

While some of Fine's published-in-1983 phrasing or sources suggest an uncertainty between biological or social learning differences for why women were less involved in certain games or activities, we know now almost all of these concerns stem from society. Nonetheless, the quotes he pulls and suggestions he makes, coming from a celebrated sociologist writing at the time, and from within the subculture, prove to show us some loosely plausible suggestions, and, more importantly, Fine shows us the mindset of many of these gamers who he interviews and observes. After referencing multiple studies that suggested young women were less likely to become involved in longer games, Fine quotes a gamer and then proceeds noting a possible, social-based, reluctance:

> The issue of the length of games was commented upon by one regular gamer:
>
> > I don't know whether it's instinctually, culturally, constitutionally, or whatever, [women are] just not able or willing to maintain that kind of interests for hours and hours and hours the way these guys maintain it [Personal interview]
>
> .... A further difference is based on the sex-role labels given to games; girls may be reluctant to play games that are considered male games. (64)

Even some women who Fine interviews suggest that "girls just don't have enough imagination" or that the games are "too complicated for girls" (64). Clearly, the cultural misogyny, still existent today but even more flagrant in the 1980s, that led to beliefs of women having inferior intellect to men, thus stopping them from having attention spans lasting hours or stopping them

from being able to handle the "complicated" rules, played into how many male gamer's thoughts about women, and even how some non-gaming women thought about womanhood too.

These proclaimed sex differences are ultimately socially coded, not biological. They are also self-reinforcing, as, if these women Fine interviewed perceive that they cannot handle the game, while simultaneously using that assumption to prevent themselves from properly trying the game, then the presumption will be assumed correct and will propagate further. The additional social coding of mathematics, battles, and gaming in general, as activities for "boys" acted as a further false-barrier to female entry into the TRPG community. This coding of martial interests as being solely masculine would have impacted *D&D* even worse in the 1980s, due to the form's earlier emphasis on battle rather than narrative. Of course, women, just as much as men, can be interested in both the TRPG's (war)gaming pole and its narrative pole, but ingrained social coding led to (and continues to lead to, albeit to a lesser extent) the unnecessary segregation of activities and hobbies.

The male-coding of the TRPG mostly stems from its wargaming roots, as we see even worse 1980s misogyny offenders in the wargaming sphere. One need only look at the world of the popular wargaming system *Warhammer 40k*, in which women cannot be space marines, to recognize the extreme focus on the masculine fantasy, and near complete exclusion of females. Furthermore, the problematic social idea of "women being afraid of numbers" affected early TRPGs harshly, and still carries social distortions today, seen in the low percentages of female mathematicians, engineers, and computer scientists. However, the rabbit hole of socially and systemically ingrained biases against women engaging in math-related fields or hobbies is far too

deep for us to dive into here, so we will simply leave that discussion there, having recognized the role it played in diminishing the number of early (and contemporary) female TRPG players.

Fine then moves on to more concrete issues that were faced when trying to recruit female gamers. For one, as mentioned above, the TRPG originally came out of wargaming, and, as Fine points out, "since war gaming is a virtually all-male activity, women were unlikely to be recruited in this way in the early stages of gaming" (65). Fine also explains that most subcultures that would have a reason to intersect with the TRPG, and thus would have people tempted into becoming players, were male-dominated. While Fine points out that "most science fiction fans are men, and space travel is a popular male fantasy theme," he then pivots to quoting a gamer who suggests, "We're a little weird, you know, it's almost all men... you talk about war and things like that... there's not a lot of women interested in that" (65). Thus, gamers at the time also tended to believe women had no interests in the fields of intrigue that they were exploring in play, so would not as often think to recruit them into the subculture.

This assumption of female disinterestedness then compiles with another tendency, often reflected in the game systems themselves:

Medieval games are structured particularly for male characters, reflecting the contemporary view of the Middle Ages. As a result, women as female characters have little importance. Male players comment that female characters should be treated as property and not as human beings. Particularly in *C & S* [*Chivalry & Sorcery*, an early TRPG] the role of women is limited by the restrictions imposed by the code of courtly love. While there are a few female fantasy and science fiction characters with whom a woman can identify, the vast majority of characters are male. *C & S* rules give human

characters a 75% chance of being male [a relic from when entire characters were produced by random chance], and elves, dwarves, and hobbits an 85% chance of being male. The presumption that a dwarven warrior, elven mage, or hobbit adventurer is more likely to be male is obviously not based upon a reflection of historical circumstance, although it does reflect the content of fantasy literature.

This means that women who wish to participate must portray male characters. (65-66)

While plenty of players enjoy playing a sex or gender separate to their own, it is obvious from the system rules alone why women would not feel welcomed entering these fantasy worlds. With their male counterparts upholding a patriarchal setting under the guise of attempted historical realism, despite all the magical and fantasy races, women would obviously feel immediately belittled or excluded. Moreover, some is explained by the male-dominated origins in fantasy novel sources that *D&D* and other TRPGs drew so much inspiration from (see "hobbits" appearing in the above quotation).

Fine then acknowledges that while "males deny" that they treat female gamers inequitably, "females recognize their low status, at least when they first join a group" (68). Fine even mentions Gygax noting that a designer hired had had difficulties before:

She said, "at first they didn't want me to play" and then they would let her play, they made her play a male character first. Then, after she played a while, she could play whoever she wanted. [Personal interview] (68)

This hand-holding, and frankly infantilization of female players, would obviously discourage many who wanted to join the hobby. A more surprising quotation comes when Fine quotes an

interviewee regarding if women are accepted by male players, and then expounds on what is said:

> They're accepted and they're sort of treated special. I mean people make a little joke about them, or talk to them in kind of a kidding way, and it's quite obviously a reflection of our own societal values. You know, they're making sexual remarks to the girl and teasing her about sex and so on: it's considered standard, no big deal. [Personal interview]

Although some women may find this camaraderie enjoyable and respond in kind, others feel uncomfortable or recognize social or political implications, particularly since the game simulates an oppressive male society....

In addition, female players, especially those without established relationships in the group, may be treated as sex objects:

> Andy says to Mark: "Denise turns Bruce on. She walked by and the table moved up three inches." [Field notes]

... Many women might feel uncomfortable in these settings. A "locker room" atmosphere sometimes prevails, and some male players feel that female players might inhibit them:

> *Brian*:... I don't get as carried away as I do.... When I'm with new people I don't get carried away too badly. And the same thing with females. There's a lot of things that you do in *C & S* or *D & D* or even *Traveller* that would embarrass you, if you went out and did it now.... A lot of people I know go in and pick up a woman and just walk off. . . . Some people get a little carried away and rape other

people [in the game]. . . . Well, I've seen a lot of players just kind of calm down because of [females]. [Personal interview]

It is striking that players consider inhibitions that prevent characters from engaging in fantasy rape to be a problem, but such is male informal interaction (See also Fine 1981). Groups vary in the actions permisseable within the fantasy context; fantasy rape is not legitimate in every male group. (68-69)

While Fine highlights that these interactions are not representative of the entire male gamer populace, he is obtaining most of his data from local convention goers, suggesting that a lot of this "locker room" atmosphere is coming from the most publicly available events for female gamers to try out the game (at the time).

Furthermore, this "calming down" because of a woman gamer being involved highlights the stereotypical make-up of the TRPG group of the 1980s: a group of nerdy guys who are uncomfortable around women. This itself is self-fulfilling, as of course a subculture of men is going to be uncomfortable around women when women are practically excluded from said group, thus limiting the amount of interactions these men would have had with women. And, of course, as we will continue discussing below, the male-domination of the field led to a gaming environment that was unfamiliar with women while also pursueing male-seuxual-fantasies through the game. This is a combination that, while not existing in every gaming group, is assured to lead to some seriously misogynistic fantasy behaviour within the game, as the men involved have little social knowledge of women, are creating games based on misogynistic source material, and have an all-male environment in which they can avoid any shame the public, or female, eyes would bring to these fantasized behaviors.

These comments on the table fabula, as well as the acts in the storyworld's of some of these men, are extreme examples of female sexualization. This enacting of male fantasy in the storyworld is further suggested by Fine as he explains:

> In theory, female characters can be as powerful as males; in practice they are often treated as chattels. Many games reflect fantasies that assert male sexual potency and fear of impotence. For example, players take their physical constitution score (ranging from 1 to 20 in *C & S*) as being the number of times their characters can have sexual intercourse during a night. The techniques of meeting women are similar to the most offensive images of the macho spirit: "Brian (the referee) rolls the dice and says to me (my character is in a tavern): 'You grab a barmaid and pull her towards you like any red-blooded American male'" (field notes). (69-70)

Fine goes on to give more examples of extremely aggressive male sexuality that he witnessed in play, including more rape, none of which is met by chastisment by other players. Rather, the other players share an interest in this, and it is this tendency for extremely sexist and violent sexual remarks that causes Fine to suggest that many men simply do not invite women to join their games.

I know these paragraphs have been overflowing with quotations, but the level of rampant sexual violence implied in these storyworlds, as well as general objectification and sexism practiced in their realities, is striking. While I have heard modern horror stories of sexual creepiness in games, I have never heard them at such volume or ferocity as in the examples given by Fine. It is no wonder that so few women entered the TRPG community at the time, as they would have likely been met by a wall of real life infantilization and objectification, coupled with

a storyworld that took things even further in sexual focus, even to seemingly frequent rape

mentions around female NPC enemies or villagers. Luckily for us, contemporary TRPGs have

gotten far, far away from this male sexual fantasy, male wish fulfillment, and male

overcompensation, focus.

