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## Agential Fantasy: A Copenhagen Approach to the Tabletop Role-Playing Game

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AGENTIAL FANTASY:  
A COPENHAGEN APPROACH TO THE  
TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAME

by

Scott M. Bruner

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
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at

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May 2023

## ABSTRACT

### AGENTIAL FANTASY: A COPENHAGEN APPROACH TO THE TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAME

by

Scott M. Bruner

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023  
Under the Supervision of Professor Stuart Moulthrop

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson published the world's first commercial role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*. The tabletop roleplaying game provoked a new form of textual engagement: it entangled the fantastic tales of early 20th Century pulp fiction with the practice of play. The tabletop role-playing game initiated new perspectives on how classic texts could not only be read but also played. Our contemporary world is becoming increasingly gamified: digital media applications (from mobile phones to the personal home computer) have embedded game elements, structures, processes, and lexicons in our modern lives. Tabletop role-playing was a herald for, and catalyst, of this contemporary phenomenon. Espen Aarseth notes that tabletop role-playing games can be considered as an early form of the "cybertext," a text that requires "non-trivial" effort for its engagement, and is "the oral predecessor to computerized, written, adventure games."

The project of this dissertation offers an approach of examining and understanding the practice of tabletop role-playing through Karen Barad's concept of agential realism. Agential realism is based on concepts of Niels Bohr's "Copenhagen Interpretation" of quantum phenomenon and its premise that nothing can be observed without changing what is observed.

Agential realism requires us to accept and acknowledge our complicity in the creation, physical and sociocultural, of the realities which surround, bound, and interpellate us.

This dissertation complicates the notion of singular authorship of isolated texts and realities by examining all the relationships necessary to produce a tabletop roleplaying game text. The first chapter of this dissertation introduces the concepts of agential realism while the second offers the historical context for the emergence of tabletop role-playing games. The third chapter analyzes the affective and aesthetic inspirations for *Dungeons & Dragons* to consider the conditions for the emergence of the first commercial tabletop role-playing game and how it would reconfigure the pulp and classic mythologies that inspired it. In the fourth chapter, I examine the rules for *Traveller*, an early science fiction tabletop role-playing game directly inspired by the practice of *Dungeons & Dragons* play, to consider how the procedural mechanics of games impact their authorship. The fifth chapter analyzes another mode of authorship for the role-playing game by analyzing its actual play; in this chapter, I examine specific game sessions from a campaign of the tabletop role-playing game, *Call of Cthulhu*. Throughout these chapters, we understand how the tabletop role-playing game text, like our physical and sociocultural realities, exist within states of radical possibility. Each mode of authorship, through a text's inspiration, mechanical construction, and subjective interpretation are observations that fix the tabletop role-playing text into a specific manifestation – thought it may exist within any a priori of an observation. This dissertation advocates for an approach to consider realities, within and beyond the games we play, not as isolated moments of objective experience, but as the inevitable consequences of entanglements with all the authors (and players) that share them.

For Katie

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Finally, this project is dedicated to my wife, Katie, for \*waves arms around\* *everything*.

## **Chapter One: The Player's Handbook** (*An Introduction to Quantum Play*)

“Every sentence I say must be understood not as an affirmation, but as a question.”  
- *Niels Bohr*

“Reason had harnessed the tame / Holding the sky in their arms...”  
- *R.E.M.*

**Every engagement with a text creates a new world.** How we understand each of these worlds – their possibilities, their capacities, their agency – depends not only on how we interpret our passages through them, but how we understand the concept of a world itself. The concept of worlds within our media – alternative, possible, speculative, or even real and material – is not new. The history of literature, games, and cinematic scholarship offers an abundance of theoretical concepts that explore how textual engagements require a subjective creation of a new world interpreted by their reader, player, or audience. This type of scholarship often focuses on the speculative poetics and aesthetics of these imagined worlds. The concept of exploring who, or what, an author is, and who or what a reader is, has been ubiquitous throughout the history of literary criticism. For those who are fascinated by the text, our explorations of what they do and how they enthrall us even as the materiality of the texts themselves has changed while the message has never changed at all. Every time we watch a film, read a book, or play a game, we do not enter worlds of imagination, but rather engage in a discursive collaboration of creation with every author of the text. We enter into relationships that transcend isolated moments, subjectivities, and worlds. Through our fractured and incomplete texts, we mobilize media to *entangle* every author and compel the emergent manifestation of a material world we can all share.

Outside of critical media scholarship, other fields of scientific inquiry explore the creation, capacities, population, and boundaries of our material world. The fields of physical

science and social theory have a legacy of examining the history, breadth, and relationships of how we interpret, understand, and navigate our world. In the last century, many of these scientific fields have begun to ask the same questions about the creation and interpretation of our world that media scholarship has asked about our imaginary spaces. While the conclusions may be different, our multiple disciplines are beginning to consider similar speculative possibilities about the nature of the world around us. Scientific and humanities scholarship are equally limited by the ontological, intellectual, and perceptual limitations of being human and the epistemological capital, social, and political limitations of living within the pressures of our modern societies. Both work on similar issues even if they do not always recognize those parallels.

One of the arguments of this dissertation is that a recognition of these parallels is essential for recognizing supporting or contradictory evidence from other scholarly fields of inquiry for the speculative possibilities within our own. To wit: the field of physics is concerned with how our material world works, while literary (and media) scholarship explores how imaginary worlds are realized (and built) through textual creation and interpretation. The field of social sciences explores how we navigate and perform within cultural frames, while literary and media scholarship explores how we navigate and perform within the constructed frames of texts. We have often conceived of these worlds as ontologically separate: the physical world is real and textual worlds are simply dreams. This dissertation does not make the argument that textual worlds are as "real" as the physical world; however, it does argue that the conceptions, realizations, and interpretations of our possible worlds ineluctably influence the way that we study, interpret, define, and navigate our material worlds. Interdisciplinary approaches are invaluable and *inevitable*.

This dissertation employs theoretical concepts from media criticism, social theory, and contemporary science to argue this point and to advance a potential approach for studying a particular mode of text, the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG). The TRPG offers a particularly compelling object of study for this argument because it is a genre that *explicitly* creates imaginary worlds through a process of discursive collaboration. It is a microcosmic model of the process by which we create, define, and interpret the consensual reality of our “real world.” The study of the TRPG text and its worlds offers insights into the worlds of our material communities and cultures. Examinations of our mediated worlds are explorations of how we understand the consensual, physical realities that we navigate in our physical spaces. The physical and social sciences have begun to realize that the boundaries between the two – and the relationship between them – is much less distinct than we previously imagined.

One of the theories I apply for my analysis is from contemporary quantum physics: Niels Bohr’s “Copenhagen Interpretation” of quantum phenomena. Quantum physics is the study of the physical interactions of extremely small units of matter and energy (or “quanta”) such as electrons or photons. Quanta are the material building blocks of our universe; however, they *seem* to behave differently from the macro, everyday objects (chair, book, computer) that we can see and touch. The laws of physics for these everyday objects are referred to as “classic physics,” and classic laws of physics do not (*seem* to) apply to quantum objects. The field of quantum physics is based on studying the curious behaviors of quanta. The impact of quantum physics on modern life is everywhere. Modern cell phones and personal computers all rely on quantum phenomena and behaviors to operate; engineers must understand the laws of quantum physics in order to move the electrons that make computer chips work. Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that theoretical physics invents “facts (or world)” in order to test models of how the universe

operates and that physics is maybe “99 percent speculation and 1 percent invention...” (*Actual Minds* 14).<sup>1</sup> Scientists understand how to take advantage of quantum behaviors, although not necessarily *why* quantum objects do not obey the classic laws of physics. There are two specific quantum phenomena essential for understanding the project of this dissertation.

### **Observer Effect & Entanglement**

Perhaps the most famous (and often misunderstood) quantum experiment is the double-slit experiment. The experiment has been conducted thousands of times and generated numerous theories to explain its curious results. The experiment was originally designed to determine whether the photons which make up light are waves or particles. In the double slit experiment, scientists fire photons through a screen with two small openings on it (slits) onto a second screen. They analyze the patterns that the photons make on the second screen to determine whether they behave like a wave, not dissimilar to water waves splashing against a sea wall, that would create an “interference pattern” on the second screen, or whether the photons collide with the second screen as distinct particles, not unlike individual tennis balls striking a wall. Initial double-slit experiments (seemed to) determine that light photons were waves. They created a wave-like pattern on the second screen which suggested that photons passed through both slits – like a wave would pass through two openings in a sea wall.

In order to determine how the photons were moving through the slits, scientists set up a recording apparatus to observe exactly how the photons moved through the slits on their way to creating their interference pattern on the second screen. When they conducted the experiment with this observation apparatus, the photons behaved like individual particles. They were no

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Bruner is (sadly) unrelated to the author.

longer waves (or in the lexicon of quantum physicists, their “wave function” had collapsed) but distinct particles that chose one of the two slits to pass through. The interference pattern was gone. Before the photons were observed passing through the first screen, they passed through both slits simultaneously. Any experiment that directly observed how photons moved through the screen forced the photons to move through only *one* of the two slits.

The experiment determined that photons of light, at the quantum level, demonstrate both features of indeterminate waves and determinate particles. Light functions as an indeterminate wave, occupying several positions in space, until it is observed or measured. At that point, light “collapses,” or becomes made up of specific particles with measurable positions. This unintuitive behavior has now been recorded in other quanta as well: molecules and atoms (seem to) exist within states of “probability” that are not determined until they are measured. Until they are measured or observed, quanta exist in what physicists call superposition; they do not have a definite, specific, measurable location but occupy potential locations simultaneously. This phenomenon is called the “observer effect” and is one of the fundamental bases of Bohr’s interpretation: the very act of being observed determines the location and behaviors of matter at the quantum level. Quantum behaviors cannot be observed or measured without affecting them.

The second quantum physics phenomenon important for my analysis is quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement is a phenomenon where quanta become inextricably linked and correlated with one another: their spin, polarity, or even position are no longer independent of other quanta. Any change in one quantum simultaneously changes any other quanta entangled with it, no matter how far apart they are. If one quantum, existing within an indeterminate state of probability, is measured or observed, it collapses into a determinate state and so do the states of any other quanta with which it is entangled. Entangled quanta exist as

possibilities until their relationship is observed; then, they become “real” and measurable. It does not matter how far apart entangled quanta are. Entangled quanta could be on opposite sides of the universe and any change to one is instantly reflected in the other.

Albert Einstein famously referred to this as “spooky action at a distance,” because it violates his theory of relativity that argues nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. Entangled quanta seem to violate this rule – unless we understand that they are not communicating with each other but are rather linked together in a way not accounted for within traditional physical models (yet). This phenomenon also challenges traditional, classical physical concepts of the material reality of time and space. This experiment establishes that quanta of matter become linked with one another, without regard to time or distance, and that their relationships with other quanta are necessary for their existence. Quanta exist only through relationships with other quanta. They do not precede their relationships but emerge from them.

There are numerous theories within quantum physics to explain these phenomena although there is no definitive scientific consensus. The field of quantum physics is compelling because while we know how quantum behavior can be predicted, which is how we are able to utilize these behaviors in modern digital technologies, we do not know necessarily why they function in such curious manners. The theories to explain these phenomena are just as compelling – especially in their potential implications and larger applications – than quantum behavior itself. For instance, Possible Worlds theory posits that there are an infinite number of alternative worlds different from our own. Quanta exist within all of these “possible” worlds until they are observed and then can only exist within one: they “collapse” into a specific reality among countless other possible realities. The quantum objects we observe were previously existing in all worlds until we forced them to choose ours. The De Broglie–Bohm theory



rationalizes paradoxical quantum behaviors by arguing that quanta travel on “pilot waves” which create the interference pattern and not the quanta themselves (which are definite particles).

Quantum physicists Kathryn Schaffer and Gabriela Barreto Lemos state that any explanation for quantum behavior requires a specific interpretation. Each interpretation often reveals the philosophical (and even existential) perspectives of its proponents. Schaffer and Barreto Lemos claim that, based on what we know now, “...there can be no ‘interpretation-free’ description of the microscopic world” (14). For quantum scientists and theorists, how they understand what is happening at this scale is always based on the interpretative lens they use to define quantum behaviors. Einstein himself was notoriously troubled by quantum behaviors because their contradictions unsettled his own beliefs in a quantifiable, measurable, and eventually *knowable* universe. Quantum physics compels us to consider the impact of our subjective observations of the world on its realization and interpretation.

The most popular explanation for quantum behaviors is known as the “Copenhagen Interpretation.” This perspective was developed by Bohr and Werner Heisenberg in the 1920s. Even proponents of the Copenhagen Interpretation, including Bohr and Heisenberg, disagree on its implications (Camilleri 2007). The concept of what the Copenhagen Interpretation is apparently also depends on the perspective of scientist or observer. Bruce Rosenbloom and Fred Kuttner argue that “there is no ‘official’ Copenhagen interpretation. But every version grabs the bull by the horns and asserts that *an observation produces the property observed*” (100). Bohr himself argued that this viewpoint challenged models of classic physics based on the concept of an objective reality. At least at the quantum level, reality only becomes determined through a relationship with an observer.<sup>2</sup> He proclaimed that “everything we call real is made of things

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<sup>2</sup> Rosenbloom and Kuttner note how this concept of observation becomes problematic and identify another disagreement within quantum physics: what does observation mean? How small does matter actually need to be

that cannot be regarded as real. If quantum mechanics hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it yet.” Calling it an *Interpretation* is a misnomer; the Copenhagen Interpretation is based on the concept that can be no interpretation of the universe, no definitive states, until a relationship is formed through observation. Like a photon in a double-slit experiment, even the Copenhagen Interpretation is not determined until a conscious agent (or observer) translates it into a theoretical model. For proponents of Bohr’s version of the Copenhagen Interpretation, the double slit experiment proves that observation changes the state of the material world (photons become definitive particles when they are interacted with). Quantum entanglement demonstrates the ontological inseparability between the building blocks of our universe and time-space as a subjective construction.<sup>3</sup>

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be applying, with some reservations, feminist theorist and quantum physicist Karen Barad’s theories. Her theories are aligned with, and extend, Bohr’s interpretations about the nature of reality. Barad’s quantum background directly influences her critical perspectives. Her intersection of scientific and critical theory is an inspiration for this dissertation (and for my advocacy of interdisciplinary engagements between the humanities and sciences). Barad claims that “quantum physics opens up radical spaces for exploring the possibilities for change from inside hegemonic systems of domination” (*Troubling Time/s* 61). She argues that modern quantum theory can lead other fields to challenge perspectives that we take for granted at all levels of society, politics, and culture. Challenging

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to express these curious quantum behaviors? Does observation require a consciousness? Curious quantum behaviors have provoked as many debates about defining the experiments as it has about their potential implications.

<sup>3</sup> The idea that time and space are constructions of human consciousness (or experience) is becoming an increasingly popular theory within theoretical physics. Scientists such as Max Tegmark (physics) and Donald Hoffman (cognitive psychology) argue that space and time are constructed through consciousness to navigate (and limit) an actual reality too overwhelming for human minds to fully comprehend.

these notions leads us to antagonize established structures and she advocates for a conscious re-thinking of those structures that recognizes the impact observers have on time, history, and our interpretation(s) of the world and universe.

Barad argues that the world around us does not have a determinate reality separate from, or pre-existing, our engagement with it, and that any interaction that we have with the world ineluctably transforms it and us. The phenomenon of entanglement demonstrates that it is the *relationships* between objects in our universe, whether they are quanta, material objects, people, or even ideas, that define it, rather than the illusion that they exist independently from one another. This perspective forms the basis of Barad's theory of "agential realism." Agential realism is the concept that nothing in the universe pre-exists its relationship with other parts of the universe. Barad explains that:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. Which is not to say that emergence happens once and for all, as an event or as a process that takes place according to some external measures of space and of time, but rather that time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future. (*Meeting the Universe Halfway IX*)

Barad introduces the term "intra-action" as a substitute for "interaction," for conceptualizing the ontological primacy of relationships between agents within our universe. Interactions assume that there can exist two distinct agents in the universe which pre-exist any relationship between them. Barad argues that this is not possible: existence only emerges through relationships. An intra-action, similar to quantum entanglement, assumes that agents cannot exist without one another, and any change (or observation) of one agent changes the other. In the double-slit experiment, for instance, quantum matter emerges as solid, definite particles only

through a relationship with an observer (in the act of observation). This process also creates the world of the observer. Both entities emerge through the entanglement of their possibility. It is not an *interaction* because the world does not exist without an observer and the observer cannot exist without a world to inhabit. Agents in the universe cannot be considered as separate from their relationships. These relationships are not characteristics of agents but are a requirement for their emergence, being, existence, and agency. Intra-actions describe this process of embodied, dynamic entanglement that Barad posits as occurring within every level of existence and meaning.

For Barad, agents can be human and the nonhuman. She resists any easy distinction between the two – besides consciousness' capacity for being cognizant of this distinction. Our conception of who and what we are, and what nonhuman agents are, emerge from intra-actions with one another. We are not removed from the world (and are entangled with it); nonhumans become entangled with our subjectivities and our subjectivities become entangled with, and through, their emergence. Barad also argues that agents need not even be material: we are all also entangled with ideas, structures of power, historical record, memory, our experiences of time and place; the universe is not a collection of bodies, but a dynamic, emergent system of entangled relationships creating a universe.

Barad applies her perspective towards both the ontology and epistemology of the universe. She argues that quantum phenomena demonstrate that physical matter itself lacks any definitive state until it forms relationships with agents who have the capacity to observe it. Epistemologically, Barad argues that our interpretation of the universe also impacts its reality. She argues for cognizance of the agency of any apparatus that measures, observes, and interprets the world. Barad claims that our observation and translation of the universe is a discursive

practice of creative collaboration through this agency. She argues that this agency is “about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 214). The choices that agents make in how to observe, measure, and understand the universe constitute the creation of the ideas, practices, and philosophies which form the physical and social structures within it.

In the same manner that observing photons moving through a screen collapses their possibilities into one determinate path, the imposition of any structural apparatus (or even its consideration) collapses the multiple potentials of social, cultural political worlds into determinate realities. This is a process of physical and interpretative entanglement: the world and its populations become defined through the intra-actions which allow both to emerge. Schaffer and Barreto Lemos explain the implication of Barad’s perspective that “the notion that anything, on any scale, has a persistent and well-defined identity, is thus called into question” (14). Agential realism invites possibilities; it also introduces an almost-overwhelming level of responsibility and accountability for all our actions when they are observed as part of a tangled web of agential intra-actions. If everything is entangled, the actions of all agents (and their apparatus) impact all our material, physical, and even speculative realities.

This dissertation does not offer an explicit argument for the Copenhagen Interpretation, nor does it align itself entirely with all Barad’s conclusions or her theory of agential realism. There are several reasons for this: I am not a quantum physicist and cannot verify or refute Barad’s mathematical and scientific supports for her conclusions. There have also been critical objections to Barad’s work, often because of the implicit radicalism of her approach and advocacy for applying quantum behavior and physics towards social, critical, and humanities

theory. Jan Faye and Rasmus Jakland argue that Barad's perspective is "...one among many possible interpretations and one, we argue, whose very coherence is still in need of further scrutiny" (8234). Schaffer and Barreto Lemos also caution that Barad's approach assumes Bohr's interpretation as a "fundamental fact," without an acknowledgment of other possibilities and alternative theories. The field of quantum physics, like the behaviors and phenomenon it studies, has stubbornly resisted determinate interpretations and scientific consensus. The interpretation of quantum implications depends on the subjective observations of the theorist.

While Schaffer and Barreto Lemos welcome new applications of quantum insights (and quantum mysteries) within other critical fields, Faye and Jakland take exception to the ubiquity of Barad's ideas in other arenas. They note that most of the "over 8000" citations for Barad's book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2006), that apply agential realism are in cultural and social theory departments rather than within physics and philosophies departments which are "arguably the natural home" for these discussions (2).<sup>4</sup> Faye and Jakland's disputes with Barad's quantum interpretations are valuable. However, the very concept of homes for theoretical concepts that offer potentially revelatory insights throughout every scholarly field is a disturbing advocacy for hierarchical determinism. This is especially troubling since fields in humanities are critically trained for the implications and application of theory.

Narrative theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Umberto Eco have explored similar territory in attempts to determine the boundaries and relationships between literature, art, and the real world. Barthes and Foucault argue that textual interactions are not

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<sup>4</sup> In "(Dis)entangling Barad: Materialism and Ethics," Hollin et al. note that Barad's terminology and ideas have become popular enough to be featured in "conferences on ruins, animal ethics and informational infrastructures to journal articles on lifelong learning (Edwards, 2010), bullying in schools (Søndergaard, 2012) and feminist theories of fashion (Parkins, 2008)" (2). This dissertation, which focuses on a game where players pretend to be elves and dwarves fighting dragons, adds another non-traditional study to this eclectic collection.

passive but represent an active, dynamic dialog. This dialog between the author and reader is necessary for the realization of both. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes famously erases the concept of an author as the definitive point of origin for textual realizations (1967). Barthes’ examination of the literary work is rightly centered not on the notions of independent readers and authors, but rather the intersubjective experiences formed through their textual engagement. Barad would argue that these engagements are also not linear. Textual interaction compels a link between reader, author, texts, ideas, and perspectives that irrevocably transforms all. Barad claims that she did not write *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, but rather that it, and the authors and thinkers entangled within her own subjectivity, wrote her (ix-x). She would argue, as do I, that textual engagements do not erase authors (or readers) but that their relationship actually *produces* both.

In his lecture “What is An Author?”, Foucault responds to Barthes’ authorial erasure, by arguing that: “the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses” (1969). Like Barad, Barthes believes the conception of an author is constructed from the texts. Determining where an author begins and ends is itself an act of agential realism: we, Quixotically, attempt to determine where one subjectivity begins and another ends without appreciating their fundamental entanglement. Foucault and Barthes recognize the futility of this attempt. The books we write and read, as a vehicle for the dialog between their authors and readers, write us. Barad extends this perspective beyond textual construction towards the fabric of our physical reality: we are writing the world as it writes us. This relationship is neither linear, nor recursive, but a dialectic entanglement. To understand each of the elements within our world, we need to consider the relationships which produce them, not reinforce the illusion of their separate realities.

Eco recognized this capacity for transformation, and the entanglements not just of reader and author but of reader, author, and the texts itself in *The Role of the Reader* (1979). Eco argues that engagement with interpretable texts catalyzes a discovery of the capacity of the text itself; the text is a conduit of meaning, not just of semiotic translation, but of the possibilities of textual engagement itself. He writes that: “The system of systems of codes, which could look like an unrealistic and idealistic cultural world separate from the concrete events, leads men to act upon the world; and this action continuously converts itself into new signs, giving rise to new semiotic systems” (195). The relationship between readers, authors, and texts is neither closed nor static. Rather, the continuing changes – regardless of whether these changes are progressive or regressive, an evolution or a deconstruction – in one of these agents impacts all others radically and simultaneously. The concept of entanglement, from the field of physics, is not a new idea within narratological study, it is simply a *new* term for an *old* idea.

The unfolding and interpretation of textual media yield similar insights that quantum physics has: the worlds created through textual engagement are entangled within author (or designer, or filmmaker) and reader (or audience). Fields of literature have often suggested at possibility – staking ground in the territories of the possible, illuminating concepts within interpretation, dreams, and speculation. Barad’s work provides a parallel within the field of hard sciences that suggests the boundaries between our media and the universe are diaphanous. Science is acknowledging what the humanities have often claimed: the reality of our world is constructed by the agents (readers, writers, and texts) capable of telling, sharing, and playing with its story. The rock band R.E.M. put it best on the nature of our realities, imagined and material, within the moebius-strip title of their third album. Reality is simply a “reconstruction of the fables of the reconstruction of the fables of the reconstruction...” (1985). Barad asks us to



analyze not just the fables of our world in isolation, nor how they, or we, (re)construct a reality, but to recognize how their timeless, and repeated engagements produce the emergent symphony of our universe. Right or wrong about quantum interpretation, Barad's push for quantum insights beyond the laboratory is welcome and belongs to a vital tradition of entanglement between the sciences and the humanities. I use the term entanglement not as a novel theoretical approach but as an accessible means (and as an aesthetic, and *agential* choice) for bridging disparate disciplines.

My final reservation (and most important) on fully embracing Barad's conclusions is that this dissertation resists determinate interpretations altogether: Bohr's epigraph above is fundamental to understanding the central thesis of this dissertation. Each question we ask, each idea we consider, and each perspective that we entertain opens new epistemological possibilities about the nature of reality (and media). Every conclusion that we reach collapses those possibilities. One of the core tenets of Bohr's perspective is that we cannot necessarily know the true universe because it must be filtered through our incomplete means of measuring it. Bohr argues for quantum physics as a means of measuring how our perception of the world works. He explicitly argues that we could not measure what it necessarily *is*. I agree with Bohr's perspective: a world is created through our studies, observations, interpretations, and translations of it.<sup>5</sup> Like photons moving through a screen, we cannot watch the world without creating it. The worlds of our media are similarly created. A study of how they intersect (and entangle

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<sup>5</sup> Whether the world we create is a true reality is inconsequential; the reality we assume around us is the world we experience and worthy of exploration and analysis. If there are "deeper" realities, or a more objective construction behind what we assume as reality, we lack the capacity to discover it (for now) and there are more than enough mysteries to explore in the accessible, immediate world. This is not a solipsistic argument. I do not argue that we cannot see reality outside of our mind. I concur with Barad that we are creating one.

themselves) is a particular important study for understanding – or at least understanding the complexity of – both.

Barad considers the implications of Bohr’s interpretation and asks us to recognize our capacity to radically redetermine the authorship of social structures, culture, politics, history, and reality itself. That perspective is potentially problematic in that it assumes we are capable of reaching a consensus for what a just, equitable universe should be. Our current cultural moment is an evocative illustration of our fractured capacity for consensus. Our modern world seems to be comprised of multiple realities of interpretation, translation, and subjective experience; it is entangled within a mediated digital network which continues to split, divide, and isolate subjective perspectives. I concur with Barad that the world is constructed through its relationships; I am not convinced we can agree, or adequately determine, which relationships would lead to a better universe. Building an equitable utopia in 2023 becomes an exercise in first, asking: whose utopia? Who would be the watchmen or *watchpeople* of this consciously created universe?<sup>6</sup> However, perhaps an acknowledgment of our capacity, and the implications, of our agency within the construction of our multiple realities forces us to begin having that conversation. I firmly agree with Barad that an acknowledgment of our complicity in the creation of the universe is a first step toward accepting the responsibility for its stewardship.

The Copenhagen perspective on reality, however, is not new; nor is it the sole property of physics departments. Social theory and game theory have been advancing similar concepts,

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<sup>6</sup> Cybertextual utopianism, based on the agency provided in video games to interact with digitally created worlds, is common within popular and academic game scholarship. Books such as Jane McGonigal’s *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011) claim that game play has the capacity to radically improve society (and archaic social structures and inequity). These arguments never seem to acknowledge the radical subjectivity of what makes a world better. This dissertation resists not only determinism, but the concept that we can make equitable and ethical choices without a collaborative discourse entangled with all the possible agents and objects, and their desires, within our shared realities.

within their fields of study, for decades. The legacy of social theory is a history of examining how cultures emerge through social relationships. While quantum physics has become seductive to modern theorists, because of the provocative nature of many of its conclusions about materiality, anthropology and sociology have been making similar claims about the world of human culture (and reality) for centuries. For the social scientist, it might seem as if the physical sciences have been dragging their feet to accept what is apparent within social interactions.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim recognized the relationship (entanglement) between how our understanding of the world shapes its social structures. Durkheim argues that “the universe exists only insofar as it is thought, and ...it takes place within society, becomes an element of its inner life, and society may thus be seen as that total genus beyond which nothing else exists” (qtd. in Jameson 8). Weber and Durkheim recognize the human as entangled with cultural and social structures. Unlike Barad, however, who argues for the capacity of agency within a world being dynamically constructed, they contextualize humanity as the oppressed *subject* of the callous ideologies of modernity and history. Although much of the world’s social structures, fashioned to impose a certain level of meaning upon an uncertain world, might have sprung from human agents, humanity has long ceased to be their master.<sup>7</sup> From the viewpoint of modernity, a hierarchy exists where social structures subjugate; influence and intersection are possible, but entanglement is not. A student of Weber’s, Alfred Schutz complicates this position by arguing not for a primary, consensually agreed-upon universe, but one in which “multiple realities” exist, defined by the sociocultural

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<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau argues that this process of attempted subjugation is not always effective; people find ways to restrict social structures of power (strategies) through ground-level tactics which resist them. Structures attempt to subjugate but people are not passive, non-agential objects. I examine De Certeau’s perspective in more detail in Chapter 3 when we look at how the TRPG, and its invention, resist traditional (canonical) methods of textual interaction.

stations of the people who make them up. He claims that “it is the meaning of our experience and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality” (551). Schutz’s argument is not dissimilar from the concept of Possible Worlds theory – although it rests not on complicating notions of physical reality but rather our disparate interpretations of a shared reality. All these perspectives focus on epistemological relationships with the world: for Durkheim, Weber, and Schutz, how we understand the world is important, but the world itself is physically real and present. Their view presupposes a conflict between the populations within it for control of its interpretative construction (these populations are not agents, but antagonists).