While still not equal, now "the number of female players is at 38% and climbing,

according to Wizards of the Coast" (Alimurung). And there is a community that more and more

has had its temperament and socio-political sway guided by livestreams and podcasts, of which

we have examples like "web series such as 'Girls, Guts, Glory.' Conceived by eight young L.A.

actresses," as well as the ever-inclusive groups of *Critical Role*, *High Rollers*, and *The Adventure

Zone* (Alimurung). The members of *Girls, Guts, Glory* have said they were faced with rude

comments when they began, mostly of a sexist nature, suggesting they were not real TRPG

players, but these are so few and mild compared to the examples of Fine. While the misogyny

issue still clearly affects the TRPG community today, as it does everything our society touches,

the inclusivity of TRPGs, especially *D&D*, has not only gotten better, but has become a focus.

As Alimurung says of *D&D 5e*, "characters come in a rainbow of skin colors and body

types and sexual orientations — like the wood elves who identify as non-binary. 'You could,' the

'Players Handbook' suggests, 'play a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who

feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male'"

(*The Washington Post*). The TRPG has become a hub of the queer community as well. With the

obvious ability to craft a fantasy world in which you can be whoever you wish and not face the

chastisement of reality's society, it is no wonder minorities of all kinds enter the TRPG

community. In an interview for a *Wizards of the Coast* official show/service, *D&D Beyond*,

pillars of the *D&D* community, *Critical Role* GM Matthew Mercer and host/creative manager for *D&D Beyond*, Todd Kenreck, have an open and earnest conversation about mental health. In this interview, Mercer says of the *D&D* convention they are attending, "this is one of those spaces... for me at least, a very safe space of good people, good community, good games, and good friends" (*D&D Beyond*). The TRPG community has become just that, a safe space in which the majority of players are open minded. Many players may themselves be minorities or outcasts, seeking a subculture they can be treated well in. Considering that TRPG celebrities like Matthew Mercer, the McElroy family, and even *Wizards of the Coast* themselves, carry ideals of inclusivity and acceptance, the community has naturally flowered in that direction as well.

Figure 9. *Wizards of the Coast* officially joining Seattle's 2017 Pride Parade.

But why do I mention all of this; the bad past versus this bright moment? Well, parts of it further support ideas of having a focus on freedom in choices, seen throughout this work. Other

moments simply further prove the usefulness of the TRPG, as I will review momentarily. But, I do this as part of my general goal for this work: To stimulate further discussion, research, and scholarship regarding the TRPG. I have focused my work primarily on the narrative value the TRPG form can bring to scholarship. Here in this chapter however, as we round out the work, I have taken some time to illustrate the sociological scholarship that the TRPG is worthy of. As a sociologist, Fine's lens on the TRPG has been invaluable, but so much more could be said. For example, I have talked a lot about sexism regarding *D&D*, as well as some queer community acceptance. There is more to say about these, but even more is still unsaid about race and the TRPG. Junot Díaz, when quoted above, touches on race, but there is more to be said on both fabulae. Are racial minorities treated any differently at large TRPG conventions? How does racism play into the TRPG's origins of their fantasy races, and do those origins still exist (there is much to be debated about Orcs in fantasy as relates to racially concerning allegory)? Are black communities seeing the TRPG used as a community building tool, or is this only taking hold in more affluent white communities? Are systemic wealth gaps leading to a disproportionate amount of minority youth who cannot afford to play TRPGs? The list could go on forever, and as an English major, I am not qualified to address all these questions. And so, I turn to readers who may know of more research than I, who may have the skills requisite, and thus I just point out that the TRPG form has a fascinating community that deserves more scholarship than it generally receives.

But, in promised review, at least one sociologist, Fine, reminds us of some of our social TRPG components:

The educational value of the game is reflected in the historical components of the construction of a game scenario. The escape value of the game is reflected in the fantasy and fantastic components of the scenario structure, both in the incorporation of fantasy and mythological themes and the use of contemporary cultural elements [discussed elsewhere] to structure game events. The striving for social efficacy is expressed in the way in which the referee uses his power to constrain the players and construct a scenario, and how the players adapt to their roles and manipulate their characters within the game context. Finally, the sociability aspect of the game is reflected in the social structure of the gaming party, particularly in collective decision-making. (62)

The TRPG has proved so educationally and socially useful that it is now used for school groups, summer camps, therapy, teaching in classes, and more. TRPG skills learned by early players, now adults, have contributed to the success of many writers and TV personalities. As well as the adulthood of early players leading to a renaissance of TRPG-related or inspired media, see shows like *Stranger Things* or movies like *Onward*. Plus, those who grew up with the game are contributing the form's newfound popularity boom, as they introduce their own children to the form and carry a positive public view of the TRPG into the limelight. In the realm of celebrity, to once more quote Alimurung, "popular podcasts such as 'The Adventure Zone' and 'Critical Role' have turned anonymous players into Internet royalty" (*The Washington Post*). Not only has technology brought us these livestreams and podcasts, but it has completely revolutionized the games and community.

Not only have forums and social media assisted massively in growing the community and helping players connect, but as Alimurung says:

Technology has been a game changer. In 2019, people play D&D by video conference,

via Skype and Discord. They use dice-rolling apps, fill out online character sheets and

draw maps on laptops and iPads instead of on graph paper. They live-stream on Twitch.

When they can't make it to a physical tabletop, they log on to "virtual tabletops" such as

Fantasy Grounds and Roll20 to crawl through dungeons with players half a world away.

Here, Dungeon Masters hire themselves out like itinerant knights — they'll lead your

campaign for $10 to $20 a head. (*The Washington Post*)

It is undeniable that a combination of new availabilities with technology, alongside a popular and

accessible *D&D* system, has helped evolve the TRPG community, and has done so towards a

wonderfully inclusive and inviting direction. While the changes to the TRPG community, and its

popularity, and not exclusively *because* of the internet, the online landscape certainly affected the

changes we see. There has also been the advent of systems that are easier to learn, the adulthood

success and influence of teenagers who played in the 1980s, the form's general shift to a more

narrative focus, and an increase in general inclusivity within the community. With all this in

mind there is one question remaining: Why not come join?

Why We Play TRPGs

Or maybe we should ask: "Why join us?" While I would hope that the bulk of this work

has made much of that reasoning clear already, it does suggest the wider question of why we play

TRPGs. As I have argued throughout this work, the reasons we play TRPGs are many: the

uniqueness of the storytelling form, the mixture of gaming and narrative, the freedom provided,

the collaborative satisfaction and excitement, the community involved. All of these unique

qualities contribute to why we continue to play TRPGs decades after their first releases and

popularity spikes. The above sections within this very chapter point to some reasons we play. But

here, I would like to explore this question further, in ways both different from and similar to

what we have said so far. So, let us begin to look at the reasons for which we play TRPGs.

To start, we should naturally turn to the fanbase who keeps playing. While, above, we

have made connections between the TRPG subculture and other subcultures, such as American

football, it is important to recognize the differences in kinds of fans. Some fans are simply

consumers of media, while others consume the source of their fandom only to then go on to

create works based on, or inspired by, the media they are a fan of. Cover carefully explains this

difference in fans, as relates to participation:

> There is a difference between sports fans with season tickets and TV fans who dress up as
>
> their favorite characters at a convention. Socially, these groups are not equal, nor is their
>
> involvement with the object of their fandom the same.... [As] participation becomes more
>
> and more involved, fans move more and more toward the fringes of mainstream culture.
>
> What we might be able to argue is that a sports fan who engages actively in a fantasy
>
> football league might be similar to a *Star Trek* fan who plays the *Star Trek* role-playing
>
> game. Both of these fans go beyond the act of participating by tuning in.... Fandom, in the
>
> sense I mean it here, consists of fans who Dovey and Kennedy (2006) call "prosumers,"
>
> those who are "the consumer as producer" (p. 15). They do not watch a show, read a
>
> book, or play a game and simply move on to the next episode or the next show. Instead,

they take what they have consumed and expand on it through writing, creative game play, art, or interaction with others. (159-160)

The TRPG community overwhelmingly consists of creators, being a community of those who actively contribute to the form rather than simply being consumers. Any member of a TRPG group, anyone playing a campaign or planning one, is a creator. This is driven home by the TRPG's collaborative form, making *both* GMs and players creators. Other fandoms may have a majority of fans that only consume, but TRPG players are likely to take what they have consumed and use it themselves as a basis or inspiration for something entirely new, or at least transformative. Cover explains that TRPG "gamers take bits and pieces of popular culture, such as the fantasy worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien, and re-appropriate them to create their own narratives" (150). Cover even points out that a lot of our TRPG systems are created around a popular setting from other media, such TRPG systems for *Star Trek* from television, *Star Wars* from movies and books, and *Warhammer 40k* from wargaming itself.

In this way, TRPG players have a lot in common with fan-fiction authors, as both re-appropriate settings or ideas from things they have consumed to create something new. Although, TRPG players will often create something more wholly new, while fan-fiction draws more heavily from the source. In short, the difference between fan-fiction and TRPG playing comes in the fan-fiction author's use of the origin text, while TRPG players are more prone to *basing* their idea on other works, rather than taking directly. An exception comes from re-appropriated settings, but even then TRPG players are highly likely to change the setting they are pulling from another source, or create their own based in their inspiration's loose universe rather than use the original directly. Meanwhile, the editing of the setting in fan-fiction

constitutes an AU, or "alternative universe," while the TRPG's changing of the setting to best fit

the campaign is a given. Cover nicely explains the process and mindset of what TRPG players

are doing:

> Jenkins (1992) explains that for many fans, rejection of aesthetic distance is a rejection of
>
> authority. Instead of simply accepting the texts as they are presented, fans feel they have
>
> the right to offer their own interpretations. They "enter the realm of fiction as if it were a
>
> tangible place they can inhabit and explore" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18). TRPGs offer popular
>
> fiction worlds, with the full possibility of exploring and inhabiting them during the
>
> gaming session but, furthermore, they offer players the ability to completely transform
>
> and control these worlds.
>
> Mackay (2001) states that role-players aren't consumers because the TRPG is a
>
> process-performance. He explains that "the role-playing game exhibits a narrative, but
>
> this narrative does not exist *until* the actual performance" (Mackay, 2001, p. 50). (151)

Cover adds that while TRPG players purchase rule books and paraphernalia, their games are left

mostly private, and free to be shared with other fans. While campaign modules may represent a

sort-of purchasing of a narrative for you to play, as we discussed in our section on them, they are

only blueprints and are explicitly designed so that TRPG players expand on them, transform

them, and generally go off their pre-written rails. TRPG players approach media with a strong

belief, founded in the way the form emphasizes collaboration and extreme freedoms, that they

have the right to transform and use media to forge their own narratives. They are not a subculture

or fandom that simply buys products for consumption: they produce texts of their own through

play. The TRPG narrative does not exist until it is performed, like a script not being a show, or a

piece of sheet music not truly being realized *until* it is played. Thus, TRPG players view their source material, inspiration, or notes, only as a loose script or plan; the TRPG narrative does not exist until the group performs it.

The legal realities around this attitude have even supported this behavior. When the d20-centric system (using the 20-sided die for most ability or skill checks) emerged in 2000, not only did system mechanics improve, and crucially simplify, but *Wizards of the Coast* moved to better unify the TRPG community by leaving basic system mechanics legally available. While early *D&D*, under a different company, was notorious for pursuing many minor lawsuits, Cover explains that "while there was skepticism in the companys' [sic] choice to trademark the d20 system, Wizards of the Coast provided the System Reference Document (SRD), and the Open Gaming License (OGL) to 'allow royalty free, nonexclusive use of the game system at the heart of *Dungeons and Dragons* by anyone who wishes to do so, for both commercial and noncommercial works' (www.wizards.com)" (157). Not only did this action contribute to the wide variety of TRPG systems we have to choose from, as well as push the overall trend of simplifying game mechanics in favor of narrative, but this legal practice reinforces the TRPG player's belief in the re-appropriation of existing materials for new works.

Of course, not all fans go on to create. While earlier TRPG communities would be nearly impossible to exist in without partaking as a player or GM, as there was little else to do and little other ways to be introduced to the community, now, with the popularity of livestreaming and podcasts, many are TRPG fans and community members without ever having been players themselves. One could argue that they fit more within sub-communities relating to whatever show or podcast they consume, but the TRPG subculture online has a great deal of overlap

between these communities, so the distinction blurs easily. More distinction can be found

between communities gathered around forums, discussing complex rule debates, vs those that are

discussing the latest narrative twists and turns of their favorites TRPG show, but even then, all of

this centers in the subculture of the TRPG, and thus these differing conversations are never far

from each other. And of course, there are splits within the community where some may

vehemently dislike a show that others love, or people may argue over what is the "correct" way

to play, which in itself is a pointless but often re-hashed argument, as TRPGs are designed to be

flexible. This leads to the usual answer of "no one is right," the only correct answer is whatever

works best for you and those you play with. But arguments and small schisms occur within every

subculture, so this does not discount the TRPG in any way. In fact, passionate arguments over

minutiae are constitutive of any subculture. These arguments may seem pointless at times, but

these disagreements over shows, TRPG rules, or play styles, are important in that they maintain

the subculture and produce new ideas. The TRPG's form may lend itself to malleability, but

arguments about said malleations help keep the TRPG community alive and evolving.

Perhaps one of the main reasons that TRPG players continue to play, crucially different to

why fans of other forms or works may choose to re-read or re-watch something, comes from the

endless possibilities of the TRPG. Regarding the practically-infinite freedom and always

unknown nature of the TRPG, Cover explains that "gamers may return to the same game time

and time again, but re-playing a TRPG adventure [a common way to refer to a campaign module

or simply a campaign] would be so different from session to session that I am hesitant to call this

re-playing at all" (150). Even if one were to run the same blueprint campaign module again, the

experience would be different every time (albeit with small changes, as you do not want the same

players to hold meta-game knowledge on how to solve puzzles or where the enemies are). Cover further explains the endless nature of the TRPG with the following:

> There is a difference between the games that can be continued, such as TRPGs, MMORPGs, or even simulation games such as *The Sims* and computer games that reach the point where all quests have been completed, the entire map has been explored, and the player can go no further. The later products have been consumed, whereas the former can never be. (159)

Of course, even among Cover's examples of infinite gaming experiences, it is the TRPG that still reigns supreme thanks to the earlier-discussed ability of the TRPG to have infinite choices, and thus a supreme level of freedom, via live-play interaction with the setting-designer, the GM. And, while session after session in an unfolding campaign is obviously going to be different, just as new TV show episodes would be, the TRPG can theoretically go on forever in one campaign as well, always pivoting to something new. However, most players would wish to experience a whole new setting with whole new characters via ending the campaign to start a new one. This is compounded by the issue of ending up with characters who are ridiculously powerful and thus can be difficult to give any challenge to but, again, the TRPG can be whatever you want it, so it is a possible way to play.

The TRPG's freedom allows for the playing of almost any type of character. And, thanks to the TRPG's immense degree of immersion, the TRPG can act as an escapism tool, or simply a way to explore other personas. This is, of course, another great pull towards playing TRPGs. Even Matthew Mercer, in an interview with *D&D Beyond*, discussed this persona-hood capability, escapism, and how those can *help* you:

I think, for a lot of us, and I speak from personal experience, there are times in our life where we don't feel comfortable being who we are at the moment. And, there is something freeing about being able to construct and create a persona of something that either you want to be or you're just curious to try out that isn't yourself, and it gives you a chance to kind of live in that skin and not worry about the things that, you know, fill you with anxiety, and self-loathing, and a lot of these very human issues that we all endure. And through that, hopefully, and often, [we] learn things about ourselves that we can now appreciate better and, through that as well, make connections with new friends, make stronger connections with old ones, and kind of build a stronger community of support around us that not a lot of other experiences can forge the way that role-playing games and *D&D* can. (*D&D Beyond*)

There is a lot in this quote as to why we play, and much of the ideas Mercer mentions are things we will return to. But first, we will further pursue the playing of persona, as well as escapism.

Even Fine, researching the TRPG of 1980s, which featured a much lesser focus on role-play than TRPGs tend to now, has this to say about escapism:

Two strategies in role-playing can be analytically disentangled which, while extremes, suggest a dimension on which gamers can be distinguished and distinguish themselves:

D & D players can be divided into two groups, those who want to play the game and those who want to play it as a fantasy novel, i. e., direct escapism through abandonment of oneself to the flow of play as opposed to the gamer's indirect escapism—the clearcut competition and mental exercise any good game offers. [Pulsipher 1977:16]

The gamer plays the game as himself, while the player who wishes to lose himself to the

fantasy is the true role-player—he plays the character. (207)

Fine goes on to suggest that it is mostly newer players who tend to play themselves rather than

their character. This role-play based escapism is far truer today, where the TRPG has slid more

towards role-play and narrative than its earlier close association with full-on wargaming or

general fantasy-self acting. Many may still play themselves, or more often, versions of

themselves, but most now will play a role, a character of their design. Fine is right in saying full

escapism and gaming-as-yourself-to-win are extremes, because they very much are; most players

will be wanting to "win" in the sense that they do not want to fail and see their character die, but

they also are playing a character that is substantially separate from the self. That said, their

character likely has some roots in the self so as to make the role-play an easier transition, or to

explore a *version* of themselves. Although, it is still true that many newer players will play close

renditions of themselves, as they have yet to figure out what kind of characters are available for

them as they have not yet experienced the near-limitless player freedom of the form. Or, they

simply have not gotten comfortable with role-play and immersion yet and so are just playing a

pseudo-self. But these are examples of novice players, still finding their footing. The experienced

player tends towards characters that only touch on the self; they make characters that allow them

to explore another persona.

Either way the TRPG, in moving more towards narrative, has embraced greater role-play

immersion, and thus, further emphasizes the exploration of personas different from one's self, as

well as escapism as a general enjoyment. For example, the GM of *High Rollers*, Mark Hulmes,

has talked often about his preference for playing female characters because he prefers taking on

personas that are as different from himself as possible. This idea of escapism, and our earlier

discussion of creative re-appropriation/expansion, combine back-to-back in an article written by

Gendy Alimurung:

> Frank Contreras, 18... says he likes the "possibilities" D&D stories offer. "Our world, the
>
> real world," he adds, "is kind of dark." He'd just finished decapitating an ogre.

> With D&D, a quiet, gray-haired accountant on disability like Leigh-Anne Anderson
>
> might reinvent herself as a sexy barbarian criminal enforcer suffused with rage.
>
> Anderson, 50, plays in Contreras's evening group.