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Pierre Bourdieu recognizes social structure and human agents not as constant antagonists but existing within a dynamic reflexive arrangement which, I would argue, represents a form of social entanglement. Bourdieu introduces the concept of the habitus: “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations,” that governs human action and agency (78). Human beings cannot perform their lives, rituals, and interactions without the “installed” mores and customs of their cultures; those mores and customs can only be socially legitimized through their routine practice by human agents. This relationship forms the habitus that guides human actions and performance. The habitus reflects the social realities and regulations we agree to for the construction of consensually-interpreted, and collaboratively-translated social arenas. The habitus provides a forum where we can understand one another. Bourdieu argues that the habitus breaks down barriers of time. He argues that it is a form of “embodied history” that reflects the perspectives, experiences, and necessities of the cultures from which it emerges through social practice.

The habitus is an embodied, intrinsic state of people’s conception of themselves that contains echoes of the past, responds to the contingent needs of the present, and which was

created to meet the undiscovered, social demands of the future. Like Barad, Bourdieu argues that human agency is possible and inevitable even within the boundaries of the habitus. The habitus can be a constraining mechanism but it also offers social opportunities for creativity. The habitus may be a finite palette, but the combinations offered through its social interactions are not. Even concepts such as free will or determinism exist only through their relationships with one another.

Bourdieu explains:

We have to abandon notions of simple freedom or determinism. The habitus is a system of generative schemes which permits a great deal of individual innovation. It sets the limits for particular practical expressions, but it is far from being simply a “mechanical reproduction of the initial conditions” (95).

Barad would argue that concepts such as freedom and determinism do not precede their relationships. Their very existence relies on the frictions that emerge when human agents resist or acquiesce to either. Bourdieu’s work – echoed within Michel de Certeau’s work highlighting human creativity against authoritarian structures – recognizes the importance of untangling binary perspectives to examine the complexity of the social realities that emerge from these relationships. The habitus is constructed, human agents determine its construction; it exists beyond time. It is embodied, intersected within human practice, bodies, and performance. It is entangled with culture, history, and the human agents responsible for it. The habitus is also an entangled element of reality. Bourdieu’s work establishes that our social relationships and structures emerge from similar relationships – between human agents – through similar discourses – between human agents – that Barad argues also construct the universe.

Early American theorists such as C.S. Peirce argue that epistemology and ontology are not necessarily so distinct. Peirce formulated the philosophy of pragmatism based on an acceptance that there are fundamental characteristics about our indeterminate universe that we do not and, perhaps, cannot know. Through inductive logic, Peirce argued we can make reasonable

inferences about the true nature of the universe. He claims that the limited data we do have access to, through our faculties, perceptions, allow us to distinguish essential, if incomplete, details of the universe. For Peirce, navigating life was an acknowledgment of its fundamental uncertainty with an acquiescence to the inevitable need to navigate it, a philosophy he calls pragmatism. It advocated for action and agency on the world based not on certainty or determinism, but on assessing the probabilities based on the incomplete fragments of the world we can perceive.

Peirce's perspective aligns with Bohr's fundamental argument that physics is the study not of what is, but what we *experience*. Bohr cautions against accepting our experiences as a true depiction of reality. Bohr's scientific perspective is a pragmatic one. Bohr and Peirce both avoid the pitfalls of solipsism by arguing that while our experience of the universe is limited and incomplete, it is not ineffectual. We are provided hints and insights into a universe which (may) allow us to establish fundamental truths into Einstein's "knowable" universe. I argue that another element that is inessential to accessing potential, fundamental, ontological truths resides within the capacity of intersubjective collaboration. Our eyes are open wider, or to paraphrase Sir Isaac, we can see farther by standing on the shoulders of the giants around us.

Bohr's and Peirce's perspectives on the divide between the actual universe and our experiences of it has recently received support within the biological sciences community. UC-Irvine neuroscientist Donald Hoffman makes a particularly compelling metaphor for the distinction between experience and reality. Hoffman claims that our experience of the world is not unlike the graphical user interface (GUI) on a modern personal computer ("Did We Evolve" 2019). We interface with a reality but it is not the reality that we see and touch. On a modern computer screen, the icons and folders on our desktop represent actual information, but they are

not what the actual information *is* (sets of binary codes and algorithms). The computer translates digital information into a graphic, accessible format we can understand and manipulate. Hoffman argues that our consciousness and senses do the same: they act as a bridge with a “real” reality. He argues that we should take reality, as we experience it, “seriously, but not literally” (“Truth vs. Reality” 18:55-19:00). While Hoffman’s existential perspective has been lauded as revelatory, again, it reflects parallel thoughts in the social sciences. Peirce argues that all we *can* see are the “signs” that potentially point towards universal truth; Hoffman’s metaphor of the computer interface makes it accessible to a modern audience (and it *is* an excellent metaphor) but the concept of a gaps between signs and signified has a rich history in social and literary theory. Robert Lanza argues that the universe is created through consciousness in his controversial work, *Biocentrism* (2010). Unlike Hoffman, he does not claim a fundamental universe exists a priori of human consciousness. Both, however, argue that human biology (and consciousness) is fundamental for the creation of reality.

Physicists concerned with the nature of reality proceed from establishing the physical reality (and non-reality) of the world, social theorists debate social structure’s role in its navigation, biologists argue for the role of the human mind (or consciousness) in its realization. All arrive at similar conclusions: our realities are collaboratively-constructed arenas entangled with human experience, subjectivity, and exigency. Each of these realities is simultaneously entangled with one another for the emergence of our universe: social worlds emerge from our physical realm. Biological interpretations require social structures (and lexicons) to give meaning to rituals and interactions. These relationships are not intersectional, hierarchical, or even antagonistic: they are all entangled. None of these realities have distinct boundaries, how we interpret the world determines what the world is; how our languages define is based both on what

reality is, as much as our capacity for creating definitions. Epistemology and ontology become fundamentally indivisible. Barad and Bourdieu's arguments rest on taking advantage of this indivisibility: of translating human and non-human agency through epistemology into radical possibility.

The act of interpreting and translating any universe requires us to go beyond simple readings or observation but to become active participants, *players*, within them. The term players is an allusion to the role we take when playing games; it refers to the role we take when we participate in the creation of game worlds and reality. This dissertation analyzes the emergence of the tabletop role-playing game, a compelling model that suggests that the play and creation of "imaginary" realities within the magic circle of games is often analogous to the production of the "material" realities beyond it. I do not claim that quantum physics nor anthropology, offers a definitive, scientific rationale for my mode of study. I argue that their contributions and insights offer invaluable tools for conducting approaches that transcend the study of photons and neutrons or performative frames. This approach offers a perspective that the worlds of media, culture, and imagination have more in common, or might perhaps be entirely complementary, to the physical realms we have always prioritized. I argue that media and the world, like ourselves and our world, also exist in a state of entanglement: neither exist without an embodied relationship with the other; neither move, change, or are realized without changing the shape of the other. Both are authored, consciously and creatively, through the relationships between their populations.

Art is the history of intersubjective experimentation for constructing possibilities within new universes...and our old one. If our different scientific fields arrive at similar conclusions about how social, material, and cognitive realities are manufactured, art offers a forum where



those implications might be most effectively considered. The postmodernist writer Italo Calvino argues that:

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various ‘codes’ into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world (112).

This dissertation argues that art is the crucible where the complementary perspectives of our scientific fields can catalyze synergistic insights into both the ever-elusive concept (or even impossibility) of a “knowable” universe and into the more accessible, knowable universes of our individual subjectivities. If the universe is being constantly created, the first step might be understanding its creators – and how they emerge through their relationships with the other subjectivities, media, histories, and experiences with which they are entangled. Art, the human arena for playful experiments of constructed, “manifold and multifaceted” worlds and possibilities, might be the optimal place to begin those investigations.

It could be argued that role-playing is the most ubiquitous contemporary form of art: it appears everywhere and influences nearly every mediated instance of our lives. The sociologist Erving Goffman (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1956) and folklorist Richard Bauman (*Verbal Art as Performance* 1977) have examined the multitudes and vagaries of human performances throughout multiple social worlds. They argue that these performances allow societies to define themselves. We look to our performances, socially, culturally, professionally, to have a sense of who we are. Goffman argues that the self “is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them” (573). We construct disparate roles throughout the day for ourselves and others. Our lives are a constant practice of “role-playing.” The role we play at home is different, though produced from the same material shell which expresses all our performances, than the one we play at work. Goffman refers to the

setting of each performance as entering a new “frame.” He argues that we are judged, by ourselves and society, on how effectively we navigate the context of each frame. Choosing the correct role to play, and then role-playing it well, is the key to expressing sociocultural and personal competency.

The allusion to quantum physics is compelling: our concept of ourselves is based not just on an illusion of a core, defined self, but rather the observation of our lived performances. Aristotle argued that we are what we repeatedly do (and that our ethics emerge from the habits we cultivate and the performances we express). I would expand this statement to include that we are what we do because we, and the people in our society, *observe* ourselves doing it. Identity, personal and cultural, takes shape as it is translated into narrative schemas that guide future performances by collapsing them into specific, definitive, and interpretable meanings. Bourdieu argues that society, and its cultural mores and expectations are embodied within us (through the habitus). Bauman and Goffman point to our performances as an expression of how we understand ourselves within the world: performance is a means of playing within it. I argue that all of these elements, habitus, performances, roles, and frames, exist not as separate entities that interact with one another, but rather as elements of society entangled with one another. Performances are only effective with an appropriate social frame to interpret it, and all social frames are irrevocably altered by the performances that exist within it. Our performances alter the landscape of our world and ourselves – through the worlds created by them we begin to understand what they are, who we are, and how we might express both. Our social, physical worlds, and even material worlds are continually being constructed through their observation. Art offers the opportunity to radically explore, critique, and interpret the possibilities of these constructions.

Games provide a compelling model to study the construction and emergence of these relationships through their play. Like the “material” realities that surround them, the very definition of what a game is (and what it can become) is constantly being (re)created through new observations and interpretations. In his 1958 sociological examination of play, Roger Caillois admits to feeling “despair” of attempting to define what a game is because of their “multitude and infinite variety” (11). He then attempts to define games through a typology of game genres. In 2005, Jesper Juul similarly defines games through rules for play which they must meet to be considered a game. Johan Huizinga and theorists such as Greg Costikyan and Thomas Malaby contextualize games as arenas (whether through Huizinga’s conception of a “magic circle” or Malaby’s term “forum”) that allow for, and bound, the act of play. Ian Bogost argues that boundaries (around playfulness) are the basic architecture for games – and that (nearly) any human activity can become a game through the imposition of rules to limit it. The difficulty in any static definition of a game or play is that both are dynamic constructions constructed (and re-fashioned) by dynamic agents (players). The boundaries between magic circles or ludic forums are diaphanous and shifting. The TRPG offers even further complications because its rules can be modified during play; its boundaries and limitations, likewise, exist within a state of dynamic, mutual collaboration.<sup>8</sup> Because both game and play are dynamic constructions, their construction and definition rely on instantiated observations and

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<sup>8</sup> It is tempting to argue that play becomes a game when the ludic experience needs to be shared between two players (or more). Rules allow play to be collaborative; game mechanics provide a staid definition of play, a quantifiable series of actions, and an accessible game world that can be intersubjectively shared (whether it exists physically, like a chess board, or within the players’ imagination, such as in TRPGs).

However, the plethora of single-player games, especially within modern video games, complicate this concept. Why do solitary players create a boundary around the possibilities of their play and imagination; is it to, temporarily, limit the world into a more accessible format to explore it? Is the solitaire game a type of personal observation – and analysis – of the larger social (and physical) realities we exist within? Is a single player game a discursive engagement with its (spatially-disparate, asynchronous) designer?

interpretations from their designers & players. No definition can be entirely static while those observations are based on dynamic observers. For the purposes of this dissertation, a game is defined when its players and designers interpret their play as a *game*; when players (the agents) have, consciously or unconsciously, agreed that the infinite possibilities of play have become structured and limited enough (through rules and agreement) to allow each player to access the same, or broadly similar, interpretation of it.

Games' strongest argument for inclusion within our legacy of artistic expression is their capacity for exploring alternative possibilities and agency. The worlds of our games mirror the mechanisms, performances, and interpretations of our "real" world. Art reconfigures interpretation and perspective by forcing artists and audience into states of mutual creative entanglement with worlds of radical possibility. Games continue this legacy and are not essentially different than literature, cinema, or fine arts in this regard. Their only core difference from other forms of art is that the requirement for mutual entanglement, between author and audience (or designer and player), is explicit.<sup>9</sup> I do not argue that games offer new experiences, or possibilities, or revelations, that previous forms of art have not already done. I do, however, argue that unlike many other forms of art, games do not hide, or feel embarrassed by, their need of mutual collaboration for their engagement – but revel in it. Despite what many contemporary digital utopians might claim, games are no more or less interactive, cybertextual, or even "active" than any other form of media engagement; they simply do not hide their need for

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<sup>9</sup> Games' lack of aesthetical scholarship has often been blamed on their lack of a definitive author (and definitive aesthetic perspective). This is based on the faulty, and yet enduring, concept of the lone auteur. Despite Barthes and Foucault's convincing arguments about the subjective and dynamic complicity between author and reader required for literary engagement, the assumption persists, within critical and academic fields, that any true art originates with a lone subjectivity. This dissertation challenges that concept radically and extends it outward from game theory towards ontology: individual agents do not exist (and cannot make art), only their relationships (that can) do.

entanglement behind anachronous concepts of the importance of primary authorship or the *auteur*.

Games have been afforded this luxury because they have rarely been considered by structuralists attempting to quantify the roles, responsibilities, and mechanisms of art. Games resist these hierarchies – as all art inevitably does, eventually – through an unpretentiousness afforded by their historical placement within *popular* culture. I have previously argued that this denigration causes cultures to valorize certain forms of media experiences over others, at the cost of creating hierarchies of the validity of human experiences (“I’m So Bored with The Canon” 2019). I would also argue our gatekeepers’ lack of critical consideration of games as a valid artistic medium allowed them to develop without their interference.<sup>10</sup> The history of the TRPG, as we will examine in Chapter 2, is an example of a mediation practice evolving with little regard for considering (and often in direct opposition to) artistic “merit.”

While gatekeepers have resisted the concept of games as art, and game designers have remained apathetic to critical consideration at all, the actual play of games has always served the same functions as literature, cinema, and fine art. The practice of play reconfigures the possible world through experimenting with the materially impossible worlds of fiction. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding refer to games as a “snow globe version” of social life: “safely packed, miniaturized, maybe a bit abstract, but strangely compelling” (1). Like any fine art, games provide an invitation to experiment with the imaginary worlds through which we understand and interpret (and observe) our material world.

It is important to recognize that the extent to which a game might model an alternative world, or the extent to which a game allows its players to engage with, modify, and explore that

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<sup>10</sup> For better or worse: popular games criticism continues to resist critical approaches because of an insularity developed from the historical perception of games’ lack of aesthetic value.

world varies radically in the same way that each book, film, or painting does. Games such as *Chess* or *Monopoly* do create alternative worlds on their boards but are simply abstractions of one element of the “real” world (in these cases, warfare and capitalism). The boundaries of their capacity to engage with the game world likewise varies. While there are millions of potential moves available for a player in *Chess*, the *Monopoly* player’s movements through the world are bounded by random dice rolls (and the limited decisions players can make are highly influenced by those rolls). This is true in other forms of art as well: where James Joyce’s modernist *Ulysses* presents an immersive, and almost real, world to the reader, his post-modernist work *Finnegans Wake* is a complete deconstruction of the very concept of worlds (and their creation through language).

The level of engagement that literary texts offer is equally disparate. William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) requires the reader to, inexorably, follow the narrative to its bitter conclusion; Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) occasionally allows the reader to invent their own. Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings present evocative and inviting worlds. Jackson Pollock’s art keeps the reader at a distance by eradicating the world through an anarchy of color. These examples demonstrate how art creates worlds and provides the opportunity to engage with them. The history of artistic and media experimentation is the history of combining these traits into new relationships. However, no matter their level of presenting a world – or the capacity to engage with it – the world within every text is an “alternative” one. None represent the material world as it is; all are created by the perspectives of a subjective artist and interpreted through their audience. Art is observation and dialog. The reader, viewer, player allow the author, painter, game designer to create a world for them and then agree to interpret it subjectively. It is a form of role-play, an accepted contract between

author and audience. The author (or director or game designer) presents a text full of possible interpretations. The audience (reader, theatregoer, player) then collapses those possibilities into a single subjective but also definitive and observable translation.<sup>11</sup>

The possibilities the artist provides through a text are similar to the indeterminate locations of quantum photons of light. The audience's interpretation of the text, like the observation of photons of light traveling through a slit, fixes the signified meaning of the text into a specific location. Art presents possibilities: audience engagement with art is the creation of singular, alternative worlds through the collapse of each into a specific interpretation. Audience engagement with art can take many forms: reading, viewing, observation. I would make the argument that each is a specific form of *play*. Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the interpretation of language is a form of game: the signification and interpretation of symbols, meaning, and communication are a playful dialog between artist and audience. While Wittgenstein was concerned with linguistic and literary semiotics, the same principles apply whether the medium is print, watercolors, celluloid frames, computer pixels, or game rules. All rely on the context, capacity, and choices between their authors & audience and the world (including the culture and society) around them. Play occurs as a dialog between author and audience with each of these factors influencing (and being influenced by) that dialog. Each is entangled with the other; author and audience emerge from their dialog through art (and its language); social and cultural contexts emerge through the relationships of the people who live within them.

Our fictions, whether they are literature, fine art, or game, offer opportunities to play with and reconfigure society, culture, and even ourselves. The artist presents a myriad of new

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<sup>11</sup> Although each translation is definitive for each specific interpretation, the translation can change upon further engagements – even future observations of the initial translation can change it. Any change in the audience inevitably changes their interpretations of a text.

possibilities for audiences to explore and consider. Caillois claims that “All that is mysterious or make-believe by nature approaches play...the function of fiction is to remove the mystery” (4). Fiction provides a particular interpretation of all playful possibilities; fiction offers finite momentary observations which collapse infinite potentialities. Eco argued that engagements with art are both “an interpretation and a performance” which “in every perception...takes on a fresh perspective” (49). Art is an agent that emerges through the relationship between author and audience. Neither author nor audience exist without a relationship with a text that constitutes those roles – and their performances (as author and reader or as designer and player).

The interpretation of a text is the collapse of its possibility. For the author, the construction of a text is the performance of their own perspective, ideas, and imaginary worlds – a performance that momentarily defines the location of their thoughts, perspectives and imagination. For the author, the text is a performance which emerges from all the entanglements from which the author has emerged; it is an expression of the author, and their subjectivity, at one particular moment. It collapses all possibilities of the author into one expression of the self which allows the author to observe this performance – and to observe who they are.

For the reader, each engagement with a text is a performance that collapses every possibility of the text into a specific interpretation. Every subsequent performance and interpretation may situate the text within new locations of meaning – but each interpretation establishes a definitive location of signification. The text also establishes a connection for the author’s and audience’s subjectivities to become entangled; neither is the same after being read and performed just as neither can be the same after writing and performing. There are no incorrect interpretations of art, only the construction of new interpretations: all agents are constructed through relationships. No agent can be static as long as their relationships remain



dynamic. Games, like any form of art, offer the opportunity for multiple performances and interpretations. They are the material embodiments of constructed possibilities for entanglements between author, audience, text, and speculative possibilities.

It is important to recognize, however, that it is not *games*, but rather the *practice of play* which they enable, that offers these possibilities. The practice of play, bounded through the limitations of games, teach players to accept how malleable, dynamic, and playful our world, selves, and reality are. Huizinga claimed that games operate within a “magic circle.” They provoke a social practice with their own set of rules, expectations, and contingent consequences that mirror, but are removed from the immediate frames and performances of the material world. They operate within an arena slightly removed from, but parallel to, the social worlds of the real. Huizinga’s perspective is often misinterpreted to mean that the real world and games are divided from one another, and that the experiences of one do not intrude upon the other. This is not accurate: in fact, Huizinga argues that the games that a culture engages with are an essential, embodied practice of that culture (in Bourdieu’s terminology, an essential part of a society’s “habitus” occupying the social consciousness of its members) which reflect and even guide that culture’s values and perspectives. He argues that although games may be “distinct” from real life this does not mean they are not entangled with how we understand and navigate the real world. Malaby argues that games are “contrived forums for the generation of indeterminacy” that mirror the indeterminacy of social life. He claims that games and life should be considered “*ontologically on a par with each other*” (*Making Virtual Worlds* 89).

I concur with Malaby’s argument that games are bounded, “contrived” arenas of experimentation which are as ontologically legitimate as the real world; however, Malaby’s contention that they are ontologically on par with each other assumes they exist in separate, even

if diaphanous, “forums” before their interaction. I argue that agential realism asks us to consider their relationships, not through the lens of intersection, but through the concept of entanglement. We play within the worlds of our games and lives simultaneously. Like performances and social frames, a world must exist within which to play games, but that world relies on the play within it for its observation, interpretation, and emergence. Mary Flanagan asserts that “one cannot always easily see that a clear boundary exists between [play] and social reality, or rather, see that play uses the tools of everyday reality in its construction” (254). The concept of magic circles is invaluable to highlight how these boundaries (in this case, our game and real world) are constructed through a (subjective) interpretation of their relationship. The boundaries become real (although not necessary) once agents require and construct them. These boundaries exist through the relationships of that which they bound (there is no boundary without the need to create a distinction). Ontological distinction is not a defining trait of two agents, but always a definition of how they relate to one another. They become different only when we create boundaries to make the world accessible and quantifiable by collapsing its intrinsic indeterminacy into definitive interpretations.

Authors, readers, designers, players, critics, and scholars are agents who determine the positions and reality of the boundaries around our magic circles. These boundaries become increasingly diaphanous as consensus on their reality becomes harder to reach. The boundaries around our games are as dynamic as the subjectivities who are constantly constructing (and dismantling) them. The metaphorical force of games is clear: a game can only be played once its players agree to its rules, context, and ambition. The boundaries of play must be set up by its players. The rules of a game are its guidelines, the practice of the game is where the game emerges. The players are the agents, not the game itself. Agential realism is an argument towards

a recognition of the full capacity of that agency – within game worlds and without – and to recognize that the entanglement of both is necessary for the emergence of either. The “real” world emerges from its entanglements with the imaginary worlds of game which offer it possibilities. The bounded observations of play we conceive of as games are experiments (in the game world) with alternative interpretations of the real.

The focus of this dissertation is the tabletop role-playing game. The TRPG is a game that compels a practice that reconfigures the performance of our everyday lives through the performance of alternative identities in alternate worlds. The TRPG offers a codification, a bordering of role-play possibilities. Malaby argues that games occupy a “a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency;” it is within this socially-created and consensually-created domain that the TRPG provides an arena for exploring alternative identities, experiences, and worlds that *seem* alien to our consensually-manifested material world (“Beyond Play” 96). The tabletop RPG is particularly compelling, for those studying the manufacture of social, cultural, textual, and physical realities because it is an *explicit* attempt to collaboratively construct specific, alternative worlds. Daniel Mackay argues:

Fantasy role-playing games are cultural systems. They are finely woven worlds of magic and belief. They have social structure, norms, values, and a range of cultural artifacts, which if not physically real are real to those who participate in them, and presumably (if I can stretch the metaphor) are real to the characters that inhabit these fantasy worlds.  
(123)

While every form of art provides an opportunity for playing with possible interpretations, the TRPG is an ambitious attempt to model worlds complete with contrived cultural systems, values, and material objects that are based on texts from other media. The play of a TRPG is an agreement to create, and then abide by, the mechanics, culture, and context of a collaboratively created (and performatively-manifested) world.

The TRPG game presents a system for the creation of countless possible worlds (and potentialities), while the play of a TRPG collapses one specific world into an accessible, imaginary playground. TRPG play is now a global phenomenon that attracts millions of players annually. In *The Gameful World*, Steffen Walz and Deterding write that “Practices and attitudes, patterns and tropes, materials and tools, languages and concepts from (digital) games and play increasingly pervade all arenas of life” (6-7).<sup>12</sup> The practice of TRPG play, the ubiquity of its mechanical systems within contemporary applications, and its expanding cultural presence have become embedded with of our modern social habitus, manifested themselves within our social systems, and even transformed our cultural landscape. Any study of the TRPG is a study of contemporary culture (the two are irrevocably entangled).

There are two important caveats I wish to make for this study of the initial emergence of the TRPG: the first is that, unlike much modern game scholarship, I do not argue that the impact or capacity of games (or the TRPG) is revelatory and utopian – neither do I claim that it has deleterious consequences. The play of TRPGs has changed the way we perceive our world, our capacity within it, and has introduced cybertextual modes of media engagement to a mass audience. I do not argue that these capacities are necessarily good or beneficial (only inevitable). Agential realism argues for a recognition of our complicity within the relationships which construct our universe. That responsibility can be a terrible thing, as history – and the entirely subjective perspectives that tell, record, and (re)construct it – have demonstrated. It is also inescapable: if we do not emerge except through our relationships and entanglements, any act of

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<sup>12</sup> Walz and Deterding’s “(digital)” disclaimer recognizes that video games, and their popularity, are what instigated the modern “gamification” of contemporary social life; however, the mechanics of these games is based on centuries of experiments with analog ludic texts. The worlds of digital and analog games have become entangled now: video games emerged through relationships between digital networks and analog games; analog games, such as the TRPG, are re-interpreted through their influence on the digital games that have compelled so much contemporary critical attention.

self-actualization impacts the agents with which we are entangled. Barad argues that a recognition of this complicity is essential towards the shared creation of an *ethical* universe.

I believe this overstates the powers of (contemporary) human cognition which is only one agential element within the multitudinous entanglements which make up personal subjectivity. One of the core assumptions of this dissertation is that people are not always consciously aware of, or able to change, many of the decisions we make within the relationships which construct the universe. Agential realism asks us to consider the capacity of our choices; however, I am cautious about how much a cognitive acknowledgment of those choices can influence them. We are creatures entangled with a biological, social, political, and historical context. Recognition of our capacity is not necessarily a recognition of our agency. Barad argues that “agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” and that the “space of agency is not restricted to the possibilities of human action” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 178-179). We choose some of the relationships that create us (and our universes) such as deciding which games to play. Many of the relationships that create us are not chosen – from our parents to the form of the social realities surrounding us. If history *is* a nightmare from which we are trying to wake, it will take more than our minds and best intentions to rouse us.

TRPG play provides examples of this. TRPG players are often surprised by the decisions of their characters in the same manner we are all often surprised by the choices we make outside of our games. The relationships from which our universes emerge are governed by decisions that are often not made consciously but are the effects of all the relationships (including the influence of sociocultural systems and institutions) that interpellate our being. Any study of the choices we make, within and outside of our games, does not necessarily help us to make better ones. I reject the technological utopian argument that games “make us better,” as much as the argument that

recognizing our complicity for the creation of our universe would make us more compassionate with it. The worlds of TRPG play provide many examples of how understanding the possibility of power does not force its ethical application. Contemporary games, from TRPGs to modern video games, offer plenty of game worlds that exist to indulge power, violence, and sexual fantasies.<sup>13</sup> A recognition of the complicity within the relationships that construct the universe is invaluable, however, not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a potential first step towards an intersubjective acknowledgment of the primacy of relationships for the emergence of worlds (imagined and real). No matter how fantastic the world of a TRPG is, it is still collaboratively-created by players who invest it with the same faults and flaws with which they build their “real worlds.” No game has been created that can escape providing a reflection of its designers perspective on the world. Every game that attempts to model a universe is modeling that universe based on the flawed, human perspectives of its creators. The TRPG is compelling because of its explicit ambitions: it is an attempt to model fully-realized, convincing worlds in real-time through subjective collaboration. Its process of construction and manifestation differ with the real world in one important regard: players *consciously* decide to create a TRPG universe. Even if they do not consciously control how it emerges, there is a choice to construct it. The creation of the real world is done through necessity; although agential realism asks us to question even that assumption.