> For their Dungeon Master, Mike Arellano, it's less about escaping the real world than
>
> building an alternate version of this one. Arellano maintains a home library of more than
>
> 1,000 D&D-related books — on the history of China, Africa, Egypt, on coinage and trade
>
> and castles. "Because you never know when you might need to describe the proper layout
>
> of a burial vault." (*The Washington Post*)

Not only do these players attest to the desire to have many possibilities and experience differing

lives, but the GM highlights the joy found in re-appropriating information, in their case,

real-world information, into an original gaming narrative. While not everyone will want to play a

realistic-world inspired game, or even the kinds of characters or actions described (somewhat

comically) above, that is also no problem. In the same article, Satine Phoenix, official

community manager for *Wizards of the Coast*, says, "Gone is the era of 'I can't find a group...'

Now, it's 'what style of game do I want?'" (Alimurung).

With the TRPG's growing popularity and expanding list of available systems and play styles, the options of even choosing a campaign or a group to play with start to become infinite. And one draw, which brings many to find the narratives of the TRPG so compelling, is the ability of the TRPG to address humanity. Similar to other great art forms that help us better understand other people, ourselves, and humankind in general, as Mercer explains, the TRPG often does the same thing:

> The nature of role-playing games is you don't really know where the story is gonna go. So, I like to set up aspects of [realistic, emotional, human themes] that can be tackled. A lot of times they become naturally [involved] in player's stories, and you're like, "Oh, this'll be an interesting way to explore these aspects." But, mostly, like any story or any role-playing game, there are some aspects of it that are exploring humanity... so whether we mean to or not those things can, and will be, touched on at some point through a long-term campaign, I believe. (*D&D Beyond*)

And so, like the novel, play, movie, or television drama, the TRPG is likely to explore themes that are relevant to everyone.

This goes beyond just character explorations, as themes like this can be found in the shaping of the setting as well. Fine touches on this in saying:

> Part of the engrossing character of these games is the sense of power that gamers derive from controlling a "world"—the power to make the world as one wants it to be. While we attempt this control in many social scenes, typically there exists sufficient constraints to prevent much change; a fantasy game whose only constraints are those placed on it by the

players provides a "possible utopia"—a utopia in which evil is continually overcome.

(234)

There are some interesting clarifications or changes I would like to add to this. For one, as we discussed in an earlier chapter, the tendency for good to always triumph over evil is still a common occurrence in TRPG games, but more often now, as more TRPG players are seeking interesting and mold-breaking narratives, TRPG campaigns can feature other endings as well. The TRPG itself, being so unique, is a natural form to gravitate to when seeking mold-breaking tales. Nonetheless, most of the time the player-characters are "good" and the "evil" villain is usually defeated, but often campaigns have characters who are more neutral, or a mix of good and evil characters pursuing a similar goal. Sometimes groups will play "evil" campaigns, in which the roles are reversed and they seek to triumph over the "good." And, most generally, the lines between good and evil become more and more blurred as TRPG players often seek a more nuanced narrative. Even the current campaign of *Critical Role* has been described by Mercer as an "outlaw" campaign, as the characters are neither fully good nor evil, but are often skirting the law and generally seeking their own goals of varying moral justification.

Nonetheless, it is possible to forge the world as you want it to be as a group of players. Afterall, we have extensively discussed the GM's role in having the world react to, and thus be shaped partially by, the player-characters' choices and actions. These player-characters may very well be seeking to craft a utopian society, and they may very well succeed. However, as most TRPG groups will place substantial limits on their character's abilities to reshape the world, so as to still have mass uncertainties, conflicts, and issues which are challenging, they are unlikely to plop themselves into a utopia, nor into a place where they can *easily* make the storyworld's

setting into a utopia (but who ever said utopia was easy). However, it is likely, as was suggested above by Junot Díaz, that the player-characters will end up with far more ability to affect the setting they live in than the real-life players have upon the vast socio-economic state of our world. So, they very well may seek to move the world closer to utopia: I imagine this happens with decent frequency. Although, interestingly, the creation of a utopian setting would likely end possibilities of revisiting the setting for future campaigns, as, presumably, conflicts to face in this utopia would be rare, and thus the TRPG campaign would become less of an adventure and more of a pleasant-life simulation. But, I could very well see a campaign set in a utopia in which there is "trouble in paradise," perhaps like that of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, where we do not only see murder still occurring in utopia, but there is also an undercurrent of possible future upsetting of the utopia, as some wish it to return to where it was before (*Nowhere*'s Old Grumbler). But, this is turning into quite the rabbit-hole, so we will return to our more general focus here.

Yes, the TRPG can act as a pseudo-utopic form of escapism alongside the more general character-centric escapism, but I wager it is more likely the average TRPG game will simply have a nearer-to utopia feel, as player-characters, by design, have more agency within their setting than the average person does in our vast world. This feeling of lacking power in the real world is, thereby, a huge propeller towards the TRPG as players inhabit a persona with significant power. In an earlier chapter we even quoted *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax as saying we play TRPGs, in part, to "become super powerful and affect everything" (Cover 123). The TRPG's heightened agency contributes to its being partially wish-fulfilling and majorly escapist. All forms of narrative art tend towards these two things, but the TRPG achieves them directly.

Relating to this, oftentimes the TRPG community is stereotyped as being nerds, sometimes rebels, and often outcasts. To an extent this holds true, as it is often the outcast who would be interested in seeking out immersive escapism. And yes, the origin of the TRPG in wargaming and Tolkien has led to a more "nerd" centric community. But, as should be obvious at this point, the draw of the TRPG can be applied to anyone, and thus anyone can, and likely will, enjoy the TRPG. This is amplified by TRPG play being however one wishes, i.e. more or less narrative focus, more or less fantasy, etc.. While absolutely worthy of further research, a lot of TRPG players, and scholars like Cover, are moving away from the borderline reductionist approach of typecasting TRPG players as entirely marginalized outcasts. Cover says, "I do not believe that all *D&D* players are socially marginalized or that they play *D&D* in order to rebel directly against cultural norms" (159). The TRPG may be unique in form, and have a certain historical skew towards a certain kind of player, but with the explosion of the TRPG's popularity and community of recent years, the type of person that plays the TRPG is more and more becoming *anyone* who desires a unique, and heavily involving, narrative experience.

Furthermore, on top of the narrative experience, often people play because the game is social. While not always socializing as ourselves, with the frequent role-playing, it is still a meeting of the minds and a collaborative experience. Alimurung puts it somewhat comically:

Play pretty much everyone, the game is about connection.... Analytical chemist Kristi Halbig, 40, admits that playing D&D forces her to "talk to real human beings." She's painfully shy and could otherwise spend her entire day staring at a computer.
Sitting next to her, 17-year-old Jacob Whaley concurs: "My dad says, 'I don't understand what it is. But I'm happy you're hanging out with people.'" (*The Washington Post*)

To add, GM Mark Hulmes, in a *D&D Beyond* interview, explained the social draw of the TRPG with the following:

> I think the reason that D&D's seen such a resurgence, it is a complex question, but I think that there's a really kind of human, simple answer to it really, and it's the idea that people want to feel connected to stuff, and I think D&D and RPGs [Role-playing Games] as a whole is a hobby that is about connection. It's you and your friends, most of the time physically together, or at least in a virtual environment where you're speaking to each other. You know, there's no video game and things like that in the way, and you are just telling stories together. You're connecting. You're sharing events. You're sharing trauma in the encounters and the battles that your characters have to have. You're sharing in the success, the victories, and the accomplishments of leveling up, and beating villains, and getting treasure. And whether those things are happening in the real world or in the fictional world, they bring us together. You know, they form bonds and they make us feel like closer friends. (*D&D Beyond*)

In a sense, the TRPG group is a more interactive, and thereby more social and creativity-driven, version of a book club. Everyone comes together, usually once a week, to tell a story together, and come away with new or better friendships, great stories to share, and a small community of people (set within the wider TRPG community) with whom they share something close with. Plus, this is a community which they can consistently return to for new and exciting tales as the group continues playing.

Often the TRPG is only a social thing experienced by those within the group, or those who are told the stories, as "TRPG stories are often not represented in any physical form,"

meaning no tangible material form that can be shared with the masses (Fine 153). In this way, the TRPG is a personal social event, but it can also be public; it can be practically anything you want. To quote the wonderful Cover one more time:

> Mackay (2001) explains that players continue to play out of a "desire to return to the *presence* of emotion" that disappears when the game stops (p. 85). The desire to return to the story that can never end, that can never be consumed, keeps TRPG groups going for years. Mackay (2001) sees this ongoing process as one that "suspends the desire to consume the texts (i.e. commodities) of the spectacle of popular culture" (p. 131). The audience, if they can be characterized as such, resists consumption in favor of production. Because the world and characters of *D&D* are created in the minds of the players, there is no physical texts to consume.

> The ability to create texts cannot be reproduced or commodified [they are utterly unique via player and GM choices] is important to gamers. Bebergal (2004) shows that in *D&D* imagination is key, not pre-written modules and rule books.... There is a strong sense of power and ownership involved in creating something that can never be read or consumed by others.... While some gamers want to share their stories with the world... other gamers pride themselves on creating worlds and stories that are incomprehensible to those outside their gaming group. As members of a subculture, TRPG gamers connect through their shared desire to produce texts. Because immersive qualities of TRPGs give players a sense of belonging to a storyworld and interactive qualities give players the sense of actively contributing to this world, players see their gaming as a process of production rather than consumption. (153-154)

TRPG players are a community of majority creators. Many wish to share their stories with the wider world and/or community, while others are satisfied, or even happy, to keep their group's adventures to themselves, like an inside joke only they and their friends share as a bond.