The second caveat I want to make is that I am not arguing that games, nor the TRPG, represent a revelatory medium or genre. Although the TRPG text offers a new ludic practice, it

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<sup>13</sup> This is not an indictment of those games: compelling arguments have been made that games offer a cathartic opportunity to relieve these tensions within worlds which have no direct, physical consequences on living subjectivities. Games are part of our relationship with the world, however, the question of whether existing within them offers a necessary escape and release or an educational immersion within their values systems remains very much open.

simply refashions modes of engagements with classic mythologies into a form that has captured the modern moment. They are here and they are curious. They are entangled with all our experiments with the possibilities of intersubjectivity through mediated experiences and ideas. Like all media, physical and virtual, they will eventually vanish. No physical media, printed on dead trees or living within code, can withstand time. The center of their practice, however, is what this dissertation focuses on. The practice of TRPG play will ineluctably change and transform, but it is an immutable moment within human experience. In our uncanny, modern moment, the TRPG is changing the human agent by introducing and training it in cybertextual modes of media engagement.

The practice of play is an agent not its technologies. The TRPG is *not* an agent itself, but a new mode of Marshall McLuhan's conception of media as an "extension of man": transitory tools constructed to bridge gaps between isolated subjectivities (1964). The practice of TRPG play is the practice of building new relationships between player-agents. An examination of this relationship is a study in the way that universes can be inspired, constructed, populated, and inhabited. The TRPG is not necessarily novel in this regard. Games have been creating new universes of play for centuries, however, TRPG play does offer a model of explicit universe creation, and its modern ubiquity – brought on by emerging new relationships through contemporary entanglements with digital media and games – make it a salient model for the contemporary construction of our modern world. The TRPG is important because it is being *played*. The practice of its play is transforming the player-agents entangled among the relationships that construct our present-day imaginary, material, and social worlds. The study of any game is entangled with a study of the relationship between it and the real world from which both emerge.

## What is a Tabletop Role-Playing Game?

Before I begin my analysis, it is important to define exactly what a tabletop role-playing game is. The first commercially-available tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) was *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, released in 1974 and designed by Gary Gygax & Dave Arneson.<sup>14</sup> In the next chapter, I provide a (brief) history of how *D&D* emerged from the traditions of wargaming and its subcultures. There are two different modes of the TRPG that are generally used to describe the game. The first is the artifactual ephemera of the TRPG. This includes the rulebooks, adventure scenarios, dice, pencils, pens, and paper that make up a TRPG's manifestation within the material world. For instance, *D&D*'s initial physical manifestation consisted of three modest white pamphlets that only included the game's rules. When TRPG players talk about a tabletop role-playing game, they are referring to the artifacts that prompt their play, in the same way that a reader considers the text for reading to be a physical book comprised of pages and bindings.

According to Jon Peterson, the TRPG was initially conceived for wargaming enthusiasts interested in seeing how the conflict-simulation mechanics from wargames could be applied to simulate the worlds and narratives of popular pulp fiction ("Precursors" 55). *D&D*'s three pamphlets provided three sets of rules to introduce the concept of the TRPG to potential players. In *D&D*, one player takes on the role of a referee or a "dungeon master" (DM) who creates a fictional, fantastic world from their imagination. The world a DM might present to the players has very few limitations beyond the aesthetic, theme, and the rules of the game. *D&D*'s rules

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<sup>14</sup> In *Playing at the World*, Peterson states that the term role-playing game would not appear anywhere in *D&D*'s original editions and would be coined by Richard Berg, a game designer and wargame magazine editor, interested in establishing a typology to differentiate *D&D* from other wargames (534).



were specifically designed for simulating worlds of medieval fantasy from pulp literature that resemble the high-fantasy diegesis of J.R.R Tolkien's Middle-Earth or the barbarous savagery of Robert E. Howard's Hyborian Age. Like all cultural artifacts, *D&D* is not simply a static object of the present, but an embodiment of the sociocultural ideologies and historical practice that make it possible. Mackay describes the world of *D&D* as "a pastiche of a century's worth of fantasy" (42). *D&D*'s emergence from these subcultural texts is an illustration of Bourdieu's concept of how history is codified through social practice. Gygax and Arneson's invention was made possible through the cultural and historical habitus, the "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations," they inhabited that guided their production (Bourdieu 78).

In the first edition of *D&D* (commonly referred to as "Original *Dungeons & Dragons*" or *OD&D*), two of the pamphlets, "Monsters & Treasure" and "The Underworld and Wilderness Adventures" provided a rudimentary ruleset for DMs to simulate their imaginary worlds. The pamphlets also provided rules for how these worlds, and their populations, react to actions and events within their spaces. The DM presents their imaginary world to players through a dialog around a table. *D&D*'s players create characters that live within, and interact with, this fantasy world. "Men & Magic," the first book included in *OD&D* provided rules for players to create characters through a random generation of ability scores which attempt to model the characteristics (such as strength, intelligence, and charisma) of the characters they control. In a game of *D&D*, players take on the role of the protagonists of a continuing narrative story, modeled after the characters in fantastic fiction, such as Howard's "Conan the Cimmerian" (1933-1936) or the members of J.R.R. Tolkien's "Fellowship of the Ring" which were popular cultural touchstones within the 1970s wargaming subculture.

The DM is responsible for managing not only the game’s diegesis, but every creature, villain, and supporting cast that inhabits it and with which the players can interact. *D&D* was initially meant to be played sitting around a table like the simulation wargames that preceded (and inspired) it. The DM presents the world to players by narrating what their characters see, hear, and experience. The players respond by dictating their character’s actions. The DM describes the outcome of their actions using their imagination, the game’s rules, and dice to assist in determining the results of actions with multiple possible outcomes. For example, a character attempting to pick the lock of a treasure chest would need to roll a certain number, based on their characters’ proficiency as a thief, to determine their success. A player whose character is battling a dragon needs to roll high enough on a 20-sided die (with the roll modified by the character’s strength and the toughness of the dragon’s scales) to hit it with a sword.

The actions a character may take within the world are bound by the verisimilitude of the game world, the players’ imaginations, and by the rules of the game – although rules can be altered by the DM and players. One of the more intriguing elements of TRPGs is the flexibility of their rules. Unlike *Chess* or *Monopoly*, in which a strict adherence to the rules is mandated, TRPGs encourage play groups to change, or ignore, the rules if they inhibit enjoyment of the game. Gygax writes in “Men & Magic” that “New details can be added and old ‘laws’ altered so as to provide continually new and different situations” (4). In the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014), designer Mike Mearls advises players to recognize that “*D&D* is yours...a place where you have free reign to do as you wish” (4). The game has always been explicit that the very rules underwriting its universe(s) can be changed by the authors (players and DM) who create and populate them.<sup>15</sup> The world of the TRPG is created through a consensual,

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<sup>15</sup> There is a notable exception to this generalization: as *D&D* would grow in commercial popularity and profitability, Gygax would attempt to exert more control over how groups played the game. In the *Dungeon*

collaborative, oral dialog between the game's players and dungeon (or game) master. The game, and its diegetic world, emerges from a constantly reconfiguring series of negotiations between players and DM. There is no playing board in a TRPG; the fictional events of the game take place mainly within players' imaginations. Miniatures, a vestige of the TRPG's wargaming roots, can optionally be used as playing aid to represent character's positions on a battlefield map but are not required. The DM presents a compelling world for the players' characters to explore. These characters explore, interact with, and influence the events within the fictional world. Both the DM and players exert influence on the emerging history of the world of the TRPG. Player characters respond to the world and its inhabitants, while the world responds to the decisions and choices that characters make within it. Different levels of power and responsibility exist within the manifestation of a TRPG world, but they are constantly dynamic and entangled; any change in the power and agency within the game world simultaneously transfigures the responsibility for its emergence. Entanglement is the practice of ineluctable, synchronous, mutual transfiguration.

In his ethnographic examination of TRPG play, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), Gary Alan Fine analyzes how these power relationships constantly shift during a game. Through Goffman's conception of performative "frames," Fine analyzes how players dynamically shift between playing their character, playing their real-world social self, and performing their relationships with other players and the DM (181-204). Fine argues that because the rules (and "outcomes") of TRPG play are constantly being "negotiated," they are "in some ways more like life, and less like games" (7). Fine's ethnographies align with

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*Masters Guide* rule book for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (retroactively now considered the "first edition" of *D&D*) released in 1979, Gygax warns players to "avoid the tendency to drift into areas foreign to the game as a whole. Such campaigns can become so strange as to be no longer 'AD&D'" (7). As the market for TRPGs grew, Gygax's concerns seem based on a desire for his game to maintain its identity and commercial primacy within the TRPG market.

contemporary observations of quantum phenomena – and their relationship with not only our material world, but our sociocultural ones. The Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum behavior suggests that the universe is a construction based on observations, interpretations, and translations. The TRPG operates, within the microcosm of game’s magic circle, in a strikingly similar fashion. However, the most important difference is that the world of the TRPG is created consciously and through an explicit collaboration. The players and DM are aware of their responsibility and agential capacity towards constructing the fictional universes of play. Agential realism asks us to acknowledge a responsibility for the larger interpretation and translation of our universe. TRPG players take this responsibility for granted even if their fictional universes are based solely on their capacity to entertain, rather than towards the establishment of equitable, utopian worlds.

The goal of a TRPG is also different than traditional board games or the war games from which they derive many of their mechanical systems. There is no traditional “winner” of a TRPG. As Costikyan notes:

*Dungeons & Dragons* may come to an outcome—a logical break point in the story is reached, or the players get tired and go home—but unless the gamemaster chooses, for his own reasons, to impose some arbitrary stopping point to the game, it can go on, in principle, forever. Indeed, some games have gone on for decades, with a degree of continuity in terms of the players, their characters, and the setting. In short, a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* can end, and, if tied to a story, there may be some narrative outcome; and much of the game is quantified. But no outcome is necessary, and quantification is irrelevant to the outcome, if any; outcomes are narrative in nature, not imposed by the game system. (12)

The players are not in competition with each other, nor are they in competition with the DM, who is simply the facilitator of the world within which the player’s characters inhabit. The players are presented with challenges, such as villainous monsters or diabolical traps, analogous to challenges faced by the fantastic heroes of pulp literature. Characters in a fantasy TRPG such

as *D&D* may need to defeat an evil cult threatening a small outpost on the edge of civilization. Characters in a science fiction RPG, such as *Traveller* (1977), might be tasked with uncovering the mystery of a lost convoy of spaceships. Characters in a horror TRPG, such as *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), may need to prevent a sinister society from raising one of the horrific “Great Old Ones” from the “Cthulhu” mythos.<sup>16</sup> If a player’s character, or even the entire party is defeated during play, the game does not necessarily end. Players can create new characters to continue the adventure (and advance the game’s narrative) within the TRPG world.

TRPGs are played in “sessions,” that range from a couple of hours to an entire day (or night). Although TRPGs can be played in a single session, games are usually played as part of an ongoing “campaign,” a term and concept borrowed from their wargame predecessors. The length of a campaign varies as broadly as the length of individual sessions: it might last 3-4 sessions, or it could last several years.<sup>17</sup> In most TRPGs, player characters who survive and emerge victorious against the world’s dangers are rewarded by having their characters grow in strength and power. For example, in *D&D*, characters earn “experience points,” that allow them to “level up” and learn new skills and abilities. A wizard learns new spells, a warrior’s threshold for surviving damage inflicted by monsters is raised, and the percentage chance a thief can open a locked door becomes greater. This opportunity to advance in power within the TRPG game world is one potential attraction, among many, of a TRPG campaign. Another attraction of

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<sup>16</sup> The three fictional scenarios mentioned here for *D&D*, *Traveller*, and *Call of Cthulhu* are featured within the published adventures *Keep on the Borderlands* (Gygax 1979), *Twilight’s Peak* (Miller 1980), and *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* (John Carnahan, John Scott Clegg, Ed Gore, Marc Hutchison, Randy McCall, Sandy Petersen, Ted Shelton, Tom Sullivan 1982). These adventures provide ready-to-use scenarios for the game master to run (so they do not need to invent their own).

<sup>17</sup> The author has been running a first edition *D&D* game for over 5 years. The campaign has even prompted a spin-off campaign, based in the same game world, but at a different time period than the main game. Players, and their characters, storylines and adventures, continually change and evolve, but the history and mythology of the fantastic realm of “Apshai” is continually being constructed.

playing in a TRPG campaign is the opportunity to see players develop their characters and their characters' stories. The longer a campaign goes on, the more opportunities players have to impact and influence the game's diegesis and history. The players find their agency growing in their respective roles as narrative protagonists and collaborative storytellers.

The emphasis of TRPG play is on how compelling an experience the game offers, not necessarily its outcome. The TRPG is a different textual form than the pulp literature and fantasy films that inspired it, and the form of the experience it offers is also different. Early TRPG scholarship focused on the capacity for TRPGs to create engaging narratives. Mackay defined TRPGs “an episodic and participatory story-creation system” (4). Jennifer Grouling Cover argues that TRPG play is defined by “the purpose of creating a narrative experience” (168). These definitions and assumptions demonstrate a desire to establish the relationship between TRPGs and traditional literature; it also demonstrates a concern for justifying the TRPG experience as a valid, aesthetic practice. “We impose the form of the old,” Marshall McLuhan noted, “on the content of the new” (*Medium is the Message* 86)<sup>18</sup>. As the TRPG emerged from a previous textual mode, it was seductive to consider it as merely a progression or evolution of a literary form (not only was the TRPG form nascent, so was games scholarship). The TRPG and literature are two entangled media genres: the TRPG could not exist without the inspirational fictions that drive people to want to play them. Literature has been ineluctably influenced by the way games have changed the way we tell stories.<sup>19</sup> Time is an illusion and as I argue throughout this dissertation: the entanglement between TRPG and literary texts reconfigure the practice and

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<sup>18</sup> In his work, McLuhan routinely referred to the nebulous concept of a “medium.” In this dissertation, I consider intersubjective mediation, through genre engagements with literature and games, as a form of cultural practice in order to avoid this ambiguation.

<sup>19</sup> In chapter 3, I identify specific ways in which *Dungeons & Dragons* directly influenced the pulp fictions that initially inspired it – inexorably reconfiguring the mythologies, interpretations, and translations of a literary genre.

modes of engagements with both. Progress is a linear illusion. Every change transforms the past as much as the present.

Narratives function, whether in the form of literary novel or personal anecdote, as tools for interpreting and organizing experience. Narrative is a process of making meaning from experience and observations. In *Story Logic* (2002), David Herman claims that narratives provide a “frame for constructing communicating, and reconstructing mentally projected worlds – the only worlds, arguably, that any of us can ever know” (49). Jerome Bruner claims that narrative is a tool of human minds for the “construction of reality” (“Narrative Construction” 6).

Wittgenstein and Espen Aarseth both argue that narratives are the tools we use to interpret human experience, not the basis of human experience. Narratives are *agential* tools: they are the form in which a subjectivity cognitively and affectively builds meaning from the uncertainty of their experiences. In her examination of the creative paucity in artificial intelligence algorithms, Phoebe Sengers claims the capacity to organize experiences through narrative is how meaning is translated and shared between human subjectivities. When narrative interpretations are shared and popularly accepted, they become part of the social habitus. Narratives are the a posteriori communication of personal interpretations of personal history. Their consensual adoption by social communities embed them within a culture’s perspective and history.

In order for its comprehension, reality must be made accessible. It must be defined at some location we can recognize. Peirce’s pragmatic approach and Bohr’s Copenhagen Interpretation for conceptualizing reality require accessible and interpretable data about our experiences. In Barad’s terminology: we must meet the universe “halfway.” We cannot navigate the material world through the uncertainty of infinite and unspecified quantum positions and probabilities. We must observe (and through observation, create) stories to establish definitive

meaning, position, and interpretations of our experiences. Narratives help us make sense of our experiences by collapsing the infinite worlds of potential interpretations into finite and accessible *meaning*.

The purpose of tabletop role-playing is not to directly evoke a narrative, but rather to generate a particular experience. Early TRPG designers, such as Gygax & Arneson, emerged not from a tradition of literary pioneers, but from a community of game designers experimenting with new modes of ludic practice. Their intention was to deliver a more intimate mode of engagement with pulp fiction. The TRPG was never designed to create new serials of “Conan the Cimmerian”: it was designed to make players *feel* like Conan. Markku Eskelinen argues for the primacy of the interactive/ludic experience of games, or their “configurative practice,” over the secondary narratives produced by them. He famously stated that: “If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories” (36). However, like any human experience, TRPG play compels interpretations in order to construct meaning from it. In Eskelinen's example, for instance, although the ball has been dropped – inevitably, the players (or readers) will create a story to explain *why*. In the presence of any observer, any caught or dropped ball, is ineluctably translated into a narrative to make sense, explain, and interpret the moment<sup>20</sup>. Stories are the inevitable consequence of human experience. It is important to recognize that these narratives follow experience – ludic, configurative, ergodic – although, as we will see, and as Eskelinen identifies, they also become entangled with it.

There are many things that make the experience of TRPG play compelling for players: the accumulation of power, the resolution of narrative arcs, the social interactions required by the

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<sup>20</sup> Eskelinen himself translates this imaginary experience into a narrative where the rhetorical message is that there is no story. There can be no action without interpretation, all observations – of mythical or real actions – inevitably are translated, if an observer is present, into an accessible, comprehensible reality.



game, and the joys of experimentation and exploration. Each playing group places a different emphasis on each, however, what most groups have in common is that it is the *experience* of TRPG play, rather than the narratives produced from it, are what attracts players to the game – and encourages their continued play. Players can, and do, create narratives from that experience but that was not the initial purpose of the form. TRPG narratives are an attempt to understand, define, and comprehend what happened during play. The narratives that players construct from TRPG play, especially if that interpretation is consensually adopted by the playing group as true, will certainly influence future games and sessions (and it may influence future interpretations of previous games and sessions). However, narratives are not *necessary* for TRPG play, are not *inevitable consequences* of play, and are not intended or designed to be (directly) *catalyzed* through play. The TRPG is not a story-creation system but an experience-creation system.

Although I will examine the physical artifacts of TRPGs, it is the second mode of the TRPG which is most compelling: the practice of its play. I am specifically concerned with what emerges when human subjectivities interact with TRPG rulebooks, adventures, and dice. The task of defining what we understand our conception of what a TRPG means within its practice is not as easy as defining its physical forms. Engagements with a TRPG, through the practice of their “play,” are only manifested through subjective interpretation. This is made even more complicated by the fact that, unlike a novel, play, or film, they are interpreted collaboratively by a group of players. In *Role-Playing Game Studies*, Zagal and Deterding devote an entire chapter to the topic. They argue that:

...how scholars have traditionally tried to define ‘role-playing games’ – as a presumed unchanging ‘essence’ consisting of a set of shared features – is at odds with what we know about language and meaning-making and with the kind of phenomena ‘role-playing games’ refer to. (21)

They reference Wittgenstein's work about language itself as a constantly evolving form of game that has no deterministic objective quality and is only realized through subjective interpretation. Role-playing games, like language, are in a process of constant change due to the ever-shifting subjectivities and contexts engaging with them. This is even more salient for tabletop role-playing games because the game is realized through the literal spoken word. It is a dialog, based on the play of meaning, signs, and context, intended to produce a form of imaginative gameplay through consensual, collaborative interpretation.

Zagal and Deterding are correct: scholarship on new genres and media often concentrate on attempting to define the technologies of their mediation rather than "how" the practices of these new forms change the people (through their experiences, engagements, expectations, and capacity for intersubjective experimentation) who engage with them. They also identify the danger inherent in previous definitions of RPGs which have prioritized a certain aspect (such as the production of narratives) which does not acknowledge the radical difference in emphasis points that different TRPG groups place in their game. While one group may be interested in the narratives their game produces, even within the same game system and scenario, another group may be more interested in developing their character's powers and abilities. Any study of the TRPG must recognize that any definition of the form is dynamic, contextual, and in a state of constantly subjective reconfiguration.

Zagal and Deterding's collection of studies focuses on role-playing games in their contemporary "plurality of forms." In addition to the tabletop RPG, they also analyze live action role-playing games and computer role-playing games. While the live action game exists within TRPG sub-cultures, the CRPG has eclipsed the TRPG as a popular genre. Zagal and Deterding explore the themes and common practices through each form to explore how each evolved from

the “joint ancestry” they share with TRPGs. This dissertation examines only the tabletop version of role-playing and only from a particular period (1974-1981); however, it shares their focus on looking at how the practice of role-playing transforms their players even within TRPG’s earliest incarnations. I also share their assumption that what an RPG is, tabletop or otherwise, is very much based on how we understand it within our current moment and within the context of our own agential observations.

I avoid establishing definitions of the TRPG that collapse the possibilities of what it can be in a futile attempt to determine what it is. The TRPG exists as possibility until it is collapsed (like a photon) into one definitive manifestation for one specific location, for one particular game, for one group of players, in one moment of time, through its play. My examination explores how the authors, designers, and players of TRPGs utilize their own agencies, within the radical difference of each of their games, to determine what the form their TRPG play will take. As Zagal, Deterding and Wittgenstein note, the forms of language, games, and our interpretation of them are also constantly shifting because the communities and cultures which engage with them are radically dynamic. While Zagal and Deterding attempt to identify common themes throughout different forms of RPGs, I identify commonalities through the play of TRPGs: with the common goal of understanding of what role-playing is to its players. My broader ambition is to extend Barad’s argument about how the agential interpretation of our worlds, imagined, mediated and real, compels their construction. What we understand role-playing to be and how we translate the performances of that play is not only what defines our games but how we create them. Because the TRPG is a human construction, any definition is bound (and empowered) by the human perspective: it changes with time, our capacity, and is entangled within the systems and communities which influence and interpellate our sociocultural beings and history.

The TRPG has transformed significantly from its 1974 origins, moving past its wargame origins into modern incarnations that are accessible to a wider audience. One example of how the TRPG has changed is that in its initial publication, Gygax & Arneson wrote that size of the playing group could be anywhere “from four to fifty players... from four to fifty players...but the referee to player ratio should be about 1:20 or thereabouts” (*Rules for Fantastic 5*). Modern TRPG players would likely be horrified at the concept of a 1:20 ratio of DM to players.<sup>21</sup> Contemporary role-playing groups rarely venture beyond a ratio of 1:4-6. This is one of many risks of attempting to define the TRPG. Like any media, the practice of engagements with it irrevocably impacts not only future engagements, but as Eco argues, also the form of the genre itself (195). In their initial design for *D&D*, Gygax and Arneson proceeded from assumptions they made about gaming – and group size – from their experiences running historical wargame simulations. In their wargame campaigns, large player groups of over 20 players were standard. Many of Arneson’s initial ludic experiments, that served as precursors for *D&D*, allowed similar groups of players to “role-play” simultaneously. In order to attract a wider audience outside of the modest wargaming subculture, TRPG designers (and their publishers) reduced the expectation size of the group for their games. Designers also recognized that amateur game masters struggled managing such large groups. The game adapted to provide more directed, intimate sessions for players.

Although two is the bare minimum for traditional TRPG play (at least one DM and one player), Gygax and Arneson’s company published interactive *D&D* modules for single players,

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<sup>21</sup> While the modern TRPG enthusiast might be horrified at 20+ players in an adventure, the most popular *computer* multiplayer role-playing game, Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* (2004), requires groups of 40 or more to work together to defeat the game’s most powerful enemies. In this case, the digital translation of the RPG provoked a move back to a previous mode of analog role-playing.

such as *Blizzard Pass* (1983) and *Maze of the Riddling Minotaur* (1983). These modules were similar to “Choose Your Own Adventure”-style books where the reader determines (from a limited, and often binary, list of actions) the choices that the story’s protagonist would make.<sup>22</sup> The module’s narrative is told from a first-person perspective with the reader/player assuming the (imagined) role of the protagonist. In TSR’s single player modules, the reader/player would make their choices using an “invisible ink” pen which revealed the outcome of their decisions. Based on each choice, a new set of (limited) options would then become available. These modules incorporated pared-down version of *D&D* game mechanics although their implementation was often awkward. The TRPG rules had been written to be used within the collaborative dialog of group play.

One of the earliest competitors to *Dungeons & Dragons* was Ken St. Andre’s *Tunnels & Trolls* released in 1975. Although *Tunnels & Trolls* was designed as a traditional, group-based RPG, St. Andre, and his publisher Flying Buffalo, realized that there was a lucrative market for solo adventures. They would eventually publish over 30 modules for solo play, easily dwarfing the number of traditional modules they published for group play. In 2006, game designer Tom Pigeon released *The Mythic Game Master Emulator* which provides rules for simulating the Dungeon Master role and allows for solitary play (or group play without a DM). Pigeon’s

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<sup>22</sup> In 1982, TSR would publish their own line of “Choose Your Own Adventure” books, that did not include *D&D* game mechanics, under their “Endless Quest” imprint. Although they did not include *D&D* rules, they were set in a stereotypical, although non-specific, *D&D* world. Unlike “Choose Your Own Adventure” books, the main character had a name and belonged to a specific *D&D* “class,” such as fighter or thief, and possessed an appropriate expository backstory for their adventures. (The novels were often longer and written for a slightly older audience than “Choose Your Own Adventure” books. TSR was hoping that the books might inspire readers to become players of their tabletop game.)

Interestingly, the first seven books in the “Endless Quest” series were written by Rose Estes, a rare woman writer/designer working within a field dominated in the 1970s by middle-aged men, who pitched the concept to an unenthusiastic Gyax: “Finally, annoyed that I kept on about the idea I was told that if I thought it was a good idea, I should write it myself” (Grand DM 2017).

emulator has even been translated into an online application to make it more accessible. In the past few years, several RPG games have been released designed for play without a game master at all: Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2009) allows players to role-play characters within worlds based on Coen brothers-style films. Avery Alder's *The Quiet Year* (2013) allows players to role-play as abstracted members of a small community attempting to reconstruct a functioning society after an apocalypse. These games still require a small group to play but they shift the traditional power dynamics of the conventional TRPG. Without a GM, players share full responsibility (and complicity) for creating and controlling the game world.

The size of the player group and the relationships of power within them are only two of the many transformations TRPGs have made since their introduction in the 1970s. Rules systems, player expectations and capacity, the game's aesthetics, and the different genres that TRPGs now attempt to simulate are radically disparate. The TRPG of 1974 *is not* the TRPG of 2023.<sup>23</sup> This is because the role-players of 1974 are not the role-players of 2023. The TRPG emerges from the relationships between authors, designers, and players. As have they changed, so has the TRPG. Both are entangled entities, reconfiguring one another through different modes, times, contexts, and capacities of play. The history of the TRPG illustrates Zagal and Deterding's claim that, like any media genre or form, the TRPG is notoriously difficult to categorize. And the boundaries between the TRPG and other media are also notoriously difficult to define.

Where does the wargame end, with its simulation of combat, and the TRPG, with its contextualization of simulated combat within the mythology of a fantasy world, begin? Where does the TRPG, with its focus on collaborative play end, and the interactive novel, dependent on

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<sup>23</sup> Even games whose titles have not changed are different than their initial publications. The fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* has changed drastically from its early editions. Game mechanics, expectations, even how the language of the rulebooks is presented has transformed over 40 years.

a ludic engagement between reader and author, begin? The computer role-playing game, which is now as popular as its tabletop predecessor, further complicates the material form of role-playing engagements. As I noted, this dissertation focuses on human engagements with the artifacts we know as the TRPG (within the microcosm of early TRPG forms and play). I present an argument that human entanglements (the relationships that ineluctably alter both) through media are the dynamic catalyst for our experiments with intersubjectivity. We can only hope to provide some semblance of the boundaries of TRPG *practice* – rather than a codified definition of its artifactual, material essence. As quantum physics demonstrates, the essence, or even existence, of any object depends on its (creation through) observation. The practice of play, likewise, depends on the context of its emergence through interpretation.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will examine – but not define – the tabletop role-playing game, and its play, as it was understood within American culture during its nascent origins from 1974 (the release of *D&D*) until 1981 (the beginning of the personal computer revolution). My flexible concept the TRPG is based on what its audience understood them to be during this time. I do not impose a definition on the TRPG but allow its early authors, designers, and players to (liminally) bind it by their understanding of what role-playing was in the 1970s. This definition, like any manifestation of social reality, requires consensus between those groups. The TRPG of 1974-1981, as this dissertation understands them, is what those three groups agreed it was. These groups continually created the early form of the TRPG through the act of observing and interpreting their play. This dissertation focuses on three commercially-successful TRPGs considered as foundational for introducing the concepts, aesthetic, and practice of role-playing to a popular audience.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Traveller*, and *Call of Cthulhu* are also still in print and played in 2021. *D&D* remains the most popular TRPG in the world, with millions of players worldwide, and released its fifth edition in 2014. Although

## Methodology

This dissertation examines both the possibilities that TRPG designers and authors provide for the world through an examination of rules systems, their inspirations, and how players collapse those possibilities into definitive alternative worlds. This dissertation resists the imposition of typologies, quantification, or definitive interpretation: throughout these pages, I examine artifacts linked to the TRPG, but through the conceptual lens of viewing TRPGs as practice rather than material objects. The TRPG emerges through play, and every form of its play is radically different. Much of the study of tabletop role-playing games, and the emerging field of game studies, has been focused on providing typologies for quantifying and cataloguing genres, forms, and the technologies of games. The first two sociological studies of games, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938) and Caillois' *Man, Play and Games* (1961) categorize different types of play and games while isolating them within specific fields of social practice. Where Huizinga deconstructs forms of play into five essential characteristics, Caillois creates a typology for classifying specific forms of games. This is unsurprising: fields of scientific inquiry are often based on an assumption of an objective universe that is discovered, and not created, through its observation. These viewpoints are invaluable for any exploration of TRPGs, especially as a foundational understanding of one possibility, among many, for interpreting games and their functions.

TRPG studies have often followed this model, and its attendant assumptions about an objective universe. Mackay defined the TRPG as a new form of "performance art." Grouling

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*Traveller* has gone out of print several times since its initial publication, a new version was released in 2016. *Traveller* has seen increased competition in the science fiction field and is no longer consider the science fiction TRPG standard that it was in the 1970s. *Call of Cthulhu's* 7<sup>th</sup> edition was released in 2014 and the game remains firmly entrenched as the most popular contemporary horror TRPG.



Cover defines the TRPG as a new type of “game system” that she analyzes as a form of narrative-producing rhetoric. Fine defines TRPGs as “social worlds” which contain their own cultural systems and beliefs. This dissertation argues that definitions, in all fields, are not discoveries of what an RPG is, but rather bounded limitations created to understand and access them. They are inherently valuable: the accessibility of any text, apparatus, or even object depends on an observation. Unless we know where a specific photon *is*, we cannot study it. Unless author and writer can agree on what a word (such as TRPG) means, we are existing in different (if parallel) universes. This dissertation does not advance any definition of the TRPG but also does not resist using other’s definitions. Each previous definition of the TRPG is a mode of observation which, like the observation of quantum matter, fixes the TRPG in place – creating a specific manifestation of the TRPG. Each definition is a particular construction of the TRPG. Those definitions, those conceptions are how one subjectivity observed (and thus, created) the TRPG at one location, from one point of view, for one specific representation.

I claim that any definition, any deterministic position of the TRPG fixes it for that representation; however, future definitions and the future positions of its representation change based on different locations, points of view, and time. The TRPG is not fixed, even within the limited time frame of this dissertation’s focus. By unmooring the TRPG from a strict definition, as well as from the confines of its material artifacts, I consider the potentialities and probabilities of tabletop role-playing (and the capacities of games in general). Texts, in any genre, media or form, exist only through their engagement. Their relationships between author and audience make them real through the play of interpretation and translation, or as Wittgenstein would argue, through the dialog of play. This dissertation provides an examination of that dialog,

recognizing that each engagement is a specific collapse of possibility into definitive interpretations.

Although this dissertation resists definitive typologies, it does not resist presenting an argument. The argument is that one of the most compelling features of games – embedded explicitly within the tabletop role-playing game – is how they model the choices that agents make when they construct, interpret, and explore our shared reality. At this point in time, scholars are recognizing that games are socially and culturally significant: I claim that games are also manifestly and existentially significant. Our universe is the practice of our synchronous, simultaneous, and collaborative creation. This is not the only argument that this dissertation advances, however. My other argument is that, because of the capacity embedded within the agents who observe and construct the universe, all arguments are also questions. No argument can be fully folded, answered, so long as the agents within a universe change. If agents can change, then their perspectives, ideas, and even capacities for observation do: the universe inevitably changes along with its architects. Like Barad, I argue that the universe, like the worlds of TRPGs, is not fixed.

The practice of games is the study of how we build universes, the study of the practice of tabletop role-playing games is an explicit consideration of the choices inherent in their construction. Although we perceive time from moment-to-moment, the illusion of time is sundered when we realize that all interpretation and translation – of every narrative from gameplay to historical record – is similarly dynamic. Our sociocultural history is a creation that relies on the entangled, dynamic relationships among its population. TRPG play is a model of this: a shared set of experiences constantly being redefined by authors, designers, and players.

This dissertation is a study of relationships entangled through the play of a specific genre of game.

In addition to Barad, several theoretical approaches from, and adjacent to, the young field of game studies are essential. Modern media scholar Henry Jenkins' concept of textual poaching is invaluable to considering how the TRPG reconfigured classic styles of engagement with earlier textual genres. Jon Peterson and Shannon Appelcline's historical scholarship provides the record of the emergence of the TRPG. Aarseth and Bogost's work on how game mechanics (and algorithms) are crafted to provoke specific experiences and affective responses in players provides theoretical direction for my study of game rules. Finally, scholars of the practice of play, including Malaby, Costikyan, and Flanagan, are instrumental in examining the TRPG text through its final manifestation of play around the game table. However, my dissertation pushes back against the current thread of technological fascination embedded within some modern game study. The contemporary obsession with the digital network's capacity for creating game worlds has obscured the fact that no matter the technology, genre, or format, all media are an experiment towards *human* intersubjectivity. Many game theorists point to the digital network as revolutionary. I do not argue that digital tools are compelling – but they are simply tools – and they catalyze agency only through an entangled relationship with people. Our capacity for utilizing these new tools is based on our own capacity for building and evolving those relationships.

I claim that the focus of media scholarship should concentrate on the relationships that media generates between agents, not the ephemeral, physical artifacts that act as their material vessels. My dissertation does not focus on one technology, nor even one mode of the TRPG, but rather the emerging practice of the TRPG that emerges from the relationships between its

authors, designers, and players. My dissertation aligns with current game scholarship in arguing that games are important; however, they are only important as mechanisms that encourage new relationships, new positions, and new possibilities among the *human* agents who create and play them. Technology is not an agent, but the material consequences of evolving human practices. We may become entangled with our platforms, technologies, and artifacts but they are not capable of the observations, interpretations, and translations necessary for constructing universes.

This dissertation is an examination of the questions TRPG play provokes. Flanagan posits that the boundaries between play and social reality are indistinct; I argue that both worlds are also entangled – with each simultaneously constructing and manifesting the other. How does our evolving relationship with the TRPG (and all forms of the RPG) influence the future of games, play, society, and our ever-changing, continuously interpreted, observed, and constructed realities? What new realities can we consider and construct through play? Barad’s perspective provides the foundation of this study: each theoretical approach or lens is merely one potential position of the TRPG, one method for understanding; every theoretical lens is the perspective of one interpretative voice among many voices and possibilities. None are definitive but only reinforce the concept that multiple interpretations can be possible, and equally valid – once they are accepted, like the terms of the world and rules of a TRPG game and agreed upon. To play within a TRPG is to play with the worlds of the possible. This dissertation encourages a similar playful engagement with each theory.

It also encourages an approach that views the TRPG through each of its relationships, not as a definitive text, artifact, or concept but rather as the product of its relationships and entanglements with the authors of its inspiration, the designers of its rule sets, and the players of

its practice. This dissertation employs a quantum perspective on our engagements with media forms. It is an examination of how our creativity, engagement, and imaginations catalyze new worlds. “To the extent that all meaning is shared,” Mackay argues, “the study of collective fantasy has implications for the creation of other worlds of meaning” (231). This dissertation is a celebration of the relationships, between subjectivities, and even between subjectivities and technology, that have driven changes in our media history and future. It is a reminder of the agency of consciousness: we can choose our future – and past – through a belief in the radical concept, supported by theoretical physics and contemporary game scholarship, that we are constantly creating them. Throughout this study, my focus is on the emergent practice of the tabletop role-playing game as a dynamic, consensually-manifested social practice of play meant to bridge subjectivities through the collaborative construction of new worlds (and experiences).

Within game scholarship, this dissertation reinforces the concept that games are not just a significant art form, but the practice of their play, and the interpretation of their narratives and meaning is now one of the main generators of the modern habitus. “Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life,” games theorist Mackenzie Wark argues. “They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself. These games are no joke” (7). The TRPG is one of the most compelling foundations for our modern games, analog and digital. The study of its origins, from 1974-1981, is an exploration of the early possibilities of games. It also serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing the boundaries and limitations of typologies, definitions, and staid theories intended to define static functions, mechanisms, or limited interpretation, and argue for the possibilities inherent in art forms, such as games, which revel in exploring contingency. If games have become the form of modern life, how can we maintain their fundamental uncertainties and possibilities?

Barad's agential realism argues that what we choose to consider, examine, and explore, the methods of what and how we observe any object of study, is not a *passive* act but rather one of *creation*. This dissertation does not create the practice of TRPG play, but our examination of it, ineluctably, forces decisions and critical interpretation on what it is. Any reader of this dissertation becomes entangled with this argument. Even a rejection of my perspective entails an inevitable engagement with it. Agential realism is a recognition of the creative power of observation, consideration, and interpretation; whether we choose to believe in something or not, the very fact of examining any object or perspective makes it real. Like a role-playing world, the practices, objects, and ideas that we make real through observation become real for the other players who share the world with us. Philip K. Dick famously quipped that: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (10). This dissertation argues that reality does "go away" but only when *we* (not you or I) stop believing in it. Agential realism provokes an acknowledgement of our agency for the creation of our worlds. It also requires an acknowledgment of the relationships between the agents around us and the impacts of those relationships on all the other agents entangled within them.

A game does not end or change, when one player refuses to play by the rules (or stop believing in them). However, enough players refusing the current state of the rules ineluctably changes the game: this is true in politics, culture, and society. Quantum physics suggests that this could be true with material reality. We create the universe, collaboratively, and hold only as much power as is shared through the consensus of our entangled relationships. Because of the dynamic nature of observation, interpretation, and translation, no argument can truly be definitive while we still have the nature to change our perspectives. As new evidence is collected, as new ideas are considered, the universe changes with them (new observers create

new worlds). The final argument of this dissertation follows in the footsteps of Bohr's caveat that "Every sentence I say must be understood not as an affirmation, but as a question." Every argument is a question whose answer within a shared universe, such as ours, depends on the consensus of the agents who attempt to answer it. Those agents, through time, space, and their new entanglements ineluctably change, and ergo, so do their answers. This dissertation asks questions for which even the author will have different answers, at different times, in different contexts, and within different communities. This is fine: answers resist possibility; questions create it.

The TRPG is based on the speculative power of possibilities through the power of the fundamental question that animates their play: what would it be like to live, explore, struggle, and survive in alternative worlds? This dissertation is interested in the possibilities of future engagements and new interpretations of previous engagements; I examine questions not only of potential uses of the TRPG, but its possible implications about how we interpret, translate, and create textual media and shared realities (speculative and real). This is a study of the questions prompted by that approach: What does the process of constructing these alternative, speculative and fantastic worlds tell us about the process of constructing the physical, cultural, and social realities which bound them? What do we learn about textual intersubjectivity by studying an emerging art form which asks us to explore, experiment and dwell within collaboratively, consensually created dreams? I will examine how the practice of the TRPG play emerges through the intersection of its ephemeral, material artifacts and its dynamic, subjective players. I will explore the possibilities and questions which the TRPG raises about how we interpret, translate, and collaboratively create new universes. My ambition is to encourage a recognition of

our agential capacity, responsibility, and possibility for creating worlds within the magic circle of games as well as the infinite universes beyond it.

## **Dissertation Structure**

In the next chapter, I provide a brief history of the emergence of TRPG games and practice. *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first commercially available TRPG and was released in 1974. Its introduction inspired a cultural phenomenon which led to the creation of a new game industry. In chapter 2, I examine how the game was inspired. *D&D* was Gygax & Arneson's attempt to simulate the worlds of early 20<sup>th</sup> century pulp fiction. In this chapter, I examine the entanglements between the pulp fiction novel, and their human authors, with *Dungeons & Dragons*, and their human designers. My focus is not on the rulebooks of *D&D*, nor the novels of Howard or Jack Vance, but rather the emerging relationship between the authors/designers of both. The practice of tabletop role-playing does not emerge from the ephemera of things but from the entangled subjectivities of the imaginations who create them. The entanglement between these 20<sup>th</sup> Century American authors and Gygax & Arneson was one of the initial steps towards the emergence of the TRPG. Entanglements irrevocably alter both parties. This chapter questions not only how literature influenced the emergence of the TRPG, but also how the TRPG transforms how we understand, interpret, translate, and ergo, create early 20<sup>th</sup> Century fantasy fiction.

*D&D's* popularity would lead to competitors who attempted to apply TRPG practice to other pop-cultural genres. In 1977, Marc Miller released *Traveller* to translate the diegetic worlds of science fiction literature and films into TRPG playgrounds. In chapter 3, I provide a close reading of *Traveller's* game rules, not as a study of ephemeral artifacts, but as a study of Miller's attempt to model and share his personal entanglements with science fiction. *Traveller*



was an attempt by Miller to model *ludic* possibilities for players to become entangled with (and among) their imaginary worlds. This chapter considers the question: can a game model and recreate its designer's subjective entanglements for players? What are the limitations of ludic media for creating entanglements with fictional worlds?

The final "text" my dissertation examines is the actual practice of TRPG play. Chapter 4 analyzes the subjective experience of playing Sandy Petersen's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981). *Call of Cthulhu* attempts to model the worlds of H.P. Lovecraft's "Cthulhu mythos" for TRPG play. Unlike *D&D* and *Traveller*, *Call of Cthulhu* is not designed as a vehicle for players to experience the vicarious thrills of adventure, accruing power, or thrill-seeking. The game was specifically designed to recreate, within the confines, capacities, and intimacy of ludic engagement, the uncanny terror of exploring Lovecraft's worlds and mythology. The TRPG text emerges through its relationships with its initial inspirations, the designers of its rule systems and adventures, and finally, with its players. This chapter examines the experience, insights, and relationships of players within a *Call of Cthulhu* campaign. This chapter considers how successful the TRPG is, through actual play, of modeling the experience its designers intended: how is the play of a TRPG different than reading the novels which inspired it? Are ludic engagements with fiction more intimate for catalyzing intersubjective entanglements? What new worlds are constructed through the collaboration of group play? What form does the TRPG take as it emerges through the practice of its play?

Throughout all these chapters, my focus is not on the texts themselves, but the practice of their engagements: from Gygas's practice of reading novels to Miller's practice of modeling his relationship to the practice of play at a game table. There are many agents at play in our universe, observing, creating, and constructing it. This dissertation is primarily concerned with one agent,

the human subjectivity, during one period of time, 1974-1981, and on one textual apparatus created by that agent, the TRPG. The chronological limitations of this study are to make it accessible, but the conclusions that we draw, and the questions that we ask, are not intended necessarily to be bounded (or answered). This dissertation is concerned with the capacity of observation as a means of construction to argue for the powers and responsibilities embedded with the agents (us) creating our universe.

## Chapter Two: The Monster Manual (*A Brief History of the TRPG*)

“Art is a game between all people, of all periods.”

– Marcel Duchamp

“Here is something better!”

– Gary Gygax & Dave Arneson, co-creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*

The historical consensus is that the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) was invented in 1974 when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson collaboratively designed and published *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gygax and Arneson were passionate game enthusiasts from the American Midwest and were active members of the 1970s wargaming sub-culture. The accepted narrative is that Gygax and Arneson’s experiments within their home wargames led them to a realization that it was possible to create an entirely new game genre. Through their study of how wargames simulated fictional battles, Gygax and Arneson believed it might be possible to create a set of rules which could simulate entire worlds and let players explore, interact, and change them. Arneson was the iconoclastic pioneer who first conceived of this capacity for games; Gygax was the clairvoyant seer who recognized the commercial opportunities of this new genre and started a new company, Tactical Studies Rules, to publish and promote it. Their invention, *D&D*, was the world’s first Tabletop Roleplaying Game. *D&D* would quickly become a cultural touchstone and popular phenomenon. *D&D*, and the TRPGs it would inspire, would irrevocably change our conception of what experiences were possible through gameplay. *D&D* offered something “better,” a new mode of intimate exploration within and intersubjective experience of the epic mythologies of our past, and the popular fictions of our magnificent futures. Or so the story goes.

No matter how seductive our desire to define primary authorship, identify precise moments of historical revelation, and recognize quantifiable evolutions in media might be: the “truth” of TRPG history cannot be fixed by single people, moments, or technologies. The TRPG

is the consequence of all three; our understanding of them also depends on our own interpretations of their relationships. The history that I offer in the following pages does not hope to explain how or why the TRPG was created but offers a meditation on how these relationships made this new genre possible.<sup>25</sup> I consider these relationships not merely as intersections, however, but as entanglements: Each emergent subjectivity, practice, and technology responsible for the TRPG was influenced, and a consequence of, the emergent relationships between all three. In order to understand this entanglement, a historic context of the 1970s wargaming community is essential.

Wargaming's history is as compelling as the history of TRPGs. The concept of a war game was initially conceived as a tool for training military leaders (and still serves that function in modern militaries). A Prussian army officer, George Leopold von Reisswitz, invented the "kriegsspiel" (literally "wargame" in German) as a method for virtual experimentations with different combat strategies that might be employed on actual battlefields. Reisswitz's initial game employed a table full of sand. The sand was molded and shaped to simulate the disparate geographic features of real battlefields. Military units were represented by small wooden blocks which moved across the sculpted battlefields. The game's ruleset defined how opposing players could move, and simulate battles with, these symbolic blocks. Sets of specialized dice were rolled to provide random outcomes for contingent actions in the game.

While Reisswitz's game was not formally adopted as a military training tool, his son would continue to refine the game and its rules. One of the most important refinements that the younger Reisswitz made was to require a neutral "umpire" responsible for collecting the "orders"

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<sup>25</sup> Peterson's *Playing at the World* (2012) provides the comprehensive historical record of the evolution of wargames to TRPGs. I provide an abridged version here for context; Appelcline's *Designers & Dragons* series (2014-2015) is an equally valuable record of the history of TRPG companies, creators, and philosophies of design.

that opposing players wished to give their units. Referring to the game's rules, the umpire would interpret the outcomes of these orders to the game table. The concept of an umpire who translated the (attempted) actions of players into the simulated world of a game would become a central component of the TRPG. This new, refined version was brought to the attention of the Prussian king and his military advisors who recommended its formal use for military training in 1824. Prussia's success in the Franco-Prussian war is often attributed to the pre-battle simulations that Prussian military leaders conducted within their *Kriegsspiel* games.

Charles A.L. Totten, an American military officer, would bring the concept of *Kriegsspiel* to the United States with *Strategos* in 1880. Like *Kriegsspiel*, the game allowed opposing players to move simulated military units around a table (or board) to fight imaginary conflicts. It used dice to provide random outcomes for contingent events (although, unlike in *Kriegspiell*, traditional six-sided dice were used). It also continued the younger Reisswitz's practice of requiring an impartial player (a "referee" to *Kriegsspiel*'s "umpire") to determine the outcomes of player actions. This was essential for *Strategos*, whose rule set was particularly liberal for the agency it offered to its imaginary generals. In the game's rules, Totten explained:

To derive the most good from such a study, the office of Referee should be regarded, not so much in the light of an adviser, as of an *arbiter*. He should bear in mind the principle that *anything can be attempted*. The *advisability* of an attempt is another thing, and one that it is the object of the War Game to make evident to all concerned by results. (105)

The creation of alternative, simulated worlds in wargames (and eventually, TRPGs) requires an entanglement of players' subjectivities, desires and ambitions with a referee's subjective judgment on what quantifiable, if imaginary, world should emerge from them. This outcome of course might not always be satisfactory to both players (wargames usually necessitate a winner and loser) however, players accepted the results of the game via the arbitration of the referee's judgment: they created a shared, consensual reality that all parties

agreed to before starting the game. Players cede ultimate power in *Kriegsspiel* and *Strategos* to a referee who has the final say in how probable outcomes collapse into determined outcomes for their shared, imaginary worlds. Although this concept was not standard in the wargames which would succeed them, they would become a ubiquitous component in the TRPG.<sup>26</sup>

Although this dissertation is concerned with human and media entanglement, military history and its future histories are also defined through entanglements between real war and the countless wargame simulations that national militaries employ to train leaders, generals, and soldiers. No American military action is conducted without first being simulated in order to gauge its potential consequences including possible casualties. Decisions, that impact real world lives and deaths, are made based upon these “games.” In turn, the real-world consequences of those decisions, and all of the information gathered from them, impacts the development (and play) of new simulations and games. Neither medium nor message exist without the human subjectivities required to create and engage with them; Warfare is (state-sponsored) violence as a low form of mediated rhetoric that cannot exist until it can be imagined. In the modern military, wargame simulations provide those imaginary futures. Military leaders choose the most satisfactory reality, and “endgame scenarios,” from the possible futures that wargames can predict.

These entanglements are not bound by time. Historical games of military strategy irrevocably change the way we interpret the past. Historical wargames allow players to understand the tactical and strategic challenges that leaders faced throughout history. They also

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<sup>26</sup> Gyax and Arneson were avid players of *Strategos*. Both modified its rules to create personal versions for their home gaming groups. Nearly a century removed from *Strategos*’ initial publication, Arneson would create modified versions of the game to simulate Russo-Turkish wars and the U.S. Civil War (among other conflicts). Before they began work on *D&D*, Arneson and Gyax collaborated on a naval wargame, *Don’t Give Up the Ship* (with Mike Carr 1971) that translated rules and tables from Totten’s design for sea battles.

provide ludic opportunities for players to create their own alternative past realities where different decisions are made. Wargames allow players to disrupt, distort, and distend established historical conflicts through the exploration of alternative timelines. The knowledge gained, or rather the emerging perspectives which come from future and past explorations, irrevocably change the player as well. The wargame moved historical conflicts into the present consciousness for players, from which new interpretations, meaning, and perspectives could be developed. Mackay writes that “war games were concerned with historical accuracy in their recreations and battles, but in recreating specific battles and creating their own scenarios...the real emphasis of these events became the narrative as it was unraveling *in the present*” (53). Wargames not only taught hobbyists about the historical record of war; they trained designers and players on the possibility of interacting with them. Every wargaming sand table or hexagonal grid map offers a restored, interactive battlefield ripe with alternative possibilities that players, like omnipotent deities, can determine. The history of games is a centuries-long experiment with interactivity: each new game genre is a new foray into exploring how human subjectivities can directly create (and play with) alternative future and pasts.<sup>27</sup> Barad’s complication of time as a sequence of diffracted patterns rather than linear perspectives is illustrated through these experiments. Games offer insight into the impacts that disparate interpretations, and interruptions, of the past can influence history. They also anticipate the potentialities of future histories.

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<sup>27</sup> Chess, created over a thousand years ago as an abstraction of military strategy, is the undisputed king of offering a new reality each time it is played. It allows players to experiment with new strategies and decisions within a world of *abstracted* warcraft. The popularity and predilection for games that rely on binary conflicts speaks to a cultural fascination with opposition; these games illustrate of our entanglement with our culture’s belief in violence as creative force.

While early wargames such as *Kriegsspiel* and *Strategos* were designed to prepare their players for actual war, the first commercial wargame was written by a pacifist who hoped these games would illuminate the casualties and horrors of actual warfare. In 1913, the science fiction author H.G. Wells published a set of wargaming rules, *Little Wars*, that was intended as entertainment, diversion, and within the tradition of science fiction, for the creation of cautionary fables through their play. In the game's rules, he wrote that "You have only to play at *Little Wars* three or four times to realise just what a blundering thing Great War must be" (100). Wells hoped his game vicariously offered the excitement and glory of the battlefield without any real blood needing to be spilled. The creation of *Little Wars*, like the scores of wargames and the TRPGs they inspired, is also a parable of relationships between people, ideas, and ambitions. Wells notes that his game proceeds from the lexicon and history of the *Kriegsspiel*. However, *Little Wars* cannot exist without Wells' own distaste for violence embedded within its rule systems and rhetoric. He makes it clear that *Little Wars* is neither singular nor revolutionary: "This is no new thing, no crude novelty; but a thing tested by time, ancient and ripe in its essentials for all its perennial freshness—like spring" (8).

*Little Wars* is the consequence and the material product of intra-actions between H.G. Wells (his imagination, proclivities, and subjectivities) and the legacy of war and the brutality of its human casualties. Wells, the pacifist, is created through the affective influence of warfare on his subjectivity. Likewise, Wells the gamer, is created through the desire to play with histories, and his agency within them. *Little Wars* emerges from these influences; As a rhetorical and ludic text, it also exerts influence upon Wells (and its players). *Little Wars* cathartically allows Wells, or any player, the opportunity to indulge in military strategy without becoming (directly)



complicit in war.<sup>28</sup> After play, a new version of Wells, influenced by catharsis and the results of his playful experimentations with history and military role-playing emerges: this new version of the player is now capable of new creations and experiments, both on the battlefields of *Little Wars*, but also within the material world. Caillois argued that the “destinies of cultures can be read in their games” (35). Wells’ modest ambition for his game was to entangle players’ sensibilities within his own pacifism and to offer a ludic experience to placate their baser (violent) instincts, through the substitution of a bloodless game for waging real war.

A contemporary reading of the *Little Wars* rulebook presents the uncanny nature of these entanglements. In one section, Wells laboriously presents rule systems for mortal, melee combat, while in another section, he laments the “masses of men and material and suffering and inconvenience” of real war as “too monstrously big for reason” (100). *Little Wars*, however, resists ambivalence. Although he abhors conflict on the world stage, Wells *delights* in the capacity for his rules to simulate it as a game. He revels in *Little Wars* capacity for creating a ludic mechanism for players to pretend (role-play) they are battlefield generals whose decisions prompt only virtual consequences. The concept of this bloodless war is, of course, a fantasy – one that Wells positions as superior to reality. He illustrates his own experiences of this fantastic (role-)play in the rulebook:

And suddenly your author changes. He changes into what perhaps he might have been—under different circumstances. His inky fingers become large, manly hands, his drooping scholastic back stiffens, his elbows go out, his etiolated complexion corrugates and darkens, his moustaches increase and grow and spread, and curl up horribly; a large, red scar, a sabre cut, grows lurid over one eye. He expands—all over he expands. He clears his throat startlingly, lugs at the still growing ends of his moustache, and says, with just a faint and fading doubt in his voice as to whether he can do it, "Yas, Sir!" (63-64).

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<sup>28</sup> Or does it? Arguments have been made, especially in the realm of modern video games, that games procedural rhetoric is a training ground for the practices embedded within their play. Is Wells antagonizing war by displaying its horrors or glorifying it by simulating its as compelling entertainment? That is a question that this dissertation does not address directly but is relevant to the concept of agential realism and its perspective on games.

Peterson recognizes this change in Wells as reminiscent (if not derivative) of the protagonist in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).<sup>29</sup> Stevenson's tale has become the classic archetype of the entanglements of disparate personalities. Wells' evocative description in *Little Wars* is an illustration of his own subjective entanglements between an obsession with the glories of the battlefield and a revulsion for physical violence. His pacifism intrudes upon and engages with his own fascination with ludic conflict. Wells' rule set makes the argument, or is an exploration of the argument, that wargames can be played without being materially consummated. For Wells, all fights must remain within the bounded space of an imagination that he implicitly argues is possible. However, he is unable to resist the allure of the battlefield altogether; the obsessions of his imagination are irrevocably entangled. They cannot exist without the other: allure and repulsion simultaneously creating the relationship, and game, through which Wells can explore, and live with, both.

Barad advocates for a recognition of entanglements as potential spaces of justice and humanism. If matter and meaning are entangled, our interpretations irrevocably sunder and alter historical and future potentialities. Her argument is supported by the negative evidence of our dominant forms of historical interpretations. We view the past as series of binary, and inevitable, conflicts while assuming that history is non-transmutable and that our futures will follow similar ley lines. Like Wells, Barad positions history (and conceptions of the future) within the space of possibility and not a collapsed certainty. For Wells, historical warfare is transmogrified into a comic panel of villainous absurdity through the inconsequentiality of living room play. He challenges its certitude by acknowledging it as horrific farce. The inevitability of continued warfare becomes the inevitability to recognize it as adolescent absurdity; through the adoption of

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<sup>29</sup> According to Peterson, Stevenson was also an avid wargamer who did not formally publish his own rules system but "penned vivid, literary battle reports describing his campaigns" (*Playing at the World* 16).

a new frame of interpretation, interrogation, and play, the old past becomes impossible. How could something so irrational ever be real?