No matter why we play, be it for social bonding, to create stories, to escape into narrative, or any other drive, it is clear why TRPG players continue to return to the game and form, as well as why so many new players are gravitating to the community too. Not only are there literal benefits to be reaped, in the skill-building discussion given above, but we are emotionally drawn to this unique storytelling form thanks to the freedom it provides, the immersion it can produce, and the social nature we feel in collaboratively telling a story. Considering the emotional focus of your average TRPG narrative, as we discussed in earlier chapters, it is no wonder that so many find themselves coming back again and again to this infinite well of stories chocked full of emotional highs and lows (hopefully, with good rolls, mostly highs).

The End?

We come to a close. The case has been made for the TRPG being its own unique

narrative form, occupying a space in storytelling that nothing else can. From our oscillating

fabulae, concerns around the shared imagination, the unprecedented freedoms and

unpredictability, our immersion in roleplay, and more that simply cannot reasonably be placed in

one sentence, the TRPG is overflowing with elements that deserve analyses of their own. I have

endeavored to argue the form's narrative uniqueness on many grounds. We have discussed the

way in which many formal elements and literary devices are bent or expanded on by the TRPG.

We have recognized the many benefits and perceived limitations which accompany the form's

unusual collaborative, freeing, improvisational, live-play, and role-play immersive status. We

have branched out into the ways in which other media presents or adapts the TRPG form,

including the utterly unique "campaign module" publication. And we have, most recently, looked

back out how the TPRG community has been shaped over time, as it continues to grow in size

and inclusivity. Having, in these last few sections, laid out reasons for which people play the

TRPG, as well as point to possible avenues of research, my hope after these final passages are

two-fold.

My first hope is that you go and develop an analysis of your own. The field of TRPG

scholarship is relatively small. This being the case in spite of the TRPG's large community.

There is a lack of academia despite the TRPG containing fascinating devices, themes, and

functions. The TRPG community is bustling with great creators, it simply needs more great

scholars to approach it with the respect it deserves as a serious and unique narrative form; be

your future TRPG explorations sociological, linguistical, or even narratological in focus, like my own. In this work I have expanded academia regarding the TRPG's unique formal techniques, common content features, progressive social changes, and more. All of this comes down to these truths: The TRPG is a unique storytelling form, it is surrounded by a rich and multifaceted subculture, and it is deserving of far more scholars diving into it with strong magnifying glasses.

The TRPG has a community of creators, people who produce rather than simply consume. I hope you follow in their footsteps after closing these final pages, but not just to pursue further academia. Afterall, I have spent these chapters relaying the greatness of the TRPG form, something I have *crucially* learned from first hand experience. Thus, my second hope is that you should go on to become a player or GM yourself, or at least try it once or twice. The TRPG has a social stigma that, while fading away, still prevents some adults, and even kids, from attempting the form. In my experience, as someone who thought it was not for me at first, the TRPG will surprise you with how enjoyable it is, sucking you in as a new life-long player before you know it.

And so I leave you with this: Read from others who write on the TRPG (which, if you got this far, you've already started), play your own campaigns, roleplay deeply, become a storyteller, improvisational actor, *scholar*, and more, through this diverse form and beloved game. And of course, above all, when you are doing so, roll well.

- Appendix A -

Disagreement With Cover's "Frames of Narrativity in the TRPG:"

Distortions of the Storyworld's Reality & The Unimportance of the "Social Frame"

Our chapters on formal elements introduce the idea of the table fabula and the storyworld, two fabulae that intermix well and are the center for the vast majority of our fabulae discussions. However, the minute details of these layers are more complicated. Thus, for this section, we shall examine Jennifer Grouling Cover's chapter on "Frames of Narrativity in the TRPG" in order to both understand her more complex view, as well as to argue against some of her system's classifications (88). This will prove a fruitful, albeit intricate, endeavor, as we find minute differences between the fabulae, where the lines between said fabulae lie, and postulate the unimportance, for our narratological approach, of the so-called "social frame" in the TRPG.

We will start with Cover's application of "possible-worlds theory," or the theory surrounding how we can discuss non-existing, "possible" worlds. To do this we must begin with Cover's definitions for the terminology she uses throughout the chapter, which she pulls from the work of Marie-Laure Ryan:

> There can only be one actual world (AW), which is the current physical reality. However, multiple alternate possible worlds (APWs) can exist and are treated as AWs in fictional stories. These APWs, however, are not narratives in and of themselves. Instead they hold the potential for many stories, as does the AW. The text reference world (TRW) is the APW that the text refers to, while the textual actual world (TAW) presents the view of the TRW that the author projects (Ryan, 1991, p. vii). Thus, the TRW is one of many APWs.

Finally, Ryan (1991) also includes a category for the narratorial actual world (NAW),

which is the view of the TRW provided by the narrator (p. vii). (90)

Figure 2: Terms from Possible-World Theory

AW: The actual world is our reality.

APW: An alternative possible world in a different system of reality, a fiction that is accepted as true when the reader shifts to this world.

TRW: The textual reference world is the world that the text claims as factual. It is the alternative possible world that the text refers to.

TAW: The textual actual world is the view of the text reference world that is presented by the author.

NAW: The narratorial actual world is the view of the world that the narrator presents to the narratee.
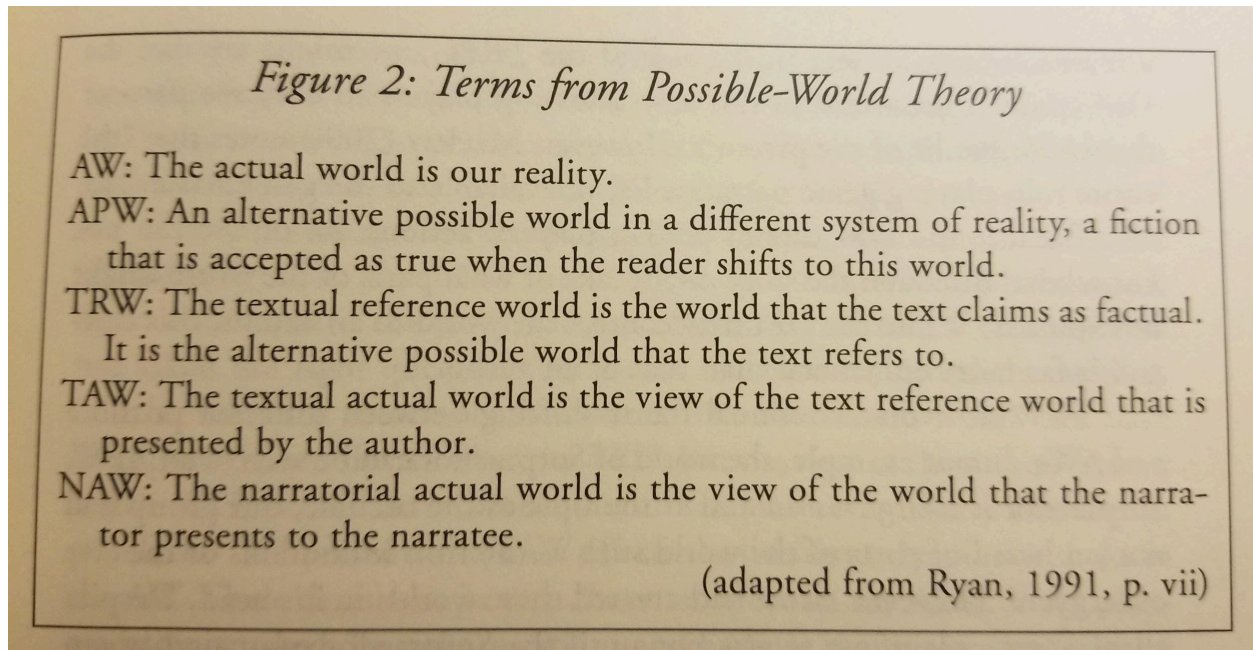
(adapted from Ryan, 1991, p. vii)

Figure 10. The shorthand acronym definitions used by Cover, seen on her pg. 91.

As we move towards mapping this formula onto the TRPG, Cover is swift to note where the system is more persuasive and where it becomes difficult, thus leading to her choosing to edit how she will use the terms. Cover points out the importance of the distinction between the author and the narrator in regards to "TRPGs that build on published campaign modules and settings. In this case, the TRW might also refer to worlds such as *Ptolus* or *Forgotten Realms* that are created as references for the Dungeon Master (DM) [another term for GM] to use" (90). Thus, in these examples where the GM is using work prepared for them by another source (campaign modules and official settings are discussed in Chapter 6), the differentiation between the TAW and the

NAW is clear. However, Cover suggests the lines between the TAW and the NAW are less obvious where the GM is the sole creator of the setting. Cover raises that in a game where the GM forged the setting, they "may bring thorough notes to the gaming session; in which case we might say that they represent the textual world.... Players may ask questions or pursue lines of the story that [the GM] didn't think of in advance, however, and, thus, there is no textual representation of these parts of the story or world until they are articulated in the gaming session" (91). This kind of unexpected story, spawned by players' unprecedented freedom, can even occur when using a module created by another. Thus, Cover opts to change our terms slightly to avoid this confusion surrounding pieces having to be literally "textual." Cover instead puts forth that the text "is the discourse provided by the actual gaming group. It is created and narrated by the gamers themselves, particularly the GM" (91). So, Cover uses TAW and TRW to refer to our storyworld interactions in general, collapsing the NAW into the TAW to avoid this confusion. In this, Cover suggests that the GM and players are all partial authors and narrators, creating the "text" in the verbal story, thus making the distinction between narrator and author, which is usually critical in text, mostly mute in the live-play, and primarily verbal, TRPG.