The rule set of *Little Wars*, like much literature, is not simply a rhetorical communication, but a display of relationships entangled within the designer's imaginations and experience (and which emerge as subjective perspective). For Wells, a writer, this also includes literary inspirations. In the introduction to *Little Wars*, Wells alludes to Sterne's 1759 novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* which "records" two of its characters, Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, playing wargames "on a scale and with an elaboration exceeding even the richness and beauty of the contemporary game" (8). The allusion is significant not only as indication of the impact of Sterne's subjective influence on Wells' (and his ambitions as a game designer) but also because of the nature of *Tristram Shandy* itself. Sterne's novel is often considered as one of the first "novels," in the form that we associate with the contemporary genre. However, Sterne's work came before the contemporary genre conventions were codified and standardized. Sterne's work is not simply a compelling narrative, but a fascinating study of literary experimentation; Throughout his text, Sterne whimsically plays and experiments with a number of meta-textual techniques: non-linear storytelling, re-contextualized (and non-contextualized) plagiarism, pages left blank, or completely black. The novel even includes printing oddities. Perhaps one of the most compelling techniques Sterne employed was how he invited and *required* his reader to join, contribute, and directly interact with the text. Ironically enough, *Tristram Shandy* is often seen as the prototypical novel. Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky famously (and without irony) declared it as "the most typical novel of world literature" (170). It is unsurprising that *Shandy* would figure prominently in Wells' imagination. Sterne's initial lesson, one based not on canonized standards of literary construction but through

the freedoms implicit in playfulness, is that nothing is sacred; the context of the novel is unsettled. Its diegetic world must be both interpreted by the reader – but also determined by them. *Tristram Shandy* is simultaneously the first novel and the novel as the “writerly” text conceived by Barthes. It is a text that demands the reader join the author as equally complicit (and playful) creators of the narrative and its world.

Aarseth famously defined electronic literature and computer games as being a form of “ergodic literature” which required “nontrivial effort... to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1).<sup>30</sup> We could conceive of *Tristram Shandy* as a cybertextual ur-text that inspired the digital texts that are the basis for Aarseth’s analysis, however, Barad advises us to conceive of time as diffracted: Aarseth and Sterne’s works exist, and influence one another, in simultaneous entanglement. Once they are considered together, we can neither write (nor think) about *Cybertext* without recognizing the embodiments of its textual conceptualizations within *Shandy*, nor can we consider *Shandy* without regarding it through theoretical interpretation as an ergodic text. An engagement with both texts is fundamentally changed through interpretation, engagement, and consideration of each simultaneously, regardless of the material space and illusory time that separate them, within the realm of entangled subjectivity.

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<sup>30</sup> Although Aarseth’s conception of the interactive nature of our new digital texts is useful, I would argue that the term “nontrivial” is subjective enough to be problematic. As *Tristram Shandy*, and many modernist novels, illustrate, the “effort” to realize a text can take many forms: from interpretation to mechanical to direct interactions. Although flipping the page of a traditional text might seem nontrivial, interpreting *Shandy*, or *Ulysses*, requires a level of interpretative and cognitive effort that is certainly more significant than the play of a mobile digital game such as *Farmville* or *Candy Crush*.

While Aarseth’s arguments about the intersections of algorithm and narrative is essential for the study of texts which exhibit either or both characteristics, these problems highlight the need for an acknowledgement of the consequences not of their material intersection but of the distinct changes, and inextricable bonding, that occurs through intra-action. Neither the narrative nor the algorithm is unchanged after their mutual engagements; or more accurately, their authors and readers cannot forget the capacities implicit in the consequences of those engagements.

*Tristram Shandy*, and the 60s-70s wargames that predate the personal computer revolution, remind us that cybertexts are not new. Digital technologies did not enable ludic agency, their modern popularity and the wider accessibility of their cybertexts merely trained audiences into the capacity of the ergodic text. *Shandy* was a primer for Wells, whose game would serve as a tutorial for Gygax & Arneson. In turn, Gygax & Arneson's TRPG would introduce these concepts to a popular audience. *Tristram Shandy* also reminds us that one genre does not only influence similar forms, or genres, within the same medium. The wargame is entangled with *Tristram Shandy*, the novel, and the TRPG emerges from, and is entangled with, both. T.S. Eliot argued that "art never improves, but...the material of art is never quite the same" (46). Media genres emerge based on the subjectivity of those who observe them; if a necessary genre does not exist, it becomes necessary to invent it.<sup>31</sup>

As seductive as it is to consider these concepts as a linear progression, it is important to recognize that none of these media forms replaces another. Each new media form radically displaces our initial interpretations of previous texts; they cannot exist any longer as they were, but they are ever-present within their new transfigurations. Practices change; technologies cannot. Literary history – especially within poetry – has often examined how the poetry of the past is embedded within the art of the new. Eliot also argues that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," and that the creation of any text irrevocably changes the texts that preceded it: "the past should be altered as much as the present is directed by the past" (44-45). Jorge Luis Borges, whose own work relies on challenging the persistence of temporal illusion, argues "that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (201). Harold Bloom provides the analogy of the

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<sup>31</sup> My apologies to Voltaire.

“Apophrades,” the moment through which the words of the dead are spoken by the living (139-155). In that moment, the dead and the living are forever changed and the words of neither can be heard without hearing the other: Is *Shandy* anymore a novel when we regard it within the context of the cybertext? Is the wargame merely a child’s diversion when we recognize its implications for producing alternative histories – can it be conceived as merely an illusion, when contemporary physics posits that every possible reality might exist simultaneously (is this a wargame or a portal)? Can the TRPG be seen as simply a new game genre, when we see how modern “gamification,” based on the elements which Gygax & Arneson refined, is shaping every moment of contemporary life? As Barad states: “the past is never finished.” It is also never finished with *us* (nor is the future).

*Little Wars* is not singular as a rules system nor as a simulation of military warfare. Wells was aware of the history of *Kriegsspiel* that preceded his casual, commercial game. Neither was *Little Wars*, like any text, free from the embedded perspectives – social, cultural, political and existential – of its designer. It was impossible for Wells to conceive of a battle simulation that did not conceptualize war as horrible; it was equally impossible for him to not conceive of it as exciting and the gateway to imagined glories. Wells prioritizes the material world by trivializing his make-believe battlefields as merely cathartic playgrounds.<sup>32</sup> McKenzie Wark argues that every game is a refracted representation of a simulated reality or “gamespace” (15); Game play

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<sup>32</sup> I agree with Wells with reservations. For games scholars and enthusiasts, it can be seductive to situate games within the functionalist perspective that their primary purpose is to enable catharsis and personal experimentation.

However, as Wark suggests, gamespace intrudes upon and can often be indistinguishable from the real world. It is becoming even more difficult to tell the two apart; as modern-day virtual communities have proven (and Katherine Hayles has argued), identifying where human subjectivity is truly embedded complicates the notions of an easy dichotomy that separate simulation and emergent reality. Is play a cathartic or training exercise? I would argue it can be both or neither depending on the subjective observation of the current player.

trains us to navigate the playgrounds of simulated and material realities. In his cultural examination of games and play, Huizinga argued that all of life might be considered play (30-31). I would extend this point to argue that gamespace and play exist in a state of entanglement with our material world. Like military simulations of warfare, neither games nor the material world manifest without the other. We must imagine both, simultaneously, for their emergence and configuration.

*Little Wars* inspired others to create their own battlefield simulations. In 1933, the science fiction author Fletcher Pratt created his own set of rules for simulating naval battles that, like *Little Wars*, was played with miniature figurines. Pratt's writing, especially his collaboration with L. Sprague de Camp, directly influenced *D&D* and its aesthetic (Pratt was a favorite author of Gygax). Fantasy author Fritz Leiber, whose "Fafhrd & The Gray Mouser" series was another primary influence on *D&D*, co-designed a wargame based on his literary worlds in 1937 (with Harry Otto Fischer) that TSR would publish in 1976.

It would take several decades, however, before a profitable commercial market existed for wargames. In 1952, Charles Roberts designed and self-published *Tactics*, a complex but accessible battlefield simulation played with a board, dice, and paper tokens rather than the tin toy soldiers of *Little Wars* (or the complicated models associated with *Kriegsspiel* games).<sup>33</sup> Roberts published *Tactics* as a form of personal kriegsspiel. An American reservist, Roberts designed the game to become acquainted with different military strategies. When he released it to the public, however, he quickly realized there was a commercial market for similar games.

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<sup>33</sup> The passage of time between the publication dates of *Little Wars* and *Tactics* suggests the possibility that playing at war during the 40 years where two global wars, with all-too-real material casualties and consequences, would seem like an obscene and decadent luxury. Gygax wrote that: "the big war made interest in the book about little ones virtually disappear" ("Foreword," *Little Wars*).

Due to the success of *Tactics*, Roberts formed The Avalon Game Company (that would later become Avalon Hill) in 1954 to create, publish and promote future wargames.<sup>34</sup> *Tactics* and its competitors and clones inspired the DIY wargame community of the 1970s to which Gygax and Arneson belonged. Gygax and Arneson both claim that Avalon Hill's *Gettysburg* (1958), a simulation of the eponymous Civil War Battle, was the first wargame they played.

Peterson argues that the biggest problem facing the growth of wargaming in the 60s and 70s was the size of the subculture supporting it; he describes it as “in a word, miniscule.” (*Playing at the World* 5). The size of the community numbered in the low thousands, and its capacity for growth, evolution, and popular emergence, was limited by its numeric paucity for generating subjective entanglements. The wargames of the period were usually designed for at least two players. Wargame players required shared engagement to play their games and designers needed experiences and testimonials from gameplay to inspire the creation of new works. If the size of the 1960s and 70s wargaming community was small, their passion for the game genre and play was not.

Wargamers devised two strategies to bridge material distances between players (and designers). The first was the creation of organized wargaming clubs that allowed members to hold regular meetings, and perhaps even more importantly, to recruit new players through newsletters (and ‘zines). Companies, such as Roberts’ Avalon Hill, created newsletters to help players organize their own clubs (and advertise the company’s products). Their profit margins relied on making sure players could find one another to play their games. These organizations were usually small: membership rarely numbered more than a hundred or so members. Gygax

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<sup>34</sup> Since 1986, The Avalon Game Company has been owned by Hasbro, the toy brand and corporation that also acquired Wizards of the Coast in 1999. Wizards of the Coast publishes the modern fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014), and now includes Avalon Hill as a subsidiary. Capitalism, too, is a story of inevitable entanglement – for good and ill.



was especially prodigious within these clubs. He was a founding member of several groups including: The International Federation of Wargaming (1967), The Castles & Crusade Society (1970), and the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association (1970). Arneson joined The Midwest Military Simulation Association when he was still in high school.

The newsletters from these organizations allowed players to share gaming exploits through the narratives produced from their alternative realities and to advertise themselves to potential opponents (Peterson, *Playing at the World* 6-7). Both Gygax and Arneson wrote for their groups' newsletters and both solicited games to interested opponents within them. Usually, advertising a game was intended for in-person competition. However, gamers also created ways to play via US Post. Several companies, such as Flying Buffalo (1969), emerged to offer play-by-mail services for wargamers.<sup>35</sup> The evolution of the wargaming hobby can be directly tracked to the subculture's capacity for enabling human engagements. This is true of any media: without readers, no text can find an audience crucial for its interpretation, meaning, and survival. The realization of a wargaming text, however, usually requires at least two simultaneously engaged intellects for an audience. Whether players are spatiotemporally present is irrelevant. What matters is that they both are engaged in the gaming contest for an agreed upon period of time. The necessity of opponents for wargames necessitated an available community of players for their realization. As new gaming organizations and newsletters proliferated, so too did new potential players, new games, and new conceptions of what might be possible through games. The 20 years following the release of Roberts' *Tactics* would see wargames developed and released for nearly every historical conflict: from medieval battles, including *Chainmail* by

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<sup>35</sup> In July 2021, Flying Buffalo was sold and the new company did not buy the rights to their play-by-mail games. However, the family of Rick Loomis, the founder of Flying Buffalo, continues to run nine play-by-mail games as of 2023. E-mail is now an acceptable channel for submitting game moves and the outcomes are simulated by computers.

Gygax & Jeff Perren (1971), through World War II and even contemporary conflicts including the Vietnam War.

### **The Siege of Bodenburg & Braunstein**

The emergence of these wargaming communities would lead to the creation of two new wargames that drastically shifted the personal intimacy of their simulations. In traditional wargames, the units that players moved across a sand-table or board, represented entire companies of soldiers or battalions of tanks and artillery. Henry Bodenstedt's *The Siege of Bodenburg* (1967) and Dave Wesely's *Braunstein* (1969) allowed players to control individual characters on imaginary battlefields. Mackay claims that this was one of the most pivotal moves towards the TPRG. He argues that "the defining shift that inaugurated the birth of the role-playing game and marked its separation from the war game was the player's emphasis on playing the 'all-human character' rather than a mere game piece" (72). Bodenstedt published the rules for his game in *Strategy & Tactics*, a popular wargaming magazine that is still in circulation (1967-). A New Jersey hobby store owner, Bodenstedt created his game to encourage customers to purchase the miniatures, including a large, plastic, medieval castle model, required to play it. Gygax would be introduced to the game in 1968 and its rules significantly influenced his and Perren's design for *Chainmail*. While *The Siege of Bodenburg* allowed players a more intimate relationship with individual characters, rather than units, the game's play and objectives were standard wargame fare. Although the players were controlling individual characters, every character was still part of a military force. The objective of the game was to defeat the other players' forces for control of a medieval castle; it remained a ludic exercise in military tactics.

Wesely's *Braunstein* was a more compelling departure from conventional wargames. Wesely was a member of The Midwest Simulation Association, along with Arneson, located in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Like Arneson and Gygax, Wesely often tinkered with the rulesets of published wargames (including modifying Totten's *Strategos* to simulate the U.S. Civil War).<sup>36</sup> Wesely introduced his new game *Braunstein* to Arneson and their gaming group in 1969. While most of the members of the gaming group were expecting another conventional wargaming scenario, *Braunstein* offered a radically different experience. Like *The Siege of Bodenburg*, Wesely's game allowed players to control individual characters. However, these characters were not necessarily part of a military force. Each of the characters represented an important personage in the fictional German town of Braunstein: while one player played the "role" of the town's militia commander, another could play the town's priest or mayor.

Each of the characters that players could choose also had their own distinct set of objectives. These objectives were based on what their fictional character's motivations and ambitions were for their imaginary lives in Braunstein. If two different characters had different plans for the town, their objectives might put their characters in opposition to each other; characters with similar motives could have very similar objectives. Like *Strategos*, the game required a referee to adjudicate rules and player conflicts. Unlike *Strategos*, and other wargames, the actions that players could take were limited mostly by the limits of their creativity and imagination.

While Wesely had created simple rules for combat and movement (based on other wargames), he made up rules during the game, if they were needed, to determine the outcomes of

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<sup>36</sup> This practice was common to the culture and not attributable only to Gygax, Arneson or Wesely. Because of the wargaming community's size and DIY spirit, players often modified, or "house-ruled," rules for their games – based on the desires and ambitions of the game group. Wargame players were almost, de facto, war game designers as they constantly changed games to fit their ludic ambitions.

any contingent player action. The players were free to have their characters attempt any action that made sense within the diegetic game world of a medieval German village. As soon as the game started, players went into different rooms to negotiate with other players to form alliances, plan strategies, and conspire with or against one another.<sup>37</sup> Afterwards, they reported back to Wesely (who also presided over a map of Braunstein and a plastic miniature of the town's central tower) who determined the results of their actions. Once those results were determined, players plotted new moves and actions based on how the scenarios was unfolding and repeated the process of negotiation and communicating their actions to Wesely.

Wesely assumed *Braunstein* would eventually turn to into a conventional wargame, with characters choosing sides in a final battle for control of the town. It never happened. Players were so wrapped up in the intrigues of their personal objectives – and the intrigues that emerged from the interactions between players with dissimilar objectives – that the game never reached a point of binary conflict before time ran out. Thinking in terms of traditional wargames, Wesely judged his experiment as a dismal failure, however, his players loved the experience and demanded he run another *Braunstein*. Players reacted to the concept of *Braunstein* in much the same way that gameplayers had initially reacted to the wargame: they were intrigued by the level of engagements within a simulated (and believable) world that it compelled.

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<sup>37</sup> This style of play is not entirely unprecedented. Gygax and Arneson were also fans of a “wargame” called *Diplomacy*, created by Allan B. Calhamer in 1954. In the “Negotiation” phase of a *Diplomacy* game, players similarly discuss alliances and betrayals with other players (in secret) apart from the game's actual map and board. Based on these negotiations, players seal secret “orders” for their military units to fulfill on the board. These are revealed during the next phase of the game.

However, unlike *Braunstein*, these orders are bounded by the game's rules which resemble conventional wargame rules. A player in *Diplomacy* could not give orders to their units to become spies and instead sabotage another players' government from the inside (which could conceivably happen in a *Braunstein*).

Wargames offered gameplayers interactive agency for playing with interpretations of historical conflicts as well as to experiment with future, alternative realities. However, wargames had always bound the actions of these imaginary, time-traveling generals to the battlefield. Wesely's *Braunstein* expanded the agency for historical deconstruction and alternate future experimentation to the battlefields of society, culture, and politics. McLuhan said that "Once you see the boundaries of your environment, they are no longer the boundaries of your environment." For the members of The Midwest Simulation Association, the boundaries of the wargame – which once offered so much agency – now seemed far too restrictive and arbitrary.

Obliging his players' appetites, Wesely ran more versions of *Braunstein* with new scenarios, characters, and objectives for his players to experiment with. In the fourth *Braunstein* that Wesely would referee, based in a fictional "banana republic," Arneson played the role of a "Peaceful Revolutionary" whose victory objective was to distribute revolutionary pamphlets. Taking advantage of the game's wide-open structure (and the use of a phony CIA badge he created before the game in the "real world"), Arneson convinced the other characters into giving his character control of the town and its treasury.<sup>38</sup> As he departed the town in a helicopter, with a suitcase full of cash, his character dropped the pamphlets on the town below. Arneson had not only chosen a novel approach for fulfilling his character's main objective, he also created an entirely new set of objectives. Arneson, found these new objectives (take control of the town and its funds) more compelling than one in which the designer, Wesely, had originally intended. Arneson recognized how these relationships offered new possibilities for collaborative play and narrative construction.

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<sup>38</sup> Arneson's clever trick might represent the first application of meta-gaming within tabletop role-playing.

His unusual approach to Wesely's game was not sabotage, but rather an indication of ludic entanglements between designer and player. Through the engagement with Wesely's design and the subjective desires that Arneson (and other players) were learning to embody within specific characters, a game that did not, and could not, exist without their entanglement emerged. Arneson would referee future games, which would eventually lead him to create an entire campaign, "The Black Moors," based on the ideas that Wesely pioneered in *Braunstein*.<sup>39</sup> The Black Moors campaign also featured a game referee (Arneson) and players fulfilling roles of individual characters with various motives. Its diegetic world was not the faux reality of "Braunstein" (or the other real-world facsimiles in its immediate sequels), but an entirely imaginary world of medieval fantasy. Arneson's own imagination, not limited to historical curiosity, had been freed by the ludic expansion that *Braunstein* promised. Why should his campaign be bound by the constraints of the real (or real histories)?

*Dungeons & Dragons* is the first commercially published tabletop role-playing game. The genesis of *D&D*, however, is not based on moments of isolated design genius, but rather the consequences of ideas, ambitions, and experiential subjectivities becoming entangled. Nearly all the design elements and major game concepts that would make *D&D* a cultural phenomenon were present in 1969's first *Braunstein*.<sup>40</sup> These initial concepts (and the initial promise they offered) would be refined, adapted, and expanded upon through their engagements with players. Arneson's *Black Moors* game was at the vanguard of those refinements. However, while

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<sup>39</sup> Arneson referred to the first sessions of his new game as a "medieval Braunstein" and players referred to this new game as a "Black Moor" in keeping with Wesely's initial naming convention (Peterson, Appelcline). The campaign world of Arneson's game would eventually be known as Blackmoor (Gygax's campaign world was known as Greyhawk.)

<sup>40</sup> At a gaming convention in 2017, Wesely ran a "Braunstein" based on his original rule set. He titled it *Braunstein 4: The world's almost first RPG*.

newsletters and fanzines allowed wargamers to share game design ideas and stories of gameplay through the post, letters were not capable of sharing the entire subjective experience of games – and certainly not the compelling new experiences that Arneson and his group were enjoying. The amateur, typewritten ‘zines of these communities could not communicate the full experience of playing these new forms of wargames. The geographic isolation of these communities stifled opportunities for collaboration: Arneson’s Minneapolis group was refining concepts in the Twin Cities that Gygax’s similar group of gameplayers was unaware of in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.<sup>41</sup>

The next necessary step for the emergence of the TRPG was an opportunity for these disparate communities to intersect. Out of necessity, invention: wargaming conventions emerged in the late 1960s that allowed players in different communities to share their stories, ideas, and experiences. The most influential would be the Lake Geneva Wargames Convention, that Gygax would first organize in 1968 for a modest group of about 100 gamers<sup>42</sup>. Gygax would host it in his hometown of Lake Geneva, a small resort town about 350 miles from Minneapolis. It was at the second Lake Geneva Convention in 1969 that Gygax was introduced to Arneson.

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<sup>41</sup> Another interesting note is that Wesely and Bodenstedt were not the only wargamers experimenting with the concept of 1-1 role-playing. On an online forum, Wesely writes that “...in 1968, Michael J. Korn published ‘Modern War in Miniature’, a set of miniature rules with all of the features of an RPG, and he and I had never met. While *Braunstein* pre-dates Korn’s rules, it is only fair to say that he also invented the RPG.”

Unlike Wesely, Korn never had an Arneson to refine and push the capacities of the initial concept nor a Gygax to bring them into a commercial market and the popular imagination. New media do not emerge from people but from their intersections, relationships, entanglements; the lone subjectivity does not exist and would have no agency if it did.

<sup>42</sup> The Lake Geneva Wargaming Convention would quickly grow and be forced to move to new locations to accommodate larger and larger crowds. It would also expand its focus to include TRPGs and other tabletop games. GenCon, as it is now known, is the largest gaming convention in the world. Barring pandemics, it is held every year in Indianapolis, Indiana and hosted over 50,000 gameplayers in 2023. Wargames are a now minority at GenCon, largely overshadowed by the TRPGs which they inspired.

## **Gygax & Arneson**

This dissertation is disinterested in the question of whether Gygax or Arneson is more responsible for the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is obsessed, however, with the concept that their relationship – and the entanglement of their subjectivities, ideas, experiences, and imaginations – is responsible for its emergence. This dissertation proceeds from a perspective that a medium exists only so far as it is imagined within those who create and engage with it: the materiality of a medium is not disposable, but rather the frustrating reminder of our material world’s intrusion into the universes of our ideas.

In many ways, Gygax and Arneson were similar: both were white, middle-class men from modest, midwestern backgrounds. At the time of their meeting, Gygax was working as an insurance underwriter. Arneson was a security guard. Gygax & Arneson were typical representatives of the demographics of the wargaming subculture in the 1960s. The wargaming culture was what sociologist Fine defines as an “idioculture,” which share “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction” (136). The wargaming community shared an obsession with military history and strategies, the desire to experiment with them, enough means to purchase games (and playing aids such as miniature figurines), and the capacity to invest time in games which could last several hours (or days).

Gygax & Arneson shared a love of history, eclectic games (and especially wargames), and fantastic fiction. Their shared interest in fantasy fiction was especially influential on the aesthetic and mood of *D&D* (and was likely a factor for their initial friendship and capacity for collaboration). Arneson attributed the design of Blackmoor specifically to Howard’s “Conan the



Cimmerian” pulp novels and 1970s pulp monster films. Gygax was a voracious reader of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century pulp fiction (Howard, Leiber, Lovecraft, Vance, among others) (Witwer, Kelly). They were both leaders in their respective gaming groups and both were obsessed with game design and philosophy. Both had adapted and translated other designer’s wargames, such as *Strategos*, to fit their own campaigns and playstyles.

One important difference was that Gygax was clearly more interested in audiences, beyond his gaming group, for his game designs and ideas. While Arneson’s game innovations usually stayed within his home group, Gygax had already published three games, including *Chainmail* (with Jeff Perren 1971) that Arneson used to simulate combat for his *Blackmoor* campaign. Gygax was also a prodigious contributor to wargaming ‘zines: he was constantly contributing opinions and narratives from his games (Peterson, *Playing at the World*). While Arneson was not silent, and many letters from him appeared (often to solicit new opponents), his focus was on innovating for his Minneapolis group. It is not surprising that it would be Gygax who organized the Lake Geneva Convention. It is also not surprising that it would be Gygax who would serve as the entrepreneurial catalyst for turning his and Arneson’s innovations into a marketable product.

The influence of role-playing games, and their design philosophies, have become ubiquitous in modern games (and life). Steffen Walz and Sebastian Deterding argue that “Gamification is certainly the most recent and visible instantiation of the interpenetration of games and everyday life” (6-7). RPG elements, from the concept of “leveling up” to “character attributes,” can be found as often in commercial mobile applications as they are in games. This has inspired considerable historical interest in attempting to determine the primary authors of the tabletop role-playing game. The OSR community, in particular, attempts to replicate early styles

of TRPG play. Since *D&D*'s inception in 1974, the game and its rules systems have changed significantly. Members of this community are interested in returning the game to the initial designs and philosophies that guided its early creation. This community, and RPG historians, are currently involved in a debate about whether Gygax or Arneson should be considered the primary author of *D&D* and ergo, the primary originator of the TRPG industry.<sup>43</sup>

Like many similar debates, such as whether games should be considered an artform, the debate is essentially absurd; new media are not the result of auteurs but the inevitable entanglements of human subjectivities, experience, and technology with our insatiable ambition for radical and authentic intersubjectivity. As the debate between Foucault and Barthes establishes, identifying the central author for any text is problematic. This does not mean examining how texts are constructed, created, and interpreted is not without merit. My argument is that those constructions and interpretations must be seen as the consequences of their inevitable intra-actions. We should consider *D&D*, and the ludic genre it introduces, as the consequence not of human "genius," but rather as the consequence of inevitable human

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<sup>43</sup> Because of his significantly higher commercial output (and ambitions), Gygax has historically been considered as the more important contributor to *D&D*. There is a gaming convention, GaryCon, named for him and held in his hometown of Lake Geneva. Witwer has authored a glowing biography of Gygax, the "creator" of *D&D*, that features re-imagined vignettes from Gygax's life contextualized as a hero's journey. Gygax's likeness and voice appeared in an episode of Matt Groening's *Futurama*. There is a *strain of bacteria* named after him (*Arthronema gygaxiana*).

Arneson has not received as much popular recognition – although his influence is being discovered and re-evaluated (thanks in part to the rigorous scholarship of historians such as Peterson and Appelcline). Full Sail University, where Arneson taught, has dedicated a game studio in his name. The documentary *Secrets of Blackmoor* (2019) features numerous interviews with Arneson's players in his Twin Cities' gaming group to highlight his contribution.

Strangely enough, one of Gygax's first *D&D* players, Robert J. Kuntz, authored a trio of essays titled *Dave Arneson's True Genius* (2017) that claims the most important new concepts in *D&D* originated with Arneson. It is the opinion of this author that these different perspectives are all valuable in illuminating the absurdity of auteur theory and our own essential, but ultimately futile, need for quantifiable points of origin. Barad would remind us that these points of origin, like time, are subjectively manufactured, and should be consciously done; an appreciation of Gygax & Arneson's dynamic entanglements frees us from collapsing the potentialities of authorship into a limited, bordered quantifiable state. It also does not really matter.

*relationships*. *D&D* is not simply the consequence of the entanglement of Gygax & Arneson, it is the consequence of the legacy of creators, thinkers, writers, authors who shaped games as well as the consequence of the legacy of friends, family, and acquaintances who invented Gygax & Arneson. As Gygax & Arneson only emerge through entanglements and interpretations of the world(s) they found themselves within (the worlds of their experience and imagination), *Dungeons & Dragons* can only emerge through the entanglements and intra-actions between their worlds.