I generally agree with Cover here; however, I wish to break down these pieces one more time and explain a few differences I see before pushing forward with Cover's thoughts. Otherwise, if we simply adopt Cover's system, we neglect the TRPG's version of the narrator vs author difference. The AW represents our real world as it occurs. An AWP is a possibility of what could occur in the AW, as well as generally representing all possible fiction that can be accepted as true by a reader who immerses themselves within it. Both of these function at the level of the table fabula. The TRW is the singular AWP we are working within and is the whole

of the fictional world. Then, the TAW is the parts of the TRW presented by the author. Cover

explains this by saying, "The author refers to the TRW but controls our view of that world by

presenting only pieces of it into the TAW" (91). Both the TRW and the TAW exist within the

storyworld fabula, with the TRW representing the whole setting while the TAW represents the

pieces we see as we play the TRPG, as, naturally, not all pieces of the world will be explored.

Then, the NAW is removed by Cover due to the near equivalence of narrator and author in the

TRPG. The author of a TRPG is no singular entity but rather all the players involved. While the

GM can ultimately decide what may or may not enter the storyworld, the creation of storyworld

events is a collaborative effort. Thus, what enters the TAW is decided by our players and the GM

working in tandem as the authors. The GM may be the primary setting controller, but nothing

becomes a part of the performed narrative of the TRPG, and thus becomes a part of the TAW,

without the players as well. Everyone involved collaborates as authors.

Table Fabula	Storyworld
AW: Actual world	TRW: Textual reference world
APWs: Alternative possible worlds	TAW: Textual actual world
	NAW: Narratorial actual world

Figure 11. A small table separating our terms by which fabula they primarily relate to.

If this is the case, when does the concept of narrator enter the TRPG? Cover already suggests that this occurs when the GM is utilizing the work written by another to run a campaign, but for the home-made experience this becomes complex. However, the narrator vs author differences arise in home-made campaigns as well, not just in the use of modules. This leads to Cover's collapsing of the TAW and NAW into one being problematic. The NAW is what the narrator presents to the narratee; this differentiates from the author-reader relationship of the TAW, as this is a subjective version of the TAW. Think of the importance of recognizing the unreliable narrator in a novel; the narrator and the author cannot be assumed to think the same. Furthermore, the information presented by the narrator may be inaccurate or misleading, and thus not representative of the storyworld reality. While the TAW represents what is occurring in the scene, the NAW represents how the scene might be distorted by a narrator. In terms of Bal's ideas on perception, the TAW is the source of the vision, but the NAW involves the agent's version/interpretation of the vision (see the top of Fig. 1 on page 36). Cover recognizes the author vs narrator difference, but is too fast to collapse them together for the TRPG. I propose the narrator vs author difference still exists in all forms of the TRPG due to the existence of a distorted version of reality seen occuring, primarily, due to the lenses through which information is filtered, seen in role-play and leading descriptions.

Consequently, I disagree with Cover's complete collapsing of the NAW into the TAW. It is correct to some extent, and assists in simplicity, but the distorting of the TAW still occurs, albeit to a lesser extent, within the TRPG, thus leading to a NAW-like level of frame. This can come from a multitude of sources, keeping in mind that all players and the GM are in roles of both author and narrator. One example, close to the idea of the GM reading off another's work, is

when a PC may need to relay the information given to them by the GM to the other PCs. For example, one player asks to make a skill check regarding what their character knows about a strange artifact. They roll well. The GM may then decide to tell them privately via a note, message, or private discussion if they think the secrecy is in any way pertinent. This will lead to that singular player needing to relay the information they have learned to the other players via role-play with the other characters. However, the player who knows may have decided to distort some of the information, or otherwise might warp the information due to their roleplay. This will lead to a difference in the TAW and the NAW. The information itself is concrete in the TAW via it becoming a piece of the scene and the campaign, as one player knowing it makes it an official piece of the narrative. However, when it is told to others in this warped role-play, it becomes the NAW, as it becomes a layer deeper in the fabula as the character acts as pseudo-narrator of the TAW information to the other characters. One may argue that role-play is dialogue rather than narration, but as role-play is practically the only way information enters the storyworld outside of description, it fits the usual trappings of the narrator vs author difference from the novel. Furthermore, I propose this TRPG situation to be NAW-like, not an exact replica of the usual NAW. Thus, this distortion of the information entering the storyworld, being different from the exact reality of the storyworld, constitutes a TAW vs NAW difference.

The above example can be especially funny among players if the original telling of information known only by the singular player is done publicly. In the private scenario, the other players may be unaware of the difference between the real TAW and the warped NAW they received, thus preventing meta-gaming as they likely assume they have been given the same version of the TAW. But, in the public scenario, their awareness of this schism will make the

distorting more poignant, as the other players must wag a finger at the speaking player, knowing they are being deceived, only to pretend they know nothing about the distortion in their own role-play due to their character having no reason to know they lack the information in its purest form. (Although, in some systems a form of the "insight" check exists to see if another character is hiding the truth, but many GMs prevent the use of this skill against fellow player-characters, as they want the truth to be pulled out through inter-player role-play, not a roll).

The NAW also enters more commonly through the GM, who is the usual source of information. Thus, when the characters approach an NPC in search of information, and the GM tells them information that is biased due to their role-playing of an NPC, the information will be distorted because NPCs will have personal motives and views. In this case, similar to above, the use of characters to impart knowledge to the (other) players/characters can equate the speaking PC or NPC to a narrator, or at least close to the purpose of the NAW as being a warped version of the storyworld's reality. Additionally, the GM may frame their narration of the storyworld in such a way to try to influence the players. A GM may emphasize a particular NPC's appearance when describing the patrons of a tavern, hoping this emphasis will draw the player-characters to this important NPC. This practice of framing the scene in such a way that it *leads* the players is common practice, but only in light or rare touches. If a GM is constantly making obvious which way they want the players to go, then the players may feel that they are lacking real choices, as they should obviously choose the path the GM is prodding them towards. This bias of the TAW description by the GM could be seen as another form of the NAW, as the TAW information is skewed. However, it is being skewed from its only source, and thus can be hard to see as being

different from the assumed TAW, explaining further the closeness of the two fabulae as well as

why this GM technique is only used lightly.

Overall, the close proximity of the TAW and the NAW makes Cover's collapsing of them

understandable, but it is important to note places where the NAW may appear, even if many of

these places (due to the similarities in the TRPG between the TAW and the NAW) could be

argued as being in the TAW or the NAW. If we are to take the TRPG on as a serious form, as we

should, then we ought to be paying close attention to these differences, just as we keep close eyes

on the differences between author and narrator sentiments when analyzing the novel. For the

TRPG, this difference is further complicated by most narrations coming from the GM, as they

are in charge of the setting and all the NPCs. Thus, the GM is the primary establisher of the TAW

out of the TRW, leading to a reliance on the GM's word as reality, not including when they are

role-playing an NPC, as characters should be assumed to have biases. While the GM is the

primary establisher of the TAW out of the TRW, the GM does not guide the story alone; thus, the

player's ultimately decide what parts the TRW can become the TAW, as they guide where we see

the storyworld from. While much regarding the ability of players to guide the story was

discussed in Chapter 3, it is useful to see Cover's summary, which explains, the GM "cannot

predict players' actions, he or she can not know what direction the story might take or what parts

of the world might be explored. While the [GM] may control the world to an extent, this control

is far more ephemeral than that of an author" (92). Thus, the GM has some control via their

ability to have final say on what enters the TAW, as well as their ability to use NAW-like

distortions to try to steer the players, they ultimately must rely on where the players choose to

take the story.

In review, to assist in some clarifications: Cover believes when a GM has an idea for a campaign it is an APW. Once this campaign starts, it becomes a TRW, as it is now part of a narrative being told rather than just ideas. Although well-made notes from before the campaign begins could be seen as a sort of narrative start, it is not until play is occurring that the TRPG storytelling has really begun and an "audience" can appreciate the narrative. Due to this, Cover argues that a TRPG must start being played before classifying it as a TRW, as, in order to be a text, it "must also have an audience," in this case, the players (92). However, the players are not just an audience to the GM, they are a part of the collaboration. In these sentiments Cover and I mostly agree; the APW is an idea for a story or setting, only once it is in process, and the storyworld fabula exists, does it become a TRW, and thus also spawns the TAW and NAW.

Before getting much further into these fabulae, I want to take a moment to establish key differences in how Cover and I define these fabula. Cover uses the TRW to represent the real factual storyworld. Then, the TAW and NAW are combined to represent what we see in the narrative. I push against this in more than just the collapsing of the NAW and TAW. I think the collaborative nature of the TRPG makes the idea of a concrete, factual TRW problematic. It is easy to agree with Cover's formula from a GM-only perspective. The TRW represents everything you have prepared and know to be going on away from the players, while the TAW represents what the players are uncovering. But the TRPG is not just players uncovering the work of the GM; players will often create real pieces of the story as well, which surprise the GM. Thus, the players contribute to this TRW as well, making their own choices that are then revealed to the others involved.