Unlike Gygax, whose design worlds were shared throughout the broader community, Arneson's design worlds were usually shared in-person and through the intimacy of gameplay. Gygax exerted an influence on Arneson before they met in Lake Geneva (Gygax's *Chainmail* rules were used for combat resolution in Arneson's *Blackmoor* campaign). However, it was not until Arneson demonstrated *Blackmoor* to Gygax in November of 1972, that this influence could be reciprocated. Their meeting in person catalyzed an intra-action. This intra-action enabled their ludic sensibilities and capacity to no longer exist as distinct mechanisms.

Once he saw *Blackmoor* in action, Gygax could no longer run *Chainmail* without recognizing how it could be applied towards the production of larger campaigns and narratives. Arneson's *Blackmoor* was an entire fantasy world. Initially, Arneson had simply applied the concept of a *Braunstein* to a fantasy medieval setting and created a dark and dangerous dungeon within the setting that his players could explore. He used the initial game mechanics of *Braunstein*: each player had their own character, and each character was free to attempt any action they would like in pursuit of their personal objectives. Gygax's *Chainmail* rules continued to be used for simulating combat with the dungeon's nefarious monsters. Gygax writes that: "From the *CHAINMAIL* fantasy rules he [Arneson] drew ideas for a far more complex and

exciting game, and thus began a campaign which still thrives as of this writing!” (“Men and Magic” 3). Arneson had taken Gygas’s simple system and extrapolated it to a much larger simulated world.

Arneson’s players’ interest in the game, and their character’s desire to see (and conquer) more of the world prompted Arneson to expand his setting from the bounded confines of a dungeon towards outdoor settings that necessitated the creation of entire kingdoms. He also instituted a system where players played the same characters over several sessions, reminiscent of a full wargaming campaign, and could earn “experience points,” that allowed their characters to develop new abilities and traits. Arneson explained in 1977:

From the first excursions into the dark depths of Blackmoor Castle's Dungeon, it became apparent that these first hardy bands of adventurers would soon seek out new worlds to pillage. From the castle itself the small town of Blackmoor grew, then the surrounding countryside became filled with new holes to explore and beyond that talk was already spreading about visiting the Egg of Coot. Each of these steps entailed a great deal of work upon a naive Judge who felt that there was already more than enough trouble already available to satisfy any band of adventures, a phrase no doubt heard rather frequently since then, in other areas. In general, a fairly loose procedure was set up for the establishment of each of these new areas, with a great deal of emphasis being placed on the players themselves setting up new Dungeons, with my original Dungeonmaster role evolving more into the job of co-ordinating the various operations that were underway at any given moment. At the height of my participation as chief co-ordinator, there were six Dungeons and over 100 detailed player characters to be kept track of at any one time. (*The First Fantasy Campaign* 3)

After being introduced to Arneson’s comprehensive world, Gygas could no longer be satisfied with waging the small fantasy skirmishes of *Chainmail*: here was an opportunity for world simulation he had never conceived through his modest wargame. Gygas reveled in the assumption that the added complexity that Blackmoor offered was superior to the small battles that *Chainmail* had been initially designed for. Siegfried Zielinski argues that “The history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus. The current state of the art does not necessarily represent the best possible state...”

(7). I would argue that the continued development of the *D&D* system, through five editions and constant revisions, are not advances in a capacity for connecting (either between pulp fiction and games or through intersubjectivity) but are driven mostly by market forces.

The actual experience of the play of a TRPG, which I examine in chapter 5, argues that the play of TRPGs is so subjective that it transcends the technology. The TRPG is compelling because it illuminates our own capacity for creating and interacting with imaginary worlds. As a mechanical apparatus (or “extension of man”), it is inert and incapable of agency. The OSR Community and modern players of *D&D* continue to prioritize advancing the TRPG as a technology rather than how to improve engagements with it. This focus on TRPG technology would spawn the “edition wars” of the 1990s, a futile debate about which version of *D&D* is best. I claim that the best experience of *D&D*, or any TRPG, is the one where the players regard technology less as implicit tool of intersubjective collaboration but as a necessary obstacle to it. Technologies do not empower, their intrinsic materiality is always a limitation (though still requisite) for intersubjectivity, intrinsically non-material (the space of ideas, experience, and perspective). The technology which is most absent is the most effective. Debates in the TRPG community all-too-often revolve around improving their technologies rather than how to improve human engagements with them.

In his collected essays, *The True Genius of Dave Arneson* (2017), Robert Kuntz argues that the original “genius” of *D&D*, and TRPGs, was because of their “open” style of play. Arneson’s ruleset was dynamic and constantly modified to meet his ambitions and his players’ desires. It was also incomplete: rules were dynamically constructed by need and within the context of the game’s situation. This would become a significant source of tension between Gygax and Arneson, especially as Gygax attempted to translate the concept of *D&D* into an

accessible rule system for others to understand. Kuntz argues that TRPG's move away from openness is driven by commercial concerns. As head of a new company, Gygax felt tremendous pressure to translate Arneson and his experiments into an accessible technology that could be marketed and sold rather than a distinct practice that could only be taught. It was nearly impossible to get Arneson to write down the rules that his game followed because they were so contingent on the entanglements of himself, his players, and the particular game that emerged from them.

Gygax's reaction to *Blackmoor* enabled Arneson to see the implications of his experiment. Until he met Gygax, Arneson did not have the means to explain to others how they might run a Blackmoor. His fantasy campaign, and its architecture, needed a translator. Gygax helped Arneson recognize that Blackmoor represented a potential new game genre which could remake how gamers understood the capacities for ludic simulation. It also offered a potentially lucrative commercial opportunity. Any future Gygax or Arneson creation would intrinsically include and be influenced by these entanglements: *D&D*, and the TRPG, became inevitable. The sole subjectivities of Gygax and Arneson, through the entanglements of their local gaming groups, were capable and compelling game designers. Gygax & Arneson, as entangled visionaries, were capable of creating, producing, and marketing a new game genre and ludic practice.

It is never that simple, however. It is also imperative to recognize that Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were not *only* Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. The lessons – and questions – inherent within the quantum possibilities that inspire Barad is that all things, at some level, are entangled. Even the act of observation impacts the phenomena being observed. The boundaries of subjectivity, perception, and perspective are dynamic and liminal. Rather than arguing that

Gygax & Arneson created *D&D* (and TRPGs), it would be more appropriate to claim that Gygax & Arneson were the human vehicles through which the desires, ambitions, interests and experiences of everyone and every system, institution, and context they were entangled allowed (and required) the TRPG to emerge. Like any act of creation or invention, it was an act of collaborative creation that was the consequence of thousands of years of experiments in art, simulation, and interpretation. It is also not a static moment but rather a rather compelling observation within the larger continuum of those experiments. While *D&D* inspired other TRPGs, perhaps its more important social (and artistic) inspiration was how it led to a cultural realization of the expanding potential capacities of ludic engagements through games. *D&D* also helped to author who we now observe as Gygax & Arneson in their roles as ludic pioneers. *D&D* was part of a continuum which began to free games from boards and tokens; it was an inspiration for the digital cybertexts which challenge conceptions of the distinctions between constructed algorithms and the algorithms of the material world. Gygax & Arneson's modest ambitions were to create new opportunities for amusement and entertainment; their experiments irrevocably changed both. We live within a global culture entangled with play. Any new game inevitably transforms it.

### **The Worlds of *D&D***

The wargame is the TRPG's direct mechanical antecedent. Wargames taught Gygax & Arneson how games can recreate and simulate contingent scenarios in real and imagined worlds. The next question to ask was which worlds would they want to simulate – and which worlds would audiences (both their local gaming groups and potential outside consumers) be interested in? What type of worlds would Gygax & Arneson, themselves, be interested in simulating for

players? What type of worlds did they want to create and play in? What would provide the aesthetic inspirations for their new game?

Gygax & Arneson decided to simulate the worlds that had occupied their imaginations since childhood. It would be fair to argue that *D&D* is the (ludic) heir to the fictions instrumental in the creation of Gygax & Arneson, and a consequence of their fictive imaginations intra-acting with their capacities (and interest) as game designers. Calvino claims that “each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles” (124). The worlds of *D&D* represent the books in the shelf of Gygax & Arneson’s personal, libraries; they are the literary, cinematic, and ludic canons of their own subjective constructions. Mackay argues that the TRPG “breathes the air” of Jean Baudrillard’s conception of a “semiosphere,” the environment of connected signs that we exist among. He writes that the TRPG is “inspired by the particles of popular culture, and influences, in turn, its expirations” (26). The TRPG was made possible, not as a direct consequence or evolution of wargaming or literature, but rather through the complex intra-actions of humans becoming compelled by both. The human engagements with games and fiction provided the catalyst for a fusion of both of that resulted in their irrevocable entanglement.

The next chapter of this dissertation provides an in-depth examination of the specific cinematic and literary influences on *D&D* (as a model for considering how games represent entanglements of traditional media through their cybertextual application). Gygax, who was often defined by his desire to share his ideas, designs, and interests with his broader communities, included references to the game’s inspirations within the first rulebook of *D&D* (“Men & Magic” 1974). He states that the game was designed for heroes of the type of fantastic tales made popular by pulp novelists Edgar Rice Burroughs (“John Carter of Mars” series),



Howard (Conan the Cimmerian), De Camp, Fletcher Pratt, and Leiber (Fafhrd & The Gray Mouser). In 1979, he would codify a more comprehensive list of the game's inspirations into "Appendix N", the subject of the following chapter's analysis.

## **The Fantasy Market**

Gygax & Arneson's inspirations for *D&D*'s aesthetic were not entirely personal or personally subjective, however. Gygax & Arneson were not only entangled with each other's imaginations (nor even the imaginations of the wargaming or fantasy community), but also with the demands, requirements, and opportunities afforded through the capitalist structures they were interpellated within; they needed to create a game that would *sell*. To broaden *D&D*'s initial appeal, Gygax realized it needed to capitalize on pop-cultural touchstones.

Even with the release of *Chainmail*, which allowed the use of magic and fantastic creatures to be used on imaginary battlefields, there had been complaints from traditional wargaming simulationists. Gygax & Arneson were trading in the limited community of serious wargamers for a larger market of fans of fantastic fiction. Peterson argues that *D&D* "famously resulted from the intersection of two cultures: a gaming culture of conflict simulation and a literary culture engaged with speculative and fantastic fiction" (*The Elusive Shift* 1). Initially, Gygax did not realize that their new game could expand beyond the limited overlap between wargamers and fantasy fiction fans. After *D&D*'s publication, and with its increasing sales, it became apparent that the latter market was much larger. In 1977, Gygax would argue that: "Tactical Studies Rules (now TSR Hobbies, Inc.) believes that of all forms of wargaming, fantasy will soon become the major contender for first place" (*D&D* 4). Gygax was certainly

prescient; eventually the TRPG would no longer be associated with wargaming at all, although it still maintains many elements, and references, of its ludic predecessors even today.<sup>44</sup>

Fortunately for Gygax's fledgling game company, the early 1970s featured a particularly relevant text to reference: Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy (1954-1955). Tolkien's sprawling epic was experiencing a cultural renaissance during the 1960s and 70s that brought it into mainstream consciousness. Although "Lord of the Rings" was never a favorite of Gygax, he realized that its popularity among members of *D&D*'s potential market audience made it attractive for providing references in his game that audiences would recognize and relate to. In 1985, Gygax claims that:

The seeming parallels and inspirations are actually the results of a studied effort to capitalize on the then-current craze for Tolkien's literature. Frankly, to attract those readers – and often at the urging of persons who were playing prototypical forms of *D&D* games – I used certain names and attributes in a superficial manner, merely to get their attention! (*Dragon* 13)

The main characters in Tolkien's saga were an eclectic mix of mythical races drawn from medieval European legends and fairy tales. Although those races were often quite different in other works of pulp fiction, Tolkien's codification of these fantastic races provided the basic archetypes Gygax would draw on which players could play in *D&D*. More importantly, however, it showcased the type of adventures that *D&D* was designed to provide through gameplay.

Tolkien's epic features a "fellowship" of fantasy characters, each with unique and special abilities, on a quest to save "Middle Earth," the epic fantasy's diegesis. By advancing the concepts developed in *The Siege of Bodenburg* and *Braunstein*, Gygax & Arneson designed a game that allowed players to role-play specific fantasy characters in similar narrative scenarios.

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<sup>44</sup> The fifth edition of *D&D*, released in 2014, still uses terms such as "hit points" and "armor class" directly purloined from wargames.

Tolkien's concept of a fantasy "fellowship," is a core component for *D&D* play and differs from many of the pulp fictions that Gygax lists as directly inspirational. In texts such as Howard's Conan or Burrough's John Carter tales, the main character acts alone or has temporary companions often discarded in following serials. *D&D*, however, requires group collaboration. Although it can be played alone, experiences with wargames (as well as the success of their initial game playtest) convinced Gygax & Arneson of how compelling group play was. It had also demonstrated how compelling narratives could be when they were collaboratively constructed. As Gygax notes, "Lord of the Rings" provided a ready-made literary allusion for players to conceive of how group adventuring could be realized.

While the "Lord of the Rings" epic provided a model for the narratives of *D&D*, its central conflict of a group of fantasy characters overcoming obstacles and defeating powerful villains, provided a model for how players might work together to overcome them. The concept of a "fellowship" was also analogous to the very act of playing games. In his cultural examination of the importance of play, Huizinga argues that play requires players to recognize the game as a social construction outside of normal life (his concept of a "magic circle"). He claims that play is always a "representation of something." The TRPG is simultaneously a representation, or recreation, of the worlds of fantastic fiction and a representative model for collaborative problem-solving. Gygax & Arneson's new game required players to work together: each player would be assuming the role of a Conan or John Carter. However, unlike their literary models, the players' characters would need help from other player characters to succeed and survive within the game world. Gygax argues that:

There is a message contained in the true role-playing game. It is the message of the difficulty in surviving alone, and the folly of trying to profit from the loss of others. The inability of any lone individual to successfully cope with every challenge is evident in RPGs and reflects life...the role-playing game brings the heroic into better perspective by

demonstrating a course of progress which requires the association and cooperation of like-minded individuals. (*Master of the Game* 150)

In addition to requiring players to solve problems (through the creation of shared solutions), the TRPG is also a model for collaborative narrative construction. In games such as *D&D*, players are not only battling imaginary villains and monsters, but also collaborating in the shared creation (or hallucination) of an imaginary world. Michael Tresca claims that the “fellowship” of the TRPG was integral to its success because it allows “characters of diverse backgrounds come together to achieve a common goal, just as a variety of players gather together to play the game” (5). The game requires a “fellowship” to construct a magic circle and define its boundaries, to construct a discourse for navigating it, and finally for collaboratively constructing a world inside this circle. TRPGs require players to collaborate rather than compete. Wargames pit players against each other, like chess opponents waging a battle of wits on a fixed, defined board-as-battlefield. The TRPG separates itself from the individualism (and the player-oppositional violence) of wargames through a focus on constructive and ludic cooperation.

One of the elements that made collaborative construction necessary in *D&D* was that Gygax & Arneson provided rules so players could create their own unique protagonists (or characters). Wargames provided specific military units for players to control. *Braunstein* and *The Siege of Bodenburg* offered a more diverse cast of characters but they were still defined by the limited cast provided by game rules. In *D&D*, players create their own characters. The game provided basic rules for simulating a fantasy avatar’s characteristics and capacities (dice randomly determine a character’s strength, players choose a “class” to define their character’s profession and abilities, etc.). This fantasy avatar acts as the player’s representative within the game’s world. The players “role-play” these “player characters” (PC), as they see fit, as protagonists within the fictional world that the referee communicates to them during the game.

Players can build a backstory, or history, for their character and even determine their own PC's motivations. However, in early TRPGs, this was not nearly as developed, nor explored, as they are in modern TRPGs. Early TRPG players were still more familiar with the concepts of wargaming, and its emphasis on strategy and victory, rather than the enjoyment of narrative construction; initial character builds from the 70s were very much based on literary (or mythical) archetypal models and primarily designed to be able to conquer their DM's deathtrap dungeons rather than as compelling characters with complex motivations, backstories, and ambitions. The concept of role-playing, and an appreciation for its autotelic enjoyment, would emerge from players experimenting with the capacities embedded in the game. The consequences of how TRPG mechanics would intra-act with players' ludic ambitions would take time. It would also irrevocably change our conception of the past: the history of TRPG (and wargames, and games) is less an evolution of technological progress and more a series of "probes" into the potentialities of the simulation of worlds, and through the creation of PCs, *ourselves*.

The simulation of the world for a TRPG campaign would be the domain of the referee or dungeon master (DM).<sup>45</sup> The referee required in wargames, such as *Little Wars* and *Strategos*, served to provide neutral adjudication for rules conflicts or to determine the results of actions that the rules did not cover. The referee in *D&D* was similarly neutral but was now responsible for communicating orally an entire simulated world to players. The villains of the game's scenarios would need to be conceived of and role-played by the referee. Appelcline notes that TRPG play in the 1970s was often "competitive" between players and the referee. Again,

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<sup>45</sup> The first edition of *D&D*, commonly known as Original *D&D*, would use the term referee. However, by 1977 (when an introductory version of the game was released), *D&D* referees became known as "Dungeon Masters." Other TRPGs usually use a variation on the term, with game master being a popular variant that avoids too close an association with *D&D*.

wargaming strategies were still the lens through which players were perceiving this new style of gameplay. Players were simply shifting the role of their opponent from another player to the referee and many early TRPG referees willingly accepted that role. Appelcline writes that some of the early published adventures for *D&D* “were about players maybe succeeding and or maybe failing and doing so with the deck stacked heavily against them” (347).<sup>46</sup> Although this style of referee still exists, the modern referee (DM) is viewed as an arbiter of a successful narrative rather than as ludic antagonist. The original referees had more in common with wargaming opponents than the contemporary dungeon master.

In the 1970s, the TRPG player and designer were being created through the relationships, between game, player, and referee, that the new TRPG genre demonstrated could be possible through a game. Gygax & Arneson, themselves, were creating new selves as TRPG designers. *D&D*'s original subtitle was “Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures.” Appelcline writes that “a modern roleplayer [2014] might actually classify that original rule set as a wargame rather than an RPG” (347). However, the first edition of *D&D*, even with its wargaming lexicon and assumptions based on the familiarities and experiences of its players and designers, was not a wargame. It offered potentialities for new modes of engagement that (the traditional play of) wargames did not offer. Those relationships would be fully explored over the following decades and begin the process of

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<sup>46</sup> The most infamous example of this is an adventure, which TSR would call a “module,” that Gygax designed and wrote in 1975: “Tomb of Horrors.” Gygax had grown so tired of players boasting about the power of their characters to him that he designed the adventure as a deadly gauntlet which is almost impossible to complete for all but the most creative, and lucky, players. The “Tomb” would be featured in Ernest Cline’s novel *Ready Player One* (2011), recreated within the virtual reality world that is the book’s main setting. Cline’s novel is an indulgent revelry of idiocultural references from the gaming and “nerd” communities: early *D&D*, and the early works of *D&D*'s creators, are now firmly entrenched mythic legends, and cultural touchstones, within that idioculture.

changing our interpretation of what games are, and what they can do, that occupies much of our contemporary scholarship, imagination, and play.

The wargaming subculture exerted the greatest influence on the creation of the TRPG. Gygax & Arneson never considered themselves as authors, nor artists, when designing their new game.<sup>47</sup> They thought of themselves as game designers. Gygax was dogmatic in separating TRPGs from art (and the pretensions of its analysis) proclaiming that “One might play a game artfully, but that makes neither the game nor its play art.” However, their new game paralleled similar experiments in the literary world of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gygax & Arneson were entangled within a post-modern media environment growing increasingly receptive to non-traditional modes of engagements with traditional media. In the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction*, Paula Geyh, Fred Leebron, and Andrew Levy claim that “postmodern American fiction is best exemplified by the growth of new genres that reflect social changes, forms of publication that absorb technological developments, and an unprecedented relationship between literature and popular culture” (XI). While postmodern writers, such as Thomas Pynchon and Calvino were deconstructing the form of the *literary* novel itself in the 1960s and 70s, Gygax & Arneson were merging the experience of the *pulp* novel with the wargame.

Postmodernism was challenging structuralist criticism and traditional literary canons that Gygax & Arneson never even considered. It could be argued that *D&D* is a better representation of postmodernism because its antagonism with preconceptions of artistic and literary value are based on an absolute apathy towards them.<sup>48</sup> In the 60s and 70s, games were not considered, nor

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<sup>47</sup> Although Gygax would eventually pen a series of fantasy novels, the Gord the Rogue series (1985-88), that take place within the world, “Greyhawk,” of his personal *D&D* campaign.

<sup>48</sup> Within traditional critical taxonomies of where specific literary works belong within the legacy of intersubjective mediations, the TRPG can certainly be viewed as the latest example of postmodernism; however, this is only one observation among many. Taxonomies intrinsically limit the universe to make it accessible. I concur with the

examined, as art forms (but as a trivial, sociocultural practice); one could argue that their emergence as a potential new art-form and genre was made possible by their early lack of pretension or scholarly consideration. Mackay makes an argument in *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (2001) that unlike traditional postmodern (literary) texts that “revel in structural innovation,” the TRPG’s pulp inspirations are based on works unafraid to “create vast other worlds” that allow readers to explore new possibilities in ontology and not simply form (147). Like postmodern texts, the TRPG was intrinsically linked with popular culture. However, its lack of artistic ambition allowed it to avoid the critical backlash against postmodernism that labeled these experimental texts as hopelessly self-referential. The TRPG was created specifically for a popular audience (and a specific idioculture) and made no apologies for that audience, nor its populist tastes. Gygax & Arneson’s new game had no transcendent artistic or intellectual goal: the extent of its ambition was the crafting of entertaining, escapist, and diversionary experiences.<sup>49</sup>

In 1974, *Dungeons & Dragons* was published by Tactical Studies Rules. Gygax had attempted to sell the game to major publishers, including Avalon Hill, but found little interest.

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postmodern perspective that complicates notions of universal “truth,” or hierarchical determinism based on concepts of reason and progress; I also argue that even this complication can be a limiting mechanism.

If we view *D&D*, or TRPG texts, within a specific genre, or through the lens of only one form of practice, we limit its possibilities; we also ignore the inevitable influence of the observer on limiting the practice into one accessible possibility. If we say the TRPG text is only postmodern, we do not allow it to also emerge as a potential engagement with modernism (it certainly shares a celebration of modernism’s promotion of technical agency) or even traditional mythology (it directly emerges from the most ancient of our heroic legends). TRPG scholarship should not be afraid to examine the text’s relationship through the lens of specific theories as long as it acknowledges how the TRPG text explicitly illustrates how all theories are dependent on the context and capacity of the observer and that all observations transform (and construct) what is observed. In this chapter, I make a brief postmodern observation of the TRPG but acknowledge this as one possibility among many.

<sup>49</sup> There are, however, many modern TRPGs that do have artistic aspirations. *Bestial Acts* (1993), an RPG designed by Greg Costikyan, is “based on the Dramatic Theories & Aesthetic of Bertolt Brecht” and designed as “a self-conscious attempt to take the paradigm of the roleplaying game and apply it to artistic effect.”



Wargaming companies did not understand the game and, unlike Gygax, were not able to envision a potential market for it. Gygax had formed Tactical Studies Rules in 1973 with a close, personal friend Don Kaye (who would pass away a year later) and an acquaintance, Brian Blume, who provided the necessary funding. The company had been set up specifically to publish *D&D*. It was published in a box set of three small booklets (“Men & Magic,” “Monsters & Treasure,” and “The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures”). Although initial sales were unimpressive (only 1,000 copies sold in 1974), once gamers became aware of this new genre through its early advocates who claimed it offered entirely new experiences, sales would skyrocket. 2,000 copies were sold the following year (Appelcline). In an article titled, “Swords & Sorcery is a Game Too!” of the February 1976 issue of the *Science Fiction & Fantasy Journal*, Gygax himself boasted about what his new game offered:

Many fantasy novels and stories relate epic battles and give detailed histories of the mythical world upon which action takes place. This sort of fare is meat and drink to the devotee of wargaming, but until about two years ago there wasn't much he could do to put this imaginative action and creation into his hobby. Similarly, the swords & sorcery buff was unable to do much more than read. This changed with the advent of *Dungeons & Dragons*. (A-7)

It is impossible to consider *D&D* – especially in the realm of relationships, intra-actions, and entanglements – without considering the implications of its name. The title comes from Gygax, or rather his family, “though the attribution changed in the telling: sometimes he bestowed it to his first wife, Mary, other times to his daughter Cindy” (Peterson, *Playing at the World* 75)<sup>50</sup>. Peterson notes that its alliteration is evocative of 1970s wargaming culture: one of Gygax’s wargaming clubs was The Castle & Crusade Society, *Cavaliers & Roundheads* was a

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<sup>50</sup> Gygax is not one person but rather the emergence of all entangled with his subjectivity: there is no *D&D* without his relationships with his family: not only did they supply the name, his young children play tested early prototypes of the game. *D&D* was the creation not of two men, but all of the subjectivities (family, friends, community, media) with which they were entangled.

British Civil War game he had designed (1973), *Strategy & Tactics* was a popular gaming zine. The name also conjures up a relationship between villains and obstacles (the dragons) and the space where the game will be played (the dungeon) although both serve as metaphor. Not all the villains in *D&D* are dragons, and not all of the spaces that are explored are dungeons; both, however, serve as functional, aesthetic archetypes. Nearly all the villains would be monstrous (like dragons), and the game's adventures would feature a journey into some dark, dangerous corner of the game world (like a dungeon). The titles also evoke the concept that the game offers a particular *space* to explore. Although the game is played within the imagination, players explore new, imaginary vistas within it.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet Murray argues that one of the qualities that makes computer games unique is their capacity for providing three-dimensional spaces to play in. *D&D* in 1974 provided the same capacity. The argument could be made that wargames also provide spaces to explore. Murray's point is compelling for a consideration of how digital spaces are constructed; however, any medium requires the space to be re-constructed subjectively through the audience's (player) interpretation. The technology does not create the space for the player, their reinterpretation of it does. I would argue that the computer game's visual and aural spatial representations are less efficient than the TRPG's discursive, spatial representation of places.<sup>51</sup> The TRPG space (or dungeon) is communicated through oral, textual communication as part of a collaborative discourse: the player can not only ask questions about the space they have

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<sup>51</sup> In Jason Scott's documentary, *Get Lamp* (2010), game designer Richard Bartle makes a similar argument about early computer text adventures. Bartle claims that text is a more effective mode of intersubjectivity because it "talks straight to that imagination," rather than needing to be interpreted through eyes and ears. The TRPG, similarly, is constructed not by modeling a physical world, but by modeling the experience of it.

the responsibility to actively *construct* and *change* them.<sup>52</sup> Murray is correct about the computer game, although it is not unique to digital texts. Murray's perspective, and argument for the capacity of spatial exploration as rhetorical experience, allows us to recognize the importance of this cybertextual quality in previous, analog texts such as the TRPG. Wargames usually featured two opposing sides as the main protagonists. *Dungeons & Dragons*, through the contextualization of its name, argues that the world of the game is as important as the conflicts, relationships, and populations that animate it. It would not take long for Gygax, TSR, and other game designers to recognize that the nascent TRPG genre offered a potentially lucrative market for new games. TSR created new TRPGs based on other fictional genres including: *Boot Hill* in 1975, based on American western mythology; *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976), based on the science fiction/fantasy genre; and, *Top Secret* (1980), based on the spy thriller genre. Competitors began to release their own games: Flying Buffalo released St. Andre's *Tunnels & Trolls* in 1975, another fantasy-inspired game meant to compete with *D&D*. Game Designer's Workshop released Miller's *Traveller* in 1977, a science fiction TRPG that became the most popular TRPG within the genre. Petersen's *Call of Cthulhu* followed in 1981, one of the first horror TRPGs, that offered players an opportunity to explore Lovecraft's mythos of the weird and uncanny. Amateur TRPG designers advertised their own creations within the community's 'zines and newsletters, such as TSR's own *The Dragon* (1976-2013), that sprang up to connect the new players of the growing tabletop role-playing hobby. The texts I will examine in this dissertation emerge from this early market and the early era of the TRPG from 1974-1981. 1974 is when the TRPG emerged and 1981 is when the personal computer revolution, and its successive cybertexts, begin to alter the course of the TRPG.

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<sup>52</sup> Certain quantum interpretations, such as the Bohrs interpretation favored by Barad and myself, suggest that the material universe is similarly malleable.

## Future History

Historical scholarship of *D&D* and the TRPG situates the game as an evolution of wargaming, influenced by or through an intersection with literary works. The brief history of the TRPG above also follows some of the problematic assumptions of linear time (problematic assumptions placed on us by the limitations of our biological capacity for comprehensive observations of infinite possibilities). The emergence of new media, or new genres, is not simply the inevitable, progressive evolution of superior technologies. This assumption would imply that the TRPG is a superior medium than the book or wargame that preceded it. However, the changes in media are not a progression but rather the consequence of new social interactions, interest, and engagements with our media. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that new media “try to refashion the older medium or media entirely, while still marking the presence of the older media...” (46) while Marshall McLuhan prophetically claims that “We impose the form of the old on the content of the new. The malady lingers on” (*Medium is the Massage* 86). Every medium exists within a state of entanglement with one another – as long as each medium finds an audience: human subjectivity is ultimately the necessary catalyst for the fusion of each entanglement. Each new medium is also not distinctly situated in time. As we learn new modes of engagement, previous texts are constantly re-interpreted and transformed. While McLuhan posits a move toward recognizing how “all media work us over completely,” I counter by arguing that we also work *all media* over completely (26).

Wells and Totten established their own agency, through play, within the staid, textual interpretations of historical conflicts (and history itself). Gygax & Arneson established their own

agency, through play, within the worlds of the popular fictions that occupied their imaginations and influenced their perspectives. The media that inspired, and are forever entangled with, the TRPG is legion: from historical texts, fantastic texts, wargames, ‘zines, to even the correspondences shared between players and designers. It is as impossible to define which mediums are most responsible for the TRPG as it is to identify the mediums which most influence an isolated subjectivity. Zielinski argues that the history of media is simply a series of experiments to “connect what is separated” (7). The TRPG attempts to connect the disparate imaginations, experiences, and ambitions of authors, readers, and players. Media is not simply a bridge, however. Just as no (wargaming) plan survives contact with the enemy, no medium survives engagements with an audience unchanged. Individual texts may be incapable of agency, but their manifestation as a means for rhetorical expression, affective engagement, and intersubjectivity are all irrevocably changed once audiences explore, experiment, and *play* with them. Media train and expose audiences into new forms of engagements; those engagements spawn new mediums, genres, and texts. We become entangled with the media that “work us over completely,” in turn, media become more than semiotic expression, or simply “extensions of man,” but the expression of a desire to engage with the subjectivities, histories, and realities of the world around us. The TRPG was not invented, nor created, nor evolved from previous media. It emerged from a series of entangled media engagements that invited new explorations. That emergence always requires human subjectivity, ingenuity, and affective capacity; in this case, Gyax & Arneson, and the relationships which created them, made the emergence of the TRPG possible (and inevitable).

The history of the TRPG is not a linear path, nor can it be traced directly from a perfectly evolving set of technologies. It is also not a perfectly situated and distinct text. The TRPG is the

textual manifestation of a new philosophy for media engagements based on play. It is part of a continuum of new forms of play that have convinced us of the capacity of play as rhetoric and art. Social theorists such as Sally Falk Moore have challenged structuralist concepts about the formation of social structures (and their media) by identifying their “theoretically absolute indeterminacy” (48-49). The indeterminacy of life makes it impossible to predict where our experiments with media will lead us. I argue, however, that it is equally impossible that until we reach a capacity for genuine intersubjectivity and expression that establishes an unmitigated agency in (real) worlds as satisfactory as our simulated ones, the experiment will continue.

The TRPG is neither the alpha nor omega of games, play, books, media, or history. It represents the emergence of one possible mode of engagement for exploring potential experiences within all of them. It is not even necessarily new, though the emergence of its analysis and observation are welcome and novel. We can only hope that our observations do not collapse too many possibilities for this compelling form of ludic engagement. The past, future, and present of TRPG play has always invited them.

### Chapter Three: The Dungeon Masters Guide (*The Literary Inspirations for the TRPG*)

“Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.” – Italo Calvino

“I explore the brains of men which are thousands of worlds.” – Dr. Rene de Keradel in *Creep, Shadow!* by A. Merritt

On page 224 of the 1979 *Dungeon Masters Guide* rule book for *Dungeons & Dragons*, Gygax included a list of literary texts he considered “Inspirational and Educational” for his game. This list appears under the heading “Appendix N” and appears between a list of monsters which can be summoned by magic spells (Appendix M) and another listing the weight encumbrances for standard items carried by player characters (Appendix O). Gygax included Appendix N to showcase the literary fictions that had a direct influence on his new game.

It was not the first time that Gygax alluded to the pulp narratives that inspired *D&D*'s aesthetic and design; in the original 1977 set of *D&D* rulebooks, Gygax stated that the game would be appreciated by wargamers who were fans of Burroughs' Martian adventures, Howards Conan the Cimmerian saga, De Camp & Fletcher Pratt's fantastic fiction, and Leiber's “Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser tales. In 1976, he would pen a column about *D&D* for the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Journal* where he continued to list influential authors while promoting the play of his new game as a novel way to engage with their mythologies (7-8). Gygax was fond of listing, and giving his opinions on, the writers that captivated his imagination to build bridges between the wargaming and genre fiction fandom communities.<sup>53</sup> It would also not be the last time that *D&D*

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<sup>53</sup> *Dungeons & Dragons* was designed by Gygax and Arneson (and their relationship was essential for its emergence). However, it was Gygax who was the entrepreneurial spirit that guided *D&D* into commercial markets based on his own enthusiasm for its unique style of play as well as his capitalist motivation to sell it. While Arneson's contributions towards the design of *D&D*'s rules are at least the equal of Gygax's contributions, writing the rules and selling the game became the responsibility of Gygax. Gygax would hire Arneson as a designer for the

included a list of texts which inspired the current version of the game. The fifth edition *D&D Player's Handbook* includes an "Appendix E," with 57 authors on the list (30 more than Gygax's original compilation).<sup>54</sup>

However, it is 1979's "Appendix N" that has become something of a sacred text within the role-playing game subculture. It has become the ludic Rosetta Stone through which many TRPG enthusiasts and historians trace the aesthetic, thematic, and historical origins of the TRPG genre. Michelle Nephew claims that:

RPGs literally translate literature into the medium of a game, and in modifying the function of the author from a single, autonomous creative entity to an empowered, interactive storytelling among groups of participants, roleplaying games complicate previous distinctions between author and audience in a way inconceivable during the lifetimes of many writers whose works inspire the games. (1-2)

Appendix N provides a legend for examining that translation. TRPG historians employ Appendix N as a tool for deconstructing motivations behind the settings, mechanics, and design of the game. Role-playing gamers, especially those who belong to the OSR movement (a sub-culture even within the TRPG community) dedicated to replicating earlier forms of TRPG play and design, refer to Appendix N as a legend for deciphering the style of game that its creator(s) intended. James Maliszewski, who runs the blog "Grogardian," a blog dedicated to the OSR

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company he created to publish *D&D*, but their relationship, and Arneson's employment would not last long. And while Gygax loved to share the literary inspiration and influences of *D&D*, Arneson was less prosaic.

Arneson attributed his inspiration from watching five "monster movies" in a row on television while reading an unidentified Conan novel. He states that "I cannot recall which one but I always thought they were much the same..." (Varney 120). While Gygax's pretensions to the literary origins for his game are compelling, there is also something refreshing in Arneson's attributions to the game's resolutely pop-cultural origins – and its manifestation of the popular imagination rather than as an ambitious, artistic endeavor. Arneson was no longer working on *D&D* when the 1979 *Dungeon Masters Guide* was released and had no input on its new rules (although he would sue TSR to continue receiving royalties based on his designs for the original edition). For (much) more, see Peterson's *Game Wizards* (2021) and Ben Riggs' *Slaying the Dragon* (2022).

<sup>54</sup> There was no explicit list of literary influences for *D&D*'s second, third, and fourth editions although there are allusions throughout the rules of each to mythology and folklore.



philosophy, claims that “the phrase ‘Appendix N’ has now become a widely used shorthand for the literary origins of RPGs” (Dec 2011). For many fans and players of the game, Appendix N serves as notes left behind from the god who breathed life into the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe. The rules for *D&D* were designed to help the game’s “dungeon masters” create fantastic settings of their own imagination and invention; however, the rules proceed from an assumption that those worlds would be based on fantastic medieval worlds which bore resemblances to the universes created by the authors, and their works, catalogued within Appendix N.

There are reasons why Appendix N has become sacrosanct. The first is that the 1979 *Dungeon Masters Guide* was one of three rulebooks that were most people’s introduction to *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>55</sup> The original 1977 release of *D&D* was intended for wargaming enthusiasts; its rules were not particularly accessible to those not already familiar with that community’s lexicons, customs, and capacity. However, the 1979 *Dungeon Masters Guide* arrived as *D&D* was emerging into the larger consciousness and market of mainstream game players (and readers). History is a record of entanglements; entanglements require relationships. Where the pamphlets of *OD&D* reached only a several thousand wargamers, the “Advanced” *D&D* rules books, which include the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, would sell millions of copies. Those rulebooks catalyzed new relationships with Gygax & Arneson’s game and the literary

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<sup>55</sup> 1977’s *Monster Manual* and 1978’s *Players Handbook* are the other three rulebooks. These three books are known as the “first edition” of *D&D*. They were published as hardcover books. Each book consists of over 100 pages and as a set contain all the rules necessary to play the game. The original version of *D&D* (commonly referred to as “*OD&D*”) required rules, and concepts, from previously published wargames in order to play. The 1977-79 rulebooks were published under the title of “*Advanced*” *Dungeons & Dragons*; they would also simultaneously publish a “basic” version of *D&D* for newer players. Publishing two versions of the same game was a confusing and odd choice for TSR. Players simply used and mixed the rule books that best fit the needs of their game. The concept of “*Advanced*” *D&D* was dropped in 2000 for the game’s unified third edition.

authors (and their works) who inspired it. Appendix N occupies a place within the subcultural pantheon simply because of its popular accessibility – and the nostalgia that early gamers hold for it.

The second reason that Appendix N is so revered is that the list of texts is curated by one of the games' primary architects. It bears the mark of authority. In *OD&D*, Gygax's mention of literary influences and inspirations is only one sentence and appears within the foreword of the first rulebook ("Men & Magic"). It is meant to provide a brief shorthand for the experiences *D&D's* designers hoped the game would model. In the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide*, Appendix N is part of the actual rules. The list of works included in Appendix N is preceded by a paragraph to contextualize its inclusion within them and their importance to *Gary Gygax*. Appendix N moves *Dungeons & Dragons* from the province of a simple set of game rules towards embodying a personal subjectivity (and its dreams). In the foreword to Appendix N, Gygax attributes his love of fantasy literature, and the "inspiration for all of my fantasy" work, to his father (224).<sup>56</sup> Appendix N contextualizes the rules for *D&D*, and the foundations for the game's ambitions, as intimate and personal.

For many role-playing gamers, Appendix N provides a shared subcultural touchstone. The creators of *D&D* were compelled and enchanted by the same genres, modes, and forms of fiction as they were. Appendix N provided an opportunity for members within the gaming community to identify and connect with one another through their shared personal pop-cultural canons. However, there were many wargamers whose first exposure to these forms of fantasy

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<sup>56</sup> This type of personal introduction is unusual for a modern tabletop game. Neither *Clue*, *Monopoly*, nor many contemporary wargames feature exposition about their inspirations. However, it is not without precedent: in the rules for *Little Wars*, H.G. Wells intimately described his own experience role-playing generals in his wargame campaigns (IV). The performance of role-playing elicits a desire to share the intimacy of the experience with an audience.

fiction came through Appendix N or through the game that its texts inspired. Appendix N introduced many *D&D* enthusiasts to a literary genre that, except for Tolkien, existed outside of mainstream fiction.

Appendix N was not initially considered a sacred list on the release of the 1979 *Dungeon Masters Guide*. The list has become revered to role-playing gamers as the game's popular and cultural influence have become ubiquitous in modern society. Appendix N has become revered for what it represents and how it provides insight into the game's origins. In 1979, *D&D* was a new game, but it was still considered simply as *a game*. The cultural implications of tabletop role-playing (and its modern digital counterparts) would only become evident – and more compelling – as its repercussions were felt not only within gaming, but in literature, culture, and the popular imagination. It also illustrated possible new ambitions for ludic experimentation. In 1979, Appendix N was simply a list of influential fantasy fiction texts for the curious. Appendix N became venerated within the gaming and fantasy fandom subcultures as the practice of tabletop role-playing became a culturally transformative movement.

### **Appendix N as Legend**

The rules for *D&D* emerged from a multitude of personal, cultural, and communal relationships: between wargamers & readers, between books & dice, between Gygax & Arneson, and between the authors of fantastic fiction & their readers. For many modern gamers and historians, Appendix N symbolizes a key for recognizing individual constituents within those relationships. Because tabletop role-playing is a modern invention, there are also many gamers who have experienced the initial creation of *D&D* through its crucial, and enduring, influence on modern culture. Appendix N provides a nostalgic reflection of the early days of role-playing and

as a symbol of a lost mode of popular fiction entangled within our modern mythologies. As gaming has transformed modern culture so has modern culture transformed the gaming subculture; Appendix N represents a fond remembrance of gaming past. Appendix N represents, for many gamers, a codex of forgotten wisdom, a grimoire of ancient magic, an eldritch tome of lore from a lost age. However, its legacy continues to impact all levels – and capacities – of our modern games and mythologies.

The texts included in Gygax’s list and their influence on *D&D* and fantasy role-playing have become the subject of much discussion and debate within the modern TRPG community. The OSR subculture is dedicated to studying and replicating the original role-playing methods and designs of the 1970s. This subculture continues to debate the impact that each text listed within Appendix N had on Gygax and *D&D*. Appendix N has been the direct focus of two books, *Appendix N: The Literary History of Dungeons & Dragons* (2017) by Jeffro Johnson<sup>57</sup>, who dissects each text through a conservative political lens and the anthology *Appendix N: The Eldritch Roots of Dungeons & Dragons* (2021), edited by Peter Bebergal, that collects stories directly listed in “Appendix N” – and other stories that Bebergal believe are equally representative of early *D&D* aesthetics. There are also several modern role-playing games dedicated to recapturing the aesthetics and affective themes of Appendix N texts such as *Adventurer, Conqueror, King* (designed by Alexander Macris with Tavis Allison and Greg Tito

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<sup>57</sup> Even within the OSR community, there are even smaller subcultures with different ideological and political perspectives on tabletop role-playing – and its inspirations. Johnson’s book is published by Castalia House, a reactionary publishing house with alt-right connections. He argues that the types of fiction found in Appendix N, which represent an early literary and cultural period, are far superior to “woke” modern works within the fantasy and science fiction genres. It is not surprising that a movement dedicated to an earlier form of role-playing would be attractive for reactionary politics; the conversations within the community, and the ideological lines drawn with it, very much reflect the chaotic political and social discourses outside of it.

in 2014), *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (James Edward Raggi IV 2018), and *Mörk Borg* (Pelle Nilsson and Johan Nohr 2020).

However, none of these games are as directly inspired by Appendix N texts as John Goodman's *Dungeon Crawl Classics (DCC)* (2012). *DCC*'s core rulebook lists eight "qualifications" that potential players must meet to play the game.<sup>58</sup> The fifth requirement admonishes potential players that they "apprehend the fantasy pandect recorded in Appendix N with reverence and delight, acknowledging its place in creating this hobby" (10). Goodman even includes his own Appendix N in the *DCC* rulebook, which replicates Gygax's list verbatim but is accompanied by a significantly longer introduction than the original. This introduction serves as an inspirational eulogy to the canon which inspired both designers. Goodman writes:

The most powerful trait of Appendix N, insofar as influencing fantasy adventuring, is what I call 'pre-genre' storytelling.' In the current era, all gamers, and many laymen, have preconceptions of fantasy archetypes: one knows what an elf is like, and what a dwarf is like, and what powers a dragon or vampire should have. Most of the authors in Appendix N, however, were writing before 'fantasy' was an acknowledged literary category. The conception of an 'elf' as expressed in Tolkien is now 'common knowledge,' but the elves described by Lord Dunsany and Poul Anderson were completely different creatures. The same is true of dozens of other fantasy conceits. When you read Appendix N, fantasy once again becomes fantasy; the concepts escape modern classifications. (442)

Although Goodman may be using hyperbole in his tribute to Gygax's initial list, he demonstrates the high esteem that Appendix N enjoys within the TRPG game community. It is unlikely Gygax ever intended that scholars, or even future game designers, would spend so much time analyzing (and celebrating) what he thought of as an excellent summertime reading list.

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<sup>58</sup> If *DCC* players do not meet these qualifications, they are warned to "replace this book upon the shelf and flee with great celerity, for a bane befalls the heretical beholder of that which lies herein" (10). Although *DCC*'s qualifications are tongue-in-cheek, the concept of TRPG rulebooks as filled with arcane energy (and potential curses) reinforces the reverence many role-playing gamers have for them. During the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, reactionary parents and Christian groups claimed that the *D&D* rulebooks were embedded with demonic powers; in 2012, Goodman is concurring with that perspective (albeit with tongue firmly planted-in-cheek) and arguing that rather than burning RPG rulebooks, it might be better to appease the diabolic powers captured within them.

*Dungeons & Dragons*, whose very title implies an entanglement between a place and its population, emerges from the entanglement of Gygax with his canon of personal fictions. Appendix N is a personal, subjective, and fascinating list of the genre fiction that not only inspired a game, but inevitably influenced Gygax's own existential perspective. These fictions are entangled with Gygax as reader, player, designer, and human subjectivity. The popularity of his game, and the impact it has on the popular imagination necessitates its consideration as a primary source for the modern imagination – within our contemporary games and beyond them. Appendix N has become not just a cultural touchstone with TRPG fandom but has become one of the textual canons that provide a foundation for modern fantasy. Appendix N ensures that the mythologies which occupy it continue to shape the contours of our popular imagination. It reminds us of our eternal entanglements with these dreams of the impossible.

The list includes 28 authors of fantastic fiction, 13 series or sagas (such as Tolkien's "Rings trilogy" and Roger Zelazny's "The Chronicles of Amber" series), and 22 specific stories. 25 of the 28 authors in the list are male. Leigh Brackett (1915-1978), Andre Norton (1912-2005), and Margaret St. Clair (1911-1995) are the three women featured in Appendix N. Both Norton and St. Clair wrote under pen names to avoid sexist prejudices: Norton was born Alice Mary Norton (but changed her name in 1934), St. Clair also wrote as "Idris Seabright" and "Wilton Hazzard." All but two of the authors in Appendix N were American; Tolkien and Lord Dunsany were British. Every author on the list of Appendix N is white. Many of the authors listed in Appendix N are (sadly) obscure authors whose fame lasted only as long as the serialized pulp fiction magazines which published their prodigious work. Pulp authors such as A. Merritt, Fredric Brown, and Stanley Weinbaum have found their work languish because of the ephemerality of the cheap wood pulp their uncanny tales were published on (and the lack of

scholarly and critical interest in their work). Their inclusion in Appendix N ensures their legacy, if not as literary icons, then as the creators of multiplicitous, alternative worlds that compel and reward ludic exploration. However, there are authors who have received scholarly attention, critical acclaim, and whose works continue to be regularly published such as Tolkien, Lovecraft, Vance, and Michael Moorcock.

None of the authors in the list are still alive although Vance and Andrew Offutt both lived until 2013. The curator of Appendix N, Gygas passed away in 2008. Dunsany and Burroughs were both born in the late 1800s, although almost all the Appendix N writers did most of their work early in the twentieth century within the medium of cheap pulp fiction and serialized paperbacks popularized in the 1920s. The oldest specific story that Gygas lists would be *At the Earth's Core*, published in 1914, from Burroughs' "Pellucidar" stories. The most recently published works, when Gygas published his list in 1979, would have been *Swords Against Darkness III*, a collection of short stories edited by Andrew J. Offut, or *The Courts of Chaos*, the final novel in Zelazny's "The Chronicles of Amber" series. Both were published in 1978.

Many Appendix N stories and novellas were initially featured within the pages of pulp fiction magazines including: *Argosy* (1882-1978), *Weird Tales* (1923-1954), *Wonder Stories* (1929-1955), *Astounding Stories* (1930-), *Amazing Stories* (1936-), *Planet Stories* (1939-1955), *Startling Stories* (1939-1955), *Strange Stories* (1939-1941), *Unknown* (1939-1943), *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (1949-), *Galaxy Science Fiction* (1950-1980), *Science Fantasy* (1950-1967), and *Fantastic* (1952-1980). These pulp magazines explicitly served popular appetites for fantastic and lurid tales.

## Appendix N Genres

The majority of works in Appendix N are considered within traditional literary criticism as a form of “paraliterature”: art created and intended for commercial consumption as disposable entertainment. The concept of paraliterature is a modern construct that rose to prominence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to offer a critical taxonomy for separating texts intended for mass entertainment from literary works intended for the elevation of erudite audiences. Critics such as Samuel R. Delany have employed the term paraliterature to defend genres, such as fantasy and science fiction (where the texts constituting Appendix N are usually placed), as intrinsically valuable. Delany argues that paraliterature, through its implicit transgression of engaging the lurid fantasies (and common passions) of the public, merits scholarship and criticism. Delany argues that literary *art* and paraliterary *craft* are not antagonists, but complementary. Other critics, especially writers within the fields of “paraliterature” (as Delany, a Hugo and Nebula-winning author, is often identified as) have balked at the term.<sup>59</sup> Science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin rejects the term “paraliterature” as a condescending act of “division” that separates literary audiences by valorizing particular subjective engagements with literature (Freedman 110). I concur with Le Guin and have advanced a similar argument: “The art of our ‘popular’ culture

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<sup>59</sup> Delany is not included in Gygas’s Appendix N. However, he is included in the “Inspirational Source Material” list (under the heading of “Some additional authors of fantasy fiction”) in the 1981 *Dungeons & Dragons* “Basic Rulebook.” The 1981 *D&D* Basic rulebook was edited by Tom Moldvay and provided a parallel, simple, and more accessible set of the *D&D* rules intended to introduce new players to the concept of tabletop role-playing.

Moldvay’s list includes authors not listed in Gygas’s and includes two works of non-fiction (such as Jay Williams’ 1966 *Life in the Middle Ages* and Borges’ 1957 *The Book of Imaginary Beings*). While Appendix N has become so important to TRPG culture, Moldvay’s list has received little attention. This makes sense because Gygas helped create a new game genre and started the company to publish it, while Moldvay was simply an editor at TSR. Moldvay’s list provides a contemporary comparison to Gygas’s list: what themes and aesthetics were unique to each author and designer’s list? What does each list say about what texts were compelling for their translation of role-playing rules (and the worlds of fantastic fiction)? What does each list communicate about the subjectivity of imagining alternative possibilities and fantastic worlds – even when they are created in collaboration through play?



merely represents art which endures greater limitations than the elitist art of a privileged culture who can afford to ignore them” (“Bored with the Canon” 7).

Popular cultural texts often adhere to a wider set of limitations on their creation. These limitations include capital concerns, creative restrictions (from publishers or studios), the creative capacity and talents of its creators, and the interpretative capacity of its mass audience. These limitations are not necessarily restrictive; as Delany argues, craft and art are not enemies. Both are inevitably entangled: art only exists as well as it is communicated, an effective intersubjective text is only as compelling as its affective accessibility. The aesthetic quality of a text and its cultural value are calculations, however, that should not be based on the context, either a paucity or surfeit of creative limitations, of its construction but rather the form and intimacy of the dialogs (and relationships) it develops with audiences.

The imposition of a paraliterature/literature separation is a modern-day construction unsupported by the historical legacy of literature and media. Fantasy authors Lin Carter, Moorcock, Peter S. Beagle, and Le Guin make similar claims. Carter, whose “World’s End” or “Gondwane” series of novels (1969-1978) is included within Appendix N, argues that the lack of consideration given to “heroic fantasy” is an ignorant omission of what could be considered “the original form of narrative literature.” He references the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2100 BC?), Homer’s *Odyssey* (8<sup>th</sup> Century BC), and Greek mythology (especially the tales of Hercules) as a form that predates the literary novel (13-14).<sup>60</sup> Moorcock, another writer included in Appendix N, traces

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<sup>60</sup> In addition to his treatise on the history of “heroic fantasy,” *Imaginary Worlds* (1973), quoted here, Carter authored two analytic texts that each examine one specific fantasy author and their fiction: Lovecraft and Tolkien.

the emergence of “epic fantasy” from the “Romantic Revival that began in 1762 with the publication of Macpherson’s *Ossian Cycle*” (17).<sup>61</sup> Beagle writes that:

...there was a time when all literature was fantasy. How could it have been otherwise, when a bad corn crop or a sudden epidemic among the new lambs could only have been caused by the anger of some god, or the spiteful sorcery of the people in the next village, eight miles over the hill, who were all demons, as everyone knew? Story then, in every part of the world, was a means of keeping the inhabited dark at bay, and of making some kind of sense out of survival. (9)

Le Guin states: “Until the eighteenth century in Europe, imaginative fiction *was* fiction” (Beagle 357). Terms such as paraliterature, or “genre fiction” or even “popular culture” are a (problematic) modern day contrivance which attempt to re-write the legacy, and the exigency which created and compelled, literature as an intersubjective medium. Beagle again: “writers today regarded as classic fantasists...were all recognized as serious mainstream artists in their time” (10). The works that make up Appendix N are a fiction constructed for a larger audience than the works contemporarily celebrated as serious literature; they are part of a legacy that supports and celebrates the exigency of people’s lives, needs, and imaginations.<sup>62</sup> No matter the

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<sup>61</sup> MacPherson, who published “The *Ossian Cycle*,” attributed the Gaelic poems within them to a fictional Scottish poet from antiquity known as Ossian; however, modern research posits that MacPherson himself is most likely the author of these poems. The poems are inspired by and include many elements from Scottish myths of antiquity. The *Ossian Cycle*, and the scholarship on its primary attribution, highlight the problem with the concept of primary authorship. MacPherson could not have written the poems without the legacy of these mythologies – which, even if they were not embodied in one human subjectivity, could be referred to as Ossian.

The author of these poems, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, is not the work of one (or even, two) people, but rather emerges from the entanglements between human subjectivities and the texts which embody our legends and mythology. The scholarly debate on which individual wrote “The *Ossian Cycle*” becomes absurd because, it is impossible for any lone subjectivity, MacPherson or Gygax, to claim sole responsibility for the wealth of their personal, cultural, and political entanglements. Neither MacPherson nor Ossian wrote the cycle. Neither Gygax nor Arneson created *Dungeons & Dragons*. In essence, we all did and we all *do*.

<sup>62</sup> However, even with the community of fantasy and science fiction, there are debates on the literary merits of different texts. Beagle’s collection of fantasy fiction, *The Secret History of Fantasy* (2010), is marketed as offering a “much-needed antidotes to clichéd tales of sword and sorcery.” In the new foreword to Moorcock’s analysis of the fantasy genre, *Wizardry & Wild Romance* (2004, originally published in 1987), author China Miéville comments that: “We accept too little from our fantastic. We have become too easily pleased” (14). Moorcock critiques texts he does not find appealing, including Tolkien’s “*Lord of the Rings*” trilogy. In a chapter titled “Epic Pooh,” Moorcock levies criticisms against Tolkien’s lack of ambition and its bourgeois conservatism (123-140). These

reason for stories, to make meaning, to provide escape, as a means for impossible experiences and personas lived vicariously, these stories, on some level, are necessary for their readers (and the cultures they constitute). Ineluctably, they become the touchstones for avenues of meaning, escape, and experiential exploration for the societies within which they become entangled. To dismiss these exigencies is not only a modern phenomenon, but also entirely unnecessary and a dismissal of the entanglements, and “habitus,” that create us. There are many exceptions to the rule that Appendix N is a catalogue of tawdry tales from disposable pulp magazines: many of these texts were first published as full novels such as Moorcock’s *Stormbringer* (1965), Sterling Lanier’s *Hiero’s Journey* (1973), and Zelazny’s *Jack of Shadows* (1971). Many works are still in print (Tolkien’s novels, Vance’s *The Dying Earth*, Lovecraft’s stories). However, it does not matter if they originated as a pulp novella or a literary novel, all the texts within Appendix N merit consideration. All present vividly personal perspectives on fantastic worlds (and their relationship with the mundane). Every text, through *D&D*, has also become entangled with modern games and modern culture.