I believe these layers need to be changed to reflect the TRPG as follows. The table fabula houses the AW and the APW, representing the reality and the possibilities there. Here the APWs function primarily as the possibilities of roll outcomes which can be imagined. Within the storyworld fabula, the TRW represents all the possibilities for the future as well as what is outside of the characters' sight. The TRW has all the GM's prepared information yet to be uncovered, but also represents much of the planning for what will narratively be occurring in the future. This may be the GM's plans to have one nation win a war in several months or a player's plan to betray an ally when the moment is right. These plans are only possibilities, not inevitabilities, because of the collaborative nature of the TRPG. The GM's plan for one nation to win may be disrupted by the PC's actions assisting the "destined-to-lose" nation to the point that it only makes sense they win. Similarly, the player's plans may be disrupted by another player's preventing them, or more generally their learning more information that makes them change their mind. When so many people have narrative say, the possibilities for the future in the narrative are always in flux. One person's plan could be ruined by another's without either knowing the other was planning. Thus, the TRW is what is unseen and what is planned, but not yet solidified, in the TAW.

As all are authors of the TRPG, the TAW represents the reality of what is occurring within view. When plans do occur, they become a part of the TAW. When a plan is only being thought of, it is not yet a part of the narrative. In this collaborative form, the information must be shared with at least one other within the TRPG group, otherwise it never happened and is not yet "canon" within the story. For example, I once had a character who knew many languages, but I wanted to add another to his list. I asked the GM how I could learn another language, and his

response was that, due to it being early on in the campaign, alongside the fact I had never said within either the public table fabula or the storyworld that I did not already know the language I wanted my character to learn, I could pay the experience cost and simply pretend as though I had always known the language but that it simply had not come up yet. Thus, due to the information not yet being in the TAW it was not reality, even though the lack of language knowledge existed in my character sheet.

Another example comes in how the GM can change their plans at any point up to the moment of publicly sharing the occurences. A GM may have plans for an NPC to betray the party, but so long as they change their mind before information regarding this is shared, then they can change their mind at any moment, erasing any thoughts of betrayal the character had. So long as the information has not crossed the planning stage of the TRW to the reality of the TAW, then anything can be changed. While the shared imagination demands that the TAW be solid, the unpredictability of the TRPG leads to the TRW being capable of being constantly in flux up to the point of entering the TAW. The TAW is then the reality of our narrative, with the NAW, as was before described, being the occasional distortion of this reality, usually due to role-play, which thus reflects the sort of narrator-character distortion of a narrative's reality, as is often seen in novels.

Refined Definitions for Use Regarding the TRPG

AW: Actual World	Our real world, which naturally relates to the table fabula. This term also is the canon of the table fabula as it includes the past and present of reality.
APWs: Alternative Possible Worlds	All possible, imaginably believable, worlds for the table fabula. This includes unknown but possible roll outcomes. It also holds within it every possible campaign idea that has yet to be acted on, or thereby planned as a TRPG narrative. Additionally, it represents unfulfilled or unstated plans as they relate to, or are described by, the table fabula alone.
TRW: Textual Reference World	All possible futures within the storyworld fabula. This inlcudes storyworld information and plans which have yet to enter the canon or perview of the narrative, as they have not yet been publicly stated, or have not yet occurred. This term contains all possible future avenues of the storyworld, as well as what is out of the player-characters' knowledge. It is, thus, storyworld elements that are still fully malleable as they have not yet been shared into the collective storyworld canon.
TAW: Textual Actual World	When something does happen, is shared with the group, or is otherwise solidified into the storyworld's canonical occurences, it enters the TAW. The TAW is the reality of the storyworld. It is the storyworld's true, undistorted, past and present.
NAW: Narratorial Actual World	The NAW is the conveyed, but distorted, elements of the storyworld canon. Rather than being the truth of the storyworld directly, the NAW is that reality fed through a lens, and thus distorted from the actual reality of the storyworld. This level represents information which has been stated into the storyworld in some way, but has been warped by bias, lack of accurate knowledge, or otherwise has been changed from the reality that is truly occurring within the storyworld.

Figure 12. Revised definitions for the terms used as they relate to the TRPG specifically.

Note that, due to easy slipping between fabulae, the lines between a table fabula's APW and the storyworld's TRW may often be blurred. A player hoping their character finds a magic potion is imagining both an APW for themselves as a player, hoping to later celebrate while entering the potion into their character's inventory, and is also likely imagining how their character would react to this find (or is maybe deciding that this is a hope of their character as well); thus they are making a sort of TRW plan too, creating hopes that this thought will be in the future TAW. Importantly though, a player's hopes and character's hopes can often differ when the table fabula's game mechanics are concerned. A character has no idea what a "+3 Magic Weapon" is and thus would not hope for one, while a player may be gunning for it. Of course, this can be solved by having the character simply hope to find "a magical weapon to help them in battle," thus giving an in-character description for a table fabula desire that is more specific. Although, with the GM holding a majority control over the TRW, and what of it enters the TAW, said GM may decide that the desired object is not found, since they control the setting and thus can decide the desired sword or potion is simply not there to be discovered or purchases in the first place, no matter the player's desires.

The oscillation between fabulae is made even stronger by the frequent reliance of the TAW on the table fabula's rolls. We may claim we hit a creature on the TRW level, but an AW roll will decide the reality of this hit progressing into the TAW. A dice roll against the GM-determined needed number decides what occurs in the TAW, despite being detached in the table fabula, as gaming mechanics constantly affect narrative occurrences. But, to broaden out once more, this oscillating between many complex fabulae leads to a desire to even more

carefully draw lines between the fabulae. Here we wish to analyze Cover's model in order to discuss her frame splitting being both overly complicated and too simplified simultaneously. This is the case due to Cover's seperating of our real world into both a table fabula and the "social frame," leading to unnecessary complication in making our real world into two fabulae. This also over-simplifies the table fabula by suggesting speech which *appears* to be unrelated to the game's mechanics, or the storyworld directly, deserves a separate frame, as it does not touch-on or interact directly in these. However, as we will see in even Cover's own examples, this supposed "social frame" separated speech affects the overall table fabula, and storyworld, experiences quite clearly. Thus, we will look at Cover's previously mentioned three frames:

High Narrativity	
The NARRATIVE frame: Players create the textual world of the narrative.	**narrative speech** DM narrates and thereby creates the TAW (use of past or present tense, use of 2nd and 3rd person) players narrate actions that do not need confirmed by the DM, creating the TAW (use of present tense, 1st person)
	in-characters speech players and DMs interaction contribute to the TAW (use of quotative markings)
The GAME frame: Players engage in game play and are immersed in the game world, which exists as a part of the AW.	**dice rolls** DM and players' dice rolls in the AW determine whether their suggestion actions succeed in the APW (numbers announced for players, not for DM)
	narrative suggestions players suggest actions in the AW for their characters in the APW (use of present or future tense, use of 1st person)
The SOCIAL frame: Players interact in a social setting.	**narrative planning speech** players negotiate rules and how the game will be played out in the AW
	off-record speech players comment on the story world, or engage in everyday conversation in the AW
Low Narrativity	

Figure 3: Levels of narrativity in tabletop role-playing game discourse.

Figure 13. A table detailing how Cover divides her fabulae, seen on her pg. 94.

Right off the bat, it should be obvious that Cover has one further frame then we do. While we discuss the table fabula and the storyworld fabula, Cover follows Gary Alan Fine in adding the social frame. Cover uses a "model [that] separates the TRPG into three frames. In

addition to the narrative frame, there is the *social frame* of the actual world and the *gaming*

frame" (89). Cover further gives two types of speech that occurs in the social frame, "off-record

speech and narrative planning speech. Both of these types of speech involve players interacting

as players within the social setting of the TRPG" (96). Thus, we have a frame of people talking

around the table as themselves, mostly detached from the narrative. Cover describes off-record

speech as being that "which contributes the least to the narrative and is often everyday talk rather

than part of the narrative. Off-record speech shows the players reacting to the story as an

audience by relating events to other cultural texts or making jokes about the actions and

characters in the story" (96). Cover suggests these references to other media can help establish

the shared imagination, giving something to relate the information to, which can then help with

immersion, a concept delved into later. Cover also gives examples of this social frame lending

explanation to storyworld elements via explaining a moment where two characters' deaths could

be explained to a new player by retelling that their players had permanently left the gaming

group and thus their characters had been disposed of in-game through being killed "off-screen."

Thus, this speech lended an explanation to the new player for the corpses in the storyworld.

    While this separation of table activities into a game and social frame may prove useful

for purely sociological approaches, for our narrative-driven analysis I must break from Cover. In

regards to off-record speech, I would argue it is either completely detached from the TRPG, or is

a part of the overall table fabula experience. When off-record speech is affecting player thought,

and thereby could also affect character thought via meta-gaming, the speech is a part of the

overall TRPG narrative, even if it likely does not fully permeate the literal narrative frame,

which I call the storyworld. Comments detached from discussions of system mechanics do not

become separate from the table experience; it is all happening in the AW. In some of our transcripted examples we have seen players joking about the game, this is the same emotion that surrounds suspense from the game, and all this emotion and banter makes up the emotional power of the table fabula, even when it is not of a serious tone. Cover even gives an example of using a pop-culture reference to determine how the rules may be interpreted and implemented slightly differently. This directly affects the "game frame," as Cover calls it. If speech affects the storyworld's shared imagination, or the table fabula's decisions, it is part of the TRPG table experience, it is should not be separated as being "off-record."

Cover tells us the other type of social frame speech, "narrative planning speech," often "involves complex negotiation of game rules" (98). While Cover does admit that this is a speech that more immediately connects to the other frames, I would still classify it as simply a part of the overarching table fabula, rather than its own frame. In other sections we discuss the malleability of rules, as well as the excitement that can follow the realization of how a rule works. This excitement is, once again, highly connected to the table fabula's game mechanics, and thus affects how the narrative will flow, and is a key part of the overall emotion around the table. I find that when we are looking at the overall story of the TRPG, which includes the narrative itself and all the emotions and banter of the table setting, it makes little sense to separate these heavily interlaced pieces. These occurrences are part of the total narrative experience. Thus, we have but one table fabula to represent the whole of the AW. This separation, or over-simplifying of "social frame speech," may be of interest for a sociological approach, but it becomes problematic for a narratological approach as we take here.

Cover, in part, argues the separation of the AW frames due to their differing logic. Our real world social logic does not necessarily align with the odd logic of game-system mechanics. Cover gives an example from *D&D 5e* in which the playing of an instrument requires only a Charisma based check. Thereby, if drinking alcohol only hinders your Dexterity, by game-mechanic logic, your instrument playing would not be hindered, even when extremely drunk. Naturally, our real-world knowledge suggests that most instruments require Dexterity, relating to hand coordination; however, the game mechanics do not think of this more niche situation of a drunk concert. While this may be the case, this differing logic does not warrant a parting of fabulae, but rather a realization that Cover mentions in other locations, as well as in this very example. The players involved can simply discuss how the rules should be changed to reflect realism, or, at the very least, come up with an explanation to logically explain the rules as they stand. The malleability of the game rules in the hands of the TRPG group is a huge part of the freedom the TRPG provides. We have even quoted *D&D 5e*'s *Dungeon Master's Guide* as directly saying this, using a brazier-attack example (see page 70). This use of out-of-game-rules talk in order to decide how to change or create game rules is innate to the form; it is an expected result and tool relating to the form's unprecedented narrative freedom.

As for the rest of Cover's frame descriptions, I generally agree. Much of these ideas, including dice rolls, description, and role-play, are explored elsewhere across this work. But I would like to take a moment to discuss Cover's insights into narrative suggestions as they relate to the use of different POVs. As discussed earlier, which POV is being used can signal what fabula we are interacting on, thus making confusion between fabulae much lesser. After making some important points on not taking discussed tactics seriously until after they become narrative

suggestions, or "statements of intention in which the player describes the actions his or her character attempts" (also meaning they have taken public legitimacy towards, often, rolling to determine how this AW statement solidifies itself in the TAW), Cover mentions the future and present tenses (99). Cover explains, "players use either future tense or present tense when stating the actions of their characters.... [This] serves to mark "re-orientating to the RPG frame" (Lacy, 2006, p.64). Although further linguistic study is necessary, the use of tense initially seems like a way to distinguish between narrative planning speech and a narrative suggestion" (100). Cover goes on to suggest that present tense can display confidence that the character will succeed, or the suggestion will enter the TAW, as the tense implies certainty.

Notably, when narrative suggestions do not require a roll to succeed, or generally are not going to be hindered, such as "I walk over to the bar and order a drink," then any uncertainty is skipped and it immediately enters into the TAW, usually accompanied by the GM recognizing the statement with some description. Also importantly, there is usually no going back on a narrative description. Once a GM recognizes that you have said "I do X," then it enters the TAW. Hence why a player cannot simply change their mind when they realize their roll was bad. A suggestion can even be "overturned" by the GM if the statement is impossible in that moment, see a statement like, "I start flying" when the character has no ability to do so (101). This is representative of the GM's "veto" power over what can and cannot pass into the TAW. This use of POV helps further clarify the interactions of our "possible-worlds theory" terms, as well as flags a source for further scholarship: the linguistic study of TRPG players' speech across the fabulae.

Overall, Cover's insights into fabulae and possible-worlds theory are fantastic and dense. However, for a narratological driven approach, as we take here, I disagree with some of her simplifications, as well as her breaking-up of the table fabula experience. The TRPG experience as a whole includes everything from the table emotions to the narrative role-play, a key fact that Cover recognizes as well and thus, even with differences, her approach, too, is to be held in careful regard. Many of these differences likely stem from a key difference, that being our more strictly narratological approach compared to Cover's (or Fine's), which takes more sociological interest. Thus, I do not want us to simply collapse the NAW and the TAW, as we lose out on the classical narrative interest of the biased narrator vs the author's reality. I also do not want to split the table fabula in half to create an additional "social frame," as nearly all occurrences in our reality, at the TRPG table, affect the overall TRPG narrative experience. Cover's approach is valuable, but we must differ for our narratological interests.

Bibliography

Figures

Figure 1 is entirely self-produced

Figure 2:

Kinnaman, Andrew, et al. "Monster Analysis: Merrow Shallow Priest." *CritRoleStats*, 14 June

      2018, www.critrolestats.com/blog/2018/6/11/monster-analysis-merrow-shallow-priest.

Figure 3:

From *Curse of Strahd* - cited below.

Figure 4:

From *Narratology* - cited below.

"TRPG Resources Character Sheets." *TRPG Resources | Dungeons & Dragons*, Wizards of the

      Coast, dnd.wizards.com/products/tabletop-games/trpg-resources/trpg-resources.

Figure 5 is entirely self-produced

Figure 6:

Eileen, Sidney. "The Balancing Path: Non-Binary Thinking & The D&D Alignment Chart."

      Agora, Patheos Explore the World's Faith through Different Perspectives on Religion and

      Spirituality! Patheos Has the Views of the Prevalent Religions and Spiritualities of the

      World., 21 Oct. 2019,

      www.patheos.com/blogs/agora/2019/10/the-balancing-path-non-binary-thinking-the-dd-al

      ignment-chart/.

Figure 7:

From Hall's *Polygon* article - cited below.

Figure 8:

Stewart, C.K., and Steve Foxe. "Taako, Magnus & Merle Return in This Exclusive The

      Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited! Excerpt." Pastemagazine.com, Paste

      Magazine, 26 June 2019,

      www.pastemagazine.com/comics/the-adventure-zone/taako-magnus-merle-return-in-this-

      exclusive-the-ad/.

Figure 9:

Wizardsmagic. Tumblr, Wizards of the Coast, 26 June 2017,

      wizardsmagic.tumblr.com/post/162259129256/our-first-pride-parade-was-so-much-fun-th

      anks-to.

Figure 10:

From *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games* - cited below.

Figure 11 is entirely self-produced.

Figure 12 is entirely self-produced.

Figure 13:

From *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-playing Games* - cited below.

Videos

"Caleb's Counterspell | Critical Role Highlight | Campaign 2, Episode 43." *YouTube*, Critical

      Role, 7 Jan. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrHrbDmN3cM .

"Caleb's Night Rant." *YouTube*, Critical Role, 18 July 2018,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEhftLmZbNw.

"Dungeons & Dragons: Satanic Panic | Retro Report | The New York Times." *YouTube*, The

New York Times, 7 June 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATUpSPj0x-c.

"Matthew Mercer on Life, Critical Role and Everything | D&D Beyond." *YouTube*, D&D

Beyond, 21 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIoNG4gbLhE.

Maza, Carlos and Gina Barton, creators. "Dungeons and Dragons, Explained." *YouTube*, Vox, 14

June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PEt5RdNHNw.

Texts

Alimurung, Gendy. "How Dungeons & Dragons Somehow Became More Popular than Ever."

The Washington Post, WP Company, 18 Apr. 2019,

www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/how-dungeons-and-dragons-somehow-became-

more-popular-than-ever/2019/04/18/fc226f56-5f8f-11e9-9412-daf3d2e67c6d_story.html.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Fourth ed., University of

Toronto Press, 2017.

Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*.

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010.

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

Press, 1983.

Hall, Charlie. "How Many People Are Playing D&D Compared to Other Tabletop RPGs?"

Polygon, Polygon, 29 July 2019,

www.polygon.com/2019/7/29/8934912/how-many-people-play-dungeons-dragons-pathfi

nder.

Kenreck, Todd. "Mark Hulmes on D&D's Popularity and Streaming." *D&D Beyond*, 11 Oct.

2018, www.dndbeyond.com/posts/342-mark-hulmes-on-d-ds-popularity-and-streaming.

Kirk, John. "INTERVIEW: 'Critical Role' Actors Discuss 'Vox Machina's Massively Successful

Kickstarter." Pop Mythology, 1 Apr. 2019,

www.popmythology.com/critical-role-vox-machina-interview/.

Mearls, Mike, et al. *Curse of Strahd*. Wizards of the Coast, 2016.

Mearls, Mike, et al. *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Mearls, Mike, et al. *Player's Handbook*. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing At The World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic*

Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games. Unreason Press, 2012.

Whitten, Sarah. "'Dungeons and Dragons' Has Found Something Its Early Fans Never Expected:

Popularity." CNBC, CNBC, 18 Mar. 2019,

www.cnbc.com/2019/03/15/dungeons-and-dragons-is-more-popular-than-ever-thanks-to-t

witch.html.

Winter, Steve, et al. The Rise of Tiamat: Tyranny of Dragons. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Yule, Simon. "GeekDad Interviews 'Critical Role's' Matthew Mercer." GeekDad, 8 Feb. 2018,

geekdad.com/2018/02/geekdad-interviews-critical-roles-matthew-mercer/.

Zakarin, Jordan. "Critical Role's Travis Willingham, Sam Riegel Answer Fan Questions about

Their Kickstarter Cartoon [Ep. #78]." SYFY WIRE, SYFY, 28 Aug. 2019,

www.syfy.com/syfywire/critical-roles-kickstarter-animated-series-interview-travis-willin

gham-sam-riegel.