### **Appendix N Ideology**

Through that entanglement, each text exerts an influence on the modern habitus and its dynamic ideologies. The eclectic nature of the works in Appendix N make it difficult to make broad generalizations about the ideological themes of the texts collated within it. In *Appendix N*, Johnson lauds these texts for their traditional, and sometimes regressive, ideologies. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century pulp fictions, in any genre (from science fiction to crime and mystery), often espoused

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criticisms are valid and compelling; criticism only becomes problematic when it becomes a judgment on the subjective engagements, experiences, and interpretations of its audience. Forms of critique that valorize particular modes of artistic engagement risk becoming a classist practice of cultural gatekeeping.

traditional values taken for granted by their popular audience. Pulp magazines published stories for entertainment, for the broadest audience possible (even within niche genres) meant to reinforce the Western values of their readers rather than challenge them.<sup>63</sup> This is certainly true for several texts in Appendix N such as Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian series (1932-), Gardner Fox’s Kothar: Barbarian Swordsman (1969-1970) & Kyrick: Warlock Warrior (1975-1976) series as well as Leiber’s Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser tales (1939-1988). These belong to what Leiber coined as the “sword-and-sorcery genre.” These stories feature powerful (and hyper-masculine) heroes battling monsters and villains while female characters are all-too-often employed as either plot devices or the prurient spoils of victory. They provided power fantasies for their young, white, male readership – as well as the fantasy of eventually triumphing against ones’ foes even in the face of overwhelming odds.

There are Appendix N texts that rely on colonialist tropes. The crime and mystery pulps present morality tales where the protagonist must reject the debauched values of the underworld to return home. However, the protagonists of many Appendix N texts do not return home to safety, or always the safety of their traditional society, but rather attempt to force their own values, ideology, or interests on their exotic settings. Many of the struggles in Appendix N emerge from heroes attempting to “save” fantastic worlds. Pulp fiction, whether through a fantastic voyage to the Red Planet of Barsoom (Mars) or a dive down into the hedonistic world

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<sup>63</sup> American pulp fiction texts showcase transgressive behaviors and environments. Mystery and crime pulp fictions featured sub-cultures (the “lascivious” worlds of drugs, crime, and homosexuality!) outside of the experiences of their middle-class readers. However, these sub-cultures were often fetishized caricatures meant to highlight their supposed moral vacuity. Heroes and heroines of these lurid tales usually had to accept the heteronormative values of the middle-class or pay the consequence.

Pulp crime and mystery novels are contemporary morality tales from the early 20th Century. The works of fantasy and science fiction featured in Appendix N were more transgressive of the actual *realities* of their readers: they featured impossible worlds, heroes, and heroic opportunities – a fracturing of the bounded possibilities of middle-class American lives that would also be essential to the allure of playing TRPGs.

of crime and carnal lust, offered cathartic journeys into the exotic for a middle-class reader surrounded by conformity. Peterson defines this as the “visitation theme” common to many of the tales in Appendix N: “The formula is a simple one: plausible contemporary persons undertake a journey to an undiscovered fantastic realm, where after some adventures they return to their place of origin” (*Playing at the World* 122). The visitation quest mirrors Joseph Campbell’s taxonomy of the disparate steps of the mythological hero’s journey. These texts present heroes to sympathize with who not only shared the reader’s values but were happy to impose those values on the exotic, alien worlds, and characters they “visited.” Many of the stories feature sexist tropes, especially regarding the contextualization of women as prizes for heroic conquest while almost exclusively featuring men as the primary protagonists. The heroes of these novels were idealized forms of the white, heterosexual Anglo-Saxons demographics of their intended readers (though their lurid nature and transgressive subjects reached beyond this initial audience). Many of the protagonists within Appendix N texts reflect the ethnic and gender homogeneity of their authors and often indulge the prurient and power fantasies of their readers. These stories promise agency for their readers through an escape into powerful heroes who bend uncertain, chaotic worlds of the fantastic to their will. The popular fictions, in any genre, which belonged to the earlier half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century provided a balm from the uncertainties of a chaotic and uncertain world into one that could be understood and even tamed.<sup>64</sup>

There are stories in Gygax’s list that not only reinforce Western ideology but also highlight Western values and perspective as the superior traits of a civilized culture.

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<sup>64</sup> This begs the question whether gaming’s current cultural popularity may be attributable to the geopolitical, cultural, and social upheavals of our modern moment. Is it also an indication of the need to escape, or create an illusionary sense of control during the cataclysmic shifts taking place within traditional cultural institutions – and the backlash against those shifts? Is play, escape, and the flight into fantasy (and freedom) more popular when chaos is waxing in the “real” world?

In Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars* (1912), John Carter, a Confederate veteran of the US Civil War, employs super-human strength (due to the gravitational difference between Earth and Barsoom) to conquer the city-state of Zodanga, install himself as Prince, and claim the titular Princess of Mars. In Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961), the hero Holger Carlsen, a Danish soldier in WWII, finds himself transported to a parallel universe, in the throes of a battle between the forces of Law and Chaos. Through his modern knowledge of science, history, and military strategy, he leads the forces of Law to victory against the host of Chaos. De Camp and Fletcher Pratt's "Enchanter" series (1940-1954) features a protagonist, the rational psychiatrist Harold Shea, who discovers a mathematical system for visiting worlds from classic mythology. The stories allow Shea to comment on the irrationality of those mythologies, and although he is rarely ever able to set things right (the logic of fantasy is simply too wild), he is still able to procure himself a wife (and one for his boss), during his travels through the lands of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (1590).

Many of the texts belong to what Leiber termed the "sword-and-sorcery" genre in 1969, where fantastic heroes, such as Howard's Conan the Cimmerian or Leiber's own Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, are opposed in bloody, violent battles against monsters and evil magic. Many of the texts represent the sub-genre of the uncanny, horror fiction of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Lovecraft's "Cthulhu" mythos and Merritt's novels present tales of otherworldly powers and villains encroaching into our world (and do not take place within medieval periods). There are works of science fiction, such as Anderson's *High Crusade* (1960) and Fred Saberhagen's *Changeling Earth* (1973). Appendix N includes alternative history works, such as De Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939), and texts that explore classic mythology such as *Three Hearts and Three Lions* and De Camp and Pratt's "Enchanter" tales. There are certainly thematic elements

that many texts share, most notably that nearly every work dwells within an alternative universe where mythology, magic, and the uncanny are possible. However, the only truly universal theme is that all these eclectic and esoteric works are entangled with the subjective imagination of Gygax. Ergo, they are entangled, irrevocably, with the game, and game genre, he would (help) create in 1974.

Any generalization of any form of fiction – and any list that represents the interests and passions of a lone human subjectivity – will run into complications. While we can find aesthetic, political, and thematic parallels within individual texts, every genre of fiction features paradoxes and anomalies which complicate a definitive taxonomy (especially in a list this large). Art is defined by its elusiveness. Despite their radically different works, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway are both considered modernists; Samuel R. Delany and Vladimir Nabokov are both considered *post*-modernists. This is also true of Gygax’s compilation. The authors belong not to a distinct genus, but also within an entangled conversation of possibilities. Even within the field of pulp fiction we can identify divergent perspectives on these alternative worlds and possibilities. Colonialist tropes are even subverted in some of the texts. Howard’s Conan stories offer a panoply of short stories that excoriate the hypocrisies of civilization; De Camp and Pratt’s Harold Shea portrays the laws and mores of the mundane world as absurd as the fantastic – and Shea repeatedly wants to return home. There are Appendix N texts which ponder existential questions about the true reality of the universe. For instance, Philip José Farmer’s “The World of the Tiers” series (1965-1993) features tales that take place within different, artificially-created pocket universes ruled over by “Lords.” The story of Pratt’s *The Blue Star* (1952) takes place within the shared dream of a friendly group of philosophers. At the close of the novel, two of the friends ponder whether the dream was real – or even if *they* are (240). Many of the worlds

featured in Appendix N texts may be uncivilized and savage, but they are showcased as the beautiful, compelling frontiers of possibility; they are the forums for adventure that the ordinary world lacks. They may need to be tamed but their wildness is an integral part of their allure.

There are also Appendix N stories which feature protagonists who complicate facile assumptions about archetypal heroes that offer readers an opportunity to indulge escapist fantasies of power and agency. Moorcock's "Elric" stories (1961-1964) feature a hero who is a drug-addicted, amoral, wretch and whose power is presented not as morally just but as decadent. The dark wizards who rule over the "Dying Earth" in Vance's novels possess magnificent and terrible powers but the magic they wield simultaneously corrupts their minds and defiles their bodies. They are the victims not of a world begging to be tamed – but one that is slowly destroying all power within it. Likewise, Lanier's *Hiero's Journey* (1973) features a post-apocalyptic world where the hero is simply trying to survive – and there is no safe home to return to. Even Leiber's sword-and-sorcery heroes, Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser, with their considerable strength and cunning, are used as pawns by more powerful and arcane forces within the fantastic world of Nehwon.

Other texts provide exceptions to the idea of the triumph of Western values over uncivilized savagery. The horror tales of Lovecraft and Merritt align the Western protagonist not as a conqueror of, but as subservient to, ancient powers. Their tales of otherworldly, uncanny horror follow the crime/mystery pulp model: their heroes find themselves dealing with the consequences of exploring too far and too deep into places which are better left alone. In these stories, man's curiosity is not a boon, but a tragic flaw. The frontier is not one of possibility, but of existential peril. The horrors that Lovecraft invented for his "Cthulhu" mythos can neither be tamed nor vanquished (except temporarily); they must be avoided, forgotten, left alone. To even



consider them, or even be aware of their existence, is to risk madness. Lovecraft does not offer power fantasies for his readers but a cautionary reminder of their powerlessness. In *Creep, Shadow!* (1934), Merritt posits that the ancient evils that worship powers beyond time (and those that stand against them) are eternally resurrected: no victory (or defeat) is permanent. Similarly, Lord Dunsany in *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924) and Anderson in *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961) present worlds where law and chaos exist within eternal, uneasy equilibriums. Anderson has them in a state of steady, but unending conflict; Dunsany posits their relationship as almost symbiotic. These fictions present the reader with protagonists imposing their ephemeral wills on worlds that host perpetual conflicts outside of their direct agency.

This dissertation argues for a recognition of the radical agency we possess to create, interpret, and transform the multiple worlds we exist within. Many of the horror texts included in Appendix N, especially Lovecraft's stories, are in direct opposition to this perspective. Their worlds are objective (and objectively horrible), and any human agency within them is revealed as an illusion. How much this impacted Gygax's own perspective and how he encoded them within his game offers a compelling avenue of investigation. Gygax was a Jehovah's Witness who took his faith seriously. The translation of the text into a game implies grafting a layer of authorship, and a level of potential agency, on to the original stories. Lovecraft might counter that every layer of authorship, however, does not offer more agency but simply more layers of phantasmic illusion to obscure our celestial impotence.

### **Intimate Entanglements**

Any examination of Appendix N, or the imaginary canon of any reader, must appreciate not only the paradoxes within art (and literary movements) but also the paradoxes we hold within

our imaginations. At the conclusion of Appendix N, Gygax lists both Howard and Lovecraft as among “the most immediate influences upon *AD&D*” and yet their textual works offer completely divergent perspectives on the power (or powerlessness) of human agency.<sup>65</sup> Taxonomies attempt to quantify, limit, and delineate; Barad’s notion of entanglement is more helpful for considering how these texts influenced Gygax’s subjectivity and game. Like law and chaos entwined within a perpetual conflict, the heroes, worlds, conflicts, and possibilities of Appendix N were all a part of Gygax’s imagination, even when their aesthetic, political, thematic, and even existential perspectives antagonize one another. These were the stories that captivated Gygax. These were the texts that offered ideas and possibilities for the worlds necessary to produce narratives in *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns.

It is tempting to attempt to argue that the only common denominator of the works listed in Appendix N is that these were all the stories that Gygax *loved*.<sup>66</sup> However, even this generalization is complicated by the notable exception that hovers, like a dark shadow cast by the Witch-King of Angmar atop his fell beast, over Gygax’s list: J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) novel and his “Lord of the Rings” trilogy (1954-1957) are included in Appendix N, although Gygax claimed that he was not a fan. In a 1985 issue of *Dragon* magazine titled “The influence of J.R.R. Tolkien on the *D&D*® and *AD&D*® Game: Why Middle Earth is not part of the game world,” Gygax explains:

Though I thoroughly enjoyed *The Hobbit*, I found the “Ring Trilogy” . . . well, tedious. The action dragged, and it smacked of an allegory of the struggle of the little common working folk of England against the threat of Hitler’s Nazi evil. At the risk of incurring the wrath of the Professor’s dedicated readers, I must say that I was so bored with his

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<sup>65</sup> He also includes de Camp & Pratt, Leiber, and Vance among the list of “immediate” influences.

<sup>66</sup> Although the author has not read (yet) every text in Appendix N, I did not encounter any texts which directly complicated sexist tropes; there *are* a number of strong female characters that appear sporadically throughout these texts, but I did not run into a single female, or non-binary, protagonist.

tomes that I took nearly three weeks to finish them...Considered in the light of fantasy action adventure, Tolkien is not dynamic. (“The influence of J.R.R. Tolkien” 12)

Although we can take Gygax at his word about his personal apathy towards Tolkien’s work, Gygax is being disingenuous here regarding its influence on *Dungeons & Dragons*. There are countless mechanical elements that Gygax borrowed from Tolkien. Tresca provides a comprehensive analysis of each, from hobbits to balrogs, in *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (23-46). Tresca claims argues that one of the ludic foundations of *D&D* mirrors the narrative arc of “Lord of the Rings.” As mentioned in the last chapter, players in a *D&D* game role-play a band of fantastic characters (such as elves, dwarves, halflings, and wizards) exploring a fantastic, medieval world motivated by a quest. “Lord of the Rings” features a “fellowship” of characters (including an elf, dwarf, hobbits, and a wizard) traveling across the lands of “Middle Earth” in a quest to defeat an evil necromancer. Tolkien’s work might be the *closest* literary analogue to actual *D&D* play. Most of the other texts in Appendix N feature heroes who travel alone, such as Conan the Cimmerian, John Carter of Mars, Elric of Melniboné, who are accompanied only briefly by secondary companions, hirelings, or mercenaries. Tresca argues that “Lord of the Rings” was helpful for players to recognize how collaboration through each character’s unique skills and talents would be essential for overcoming *D&D*’s obstacles and challenges (which also reflected the challenges found within Tolkien’s Middle Earth, from similar monsters, traps, and villains) (5).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> It is compelling to consider that Acererak, the villain of Gygax’s most infamous *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure, *Tomb of Horrors* (1978), bears remarkable similarities to “Lord of the Rings” main villain, Sauron. Both are disembodied, evil necromancers who rely on magical artifacts to maintain a presence within the physical world. However, Sauron’s plan to enslave the entire population of Middle Earth is significantly more ambitious than Acererak’s desire to simply torture the curious adventurers (and grave robbers) that explore his “tomb.”

The influence of Tolkien on *D&D* is not simply on the game’s mechanics, bestiary, or thematic elements but also on its commercial success. There is no doubt that *Dungeons & Dragons* would not have succeeded nor reached the heights of popularity it received on its introduction without the simultaneous popular renaissance that Tolkien’s work enjoyed in the 1970s. This popular renaissance embedded *The Hobbit* and “The Lord of the Rings” as cultural touchstones for Gygax’s intended audience of players. Gygax was a very prolific reader, especially of pulp fiction, but could not necessarily rely on his audience being as familiar with the works of Lord Dunsany, De Camp, Vance, or even Lovecraft. Tolkien provided a common ground between Gygax’s imagination and ambitions for *D&D* and the imaginations – and ludic ambitions – of its potential players. The cultural popularity of Tolkien was instrumental for the commercial success of *D&D*. As Tresca’s analysis confirms, Middle Earth is not a “minimal influence” but very much a part of *D&D*’s animating DNA.

Gygax’s 1985 resistance towards attributing Tolkien’s influence on *Dungeons & Dragons* is an illustration of the complexities of dynamic personal and subjective entanglements. The Gygax of 1974 (*D&D*’s initial publication year) is different than the Gygax of 1985. The Gygax of 1985 emerged from the ’74 version through a new set of new intra-actions precipitated by his roles and responsibilities as CEO of a multimillion-dollar gaming company.<sup>68</sup> 1985’s Gygax had to be concerned with the viability of his company, which included avoiding future litigation from the Tolkien estate. It had already forced TSR to make cosmetic changes to *D&D* (for instance, Gygax changed the name of “hobbits” to “halflings” and “ents” to “treants”

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<sup>68</sup> Peterson writes that “In the fall of 1985, Gary Gygax was the most famous and powerful figure in hobby gaming. He was President and Chief Executive Officer of TSR, Inc., the company that published *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gygax had personally directed the development of the game for the last decade, most recently producing new titles for its *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* line...He had been featured in *People* magazine and appeared on national television. His name and his game seemed inseparable” (“Ambush at Sheridan Springs” 2014).

although their mechanical rules in the game remained the same). In 2000, Gygax would contradict his earlier manifestation by admitting that Tolkien had a “strong impact” on *D&D* because “Just about all the players were huge JRRT fans, and so they insisted that I put as much Tolkien-influence [sic] material into the game as possible” (“*Interview with Gary Gygax*”). Subjectivities are entangled not only with the media they engage with but also the cultural institutions they are interpellated within. While Gygax’s entanglement with his game, and its ludic possibilities, was still present, he had also become entangled with the corporate exigencies of American capitalism. This exigency is also impacted by the chronological linearity (and illusion) of human experience: when his relationship with TSR was sundered, a different, more forthcoming, and honest Gygax emerged. Entanglements and relationships change, within (and without) time. Gygax’s relationship with his fellow game players, and fellow TRPG enthusiasts was stronger in 2000 than his relationship with the commercial success of a game he was no longer financially invested in.<sup>69</sup> Entanglements change when their agents do. Each different version of Gygax is a different observation (from disparate contexts of time, place, and exigency) of a dynamic agent.

There is one agent listed in Appendix N that was more important to the creation of *D&D* than the authors catalogued in the list or capitalism. In the first sentence of Appendix N, Gygax attributes his love for fantasy literature from his father, Ernst Gygax. Gary writes:

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<sup>69</sup> The difference in Gygax’s attitudes, writing styles, and inconsistent philosophies regarding *Dungeons & Dragons*, is often discussed within the TRPG community. Personal anecdotes about Gygax and his personal play style indicate that he was often flexible with the enforcement of his rules and his home games featured mechanical improvisation.

However, in rules books and within his column for TSR’s house periodical, *The Dragon* (1976-2013), he would often exhort players of the importance of sticking to the fundamental rules of *D&D*. Role-playing gamers often refer to his stricter persona, who admonished players for bending rules, as grumpy “Uncle” Gary.

Inspiration for all the fantasy work I have done stems directly from the love my father showed when I was a tad, for he spent many hours telling me stories he made up as he went along, tales of cloaked old men who could grant wishes, of magic rings and enchanted swords, or wicked sorcerors and dauntless swordsmen. (224)

Although Gygax was not always the most faithful narrator (depending on the context of his entanglements), I believe we can take him at his word here. Michael Witwer's biography of Gygax, *Empire of Imagination*, argues that their relationship was close (and they share the same name: Gary was his middle name).<sup>70</sup> Witwer also claims that it was Ernst who introduced Gary to pulp fiction through a copy of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1948 (23). Gygax's introduction to Appendix N situates *D&D* within the continuum of his family's story-telling legacy.<sup>71</sup> This contextualization offers an intimate origin, and insight into, the genesis not only of *D&D*, but of Gary Gygax, as reader, designer, player, and entangled agent.

However, even considering the books he read, the family that raised him, the political institutions that imposed their values on him, and the culture surrounding him, the list of Gygax's entanglements is not comprehensive; the dynamic corpus of our lived experience constantly forces us into countless relationships – all which may have some bearing our interests, capacities, curiosities, and ambition. The deconstruction of any author can never be complete: not only is every agent too complex a system for any succinct mechanical analysis, but authors

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<sup>70</sup> Witwer's biography takes liberties with the historical record, including inventing dramatic scenes based on incomplete facts to present a compelling – if not entirely accurate – narrative of Gygax's life. The biography also presents Gygax uncritically with few scenes or analysis that do not fit the narrative of Gygax as a gaming hero.

<sup>71</sup> Gary's (immediate) family is also entangled with *Dungeons & Dragons*. His children play tested the game before it was released. Their characters appear within *D&D* campaign worlds and in the names of spells they invented during playtesting. For instance, Gary's oldest son, Ernest played Tenser (an anagram of his name) who was the progenitor of "Tenser's Floating Disc," a first-level spell featured in every edition of *D&D* (except *OD&D*). Gary's daughter Elise was the model for early *D&D* advertisements. His wife would work for TSR (her business card listed her as "the woman at TSR"). His second oldest son, Luke, runs an annual gaming convention, GaryCon, held annually in Gary's hometown of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. GaryCon celebrates Gygax's life and the legacy of tabletop roleplaying he helped usher in. The name Gygax has, inevitably, become intimately associated with the TRPG.

are also constantly forging new relationships. Each relationship produces a new author from the old (they may resemble each other – but only for a while). We can only observe agents and authors through the limitations of our biological capacities as human observers: we can collapse agents into a specific observation but each observation represents a finite viewpoint on those agents’ radical possibilities.

In addition, while the new author differs from the old, they remain entangled: an author’s past is an influence on their future work, and their future work will always force reinterpretations and reconfigurations of the past. A reader may observe an author (and their work) in one moment of linear time, but the author cannot escape these entanglements. The author, or game designer, is constantly forced into multiple chronological reckonings: They emerge from a past that determines the capacity and context of future creations; future texts, like a quantum observation, fix them within specific moments of emergence. Bourdieu referred to the comprehensive influences of culture and both cultural and personal history on subjectivities as the “habitus” which guides, and limits, our capacities and imaginations. The game designer and player are both confined by their history and culture but also have the capacity to become their authors.

I do not argue that we should cease all consideration of the author – as Barthes might – only that we recognize the paucity of any media analysis that focuses on agents as individuals. All media analysis, literary or ludic, is incomplete: like the authors that create them, they are constantly influenced by dynamic audiences, contexts, times, and places. However, we compound the incompleteness of these considerations if we base them on the fallacy that works are produced by individual, isolated agents operating within individual, isolated moments of time and environments. We must recognize that the observations and interpretations of agents, their

works, and their environments, collapses them into only one reality while ontologically, they exist within multiple realms of possibility.

All cultural, political, and creative events occur through the relationships of the agents that allow them to emerge. Barad argues that no agent exists a priori of a relationship: the agent Gygax emerges from his family, his culture, and the sociopolitical institutions that surround and interpellated him. In this chapter's epigraph, Calvino recognizes that all of us are a "combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined" which can "be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable" (124). Gygax's game emerged from a relationship between agents as people (Gygax & Arneson and their gaming clubs), culture (wargaming & fantasy literature), and the institutions that shape both. The author is certainly not dead. Like the text, or the quantum photon, they simply exist within a number of possible states, until we observe and define them. Those observations and definitions, however, are also dynamic. How we understand Gygax, who Gygax becomes, is based on the cultural, personal, and institutional agents – that are so numerous that they are impossible to comprehensively identify – and which produce each observer, reader, and player.

### **Who is the TRPG Author?**

The argument that media interpretation is subjective is certainly not new; however, analysis continues to focus on specific moments of authorship and on identifying specific authors (even if the conception of authorship has been complicated) and their level of responsibility & complicity for textual creation. For instance, Zagal and Deterding apply Jessica Hammer's conception that the TRPG has three levels of authorship: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Hammer argues that the primary text "outlines the rules and settings of the game." The secondary text is used to "create a specific situation," a particular scenario that the game's



characters will need to navigate (and through that navigation, ideally create a narrative). The tertiary text is “created as the characters encounter the situation in play” (70-71). Hammer’s definition argues that the rulebooks of *D&D* are the primary text, and Gygax & Arneson, presumably the primary authors. The secondary author would either be the dungeon master, who creates a specific adventure within the world of *D&D*, or the author of a pre-packaged, published module (such as Gygax’s 1979 *Keep on the Borderlands*) if the DM does not want to invent an original scenario. The tertiary text would be a game of *D&D*, with the tertiary authors being the players (and DM). She argues that this typology is valuable because it allows one to “consider who is acting as world-builder, who as story-builder, and who as story-player” (72). Hammer’s conception of the different roles necessary for tabletop role-playing is valuable; however, the delineation of the roles assumes that it is possible to divide, and prioritize, the levels of responsibility and complicity for TRPG play into fixed roles.

The most problematic issue of Hammer’s definitions is that it creates an (implied) static hierarchy of responsibility: very few *D&D* players would recognize Gygax & Arneson as the *primary* authors of their game, in very much the same way, that it would be absurd to list the universe (or God, if you’d like) as the primary author of all historical narratives. Gygax & Arneson are invaluable to a game of *D&D* because they set its parameters and define the physics of the world; this does not set them as the protagonists who imbue these worlds with life (and narratives). Hammer’s typology also subjugates the DM (or module writer) as less important the game designers (“secondary” or “tertiary” authors). A game of *D&D* cannot exist without its game (and game world) designers, nor its dungeon master, and players. It also cannot exist without a genre, or aesthetic themes, to inspire it.

All these authors bear a “primary” responsibility during the emergence of TRPG play – the final manifestation of a TRPG text. Only the ephemeral observation of a moment of a TRPG (whether rulebook, module, or actual play) creates a primary author that changes based on the time of the observation, and the entanglements of the observer. The emergence of the TRPG is fluid and its creation is neither bounded by authorial nor chronological determinacy. For instance, the play of a TRPG can modify the rules system or game world designed even before any instance of a game could exist.<sup>72</sup> Matthew Finch, a game designer associated with the OSR movement, argues that the contingent outcomes of actions in early TRPGs, such as *D&D*, are resolved through an uncertain dialog (between DM, players, and rules), rather than through a set of static rules. Finch claims:

Most of the time in old-style gaming, you don’t use a rule; you make a ruling. It’s easy to understand that sentence, but it takes a flash of insight to really “get it.” The players can describe any action, without needing to look at a character sheet to see if they “can” do it. The referee, in turn, uses common sense to decide what happens or rolls a die if he thinks there’s some random element involved, and then the game moves on. (2)

Finch implies that modern TRPGs concede more authorial responsibility to their rules rather than through dialog during play. This may be true to make the modern TRPG more accessible to contemporary audiences used to videogames (with bounded mechanics) rather than the flexibility of classic wargames. There are many modern TRPGs which complicate Finch’s generalization. Modern “rules-light” TRPGs, such as S. John Ross’ *Risus* (1993) (whose rules require only four pages) or Avery Alder’s *The Quiet Year* (2013, 16 pages) are explicitly designed around putting the majority of the responsibility for the text’s emergence on the uncertain dialog during play. The rules for *Risus* even feature an admonishment that: “There’s No Wrong Way to Play!” (4). Even within these games, however, that responsibility is

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<sup>72</sup> Chapter 5 analyzes this specific practice.

constantly being negotiated: the players and game master must determine when the game's rules should be followed or when they should be changed (or ignored). TRPGs emphasize rules or "rulings" in different measures, but neither is definitively fixed. TRPGs attempt to simulate worlds and the actions possible with them. No world, even ones bounded by the aesthetics (and narrative exigencies) of genre fiction, can be modeled comprehensively within the pages of a finitely-bounded rulebook. The authorship of the TRPG depends not on levels of successive authorship – but through a constant, dynamic negotiation among all the authors responsible for the emerging TRPG text. These responsibilities are defined only when necessary: they exist in a state of possibility until a specific "ruling" is exigent for the game to continue. A ruling then (whether created by players' interpretation, or reconfiguration, of a rule or from a random dice roll), is a ludic form of a quantum observation: it fixes contingent possibilities on one definitive outcome.

The second problematic issue with Hammer's definition is that it does not include the multitudinous entanglements that generate the designers, dungeon masters, and players in a TRPG game. The *D&D* world is not simply the creation of Gygax & Arneson. It is also the work of the authors (and family member) listed in Appendix N – as well as the directors, writers, and even actors within fantasy films – that infiltrated their imagination and provided their subculture's lexicon and touchstones. From Tolkien to Vance, each of the authors were part of a voice of fiction which cannot be separated into individual voices in a wilderness. Rather, they exist as subjective, dynamic agents in a continuum of media, that Gygax briefly, interpreted, realized, and translated into the pages of his rulebooks. An entangled agent, Gygax's design of *D&D* was an observation which collapsed the all the possibilities of his entanglements into a game which could open these possibilities up to its players.

However, like any text, the definition of what *D&D*, and TRPGs, would be, could not belong to one individual or agent. Gygax's definition of what *D&D* was – or what the worlds of its game should be – was constantly changing. Gygax is an author, no more or less responsible or complicit than his readers and players, and no more or less responsible, for the emergence of the *D&D* text. In the first issue of the wargaming zine *Alarums & Excursions* (June 1975), reader Mark Swanson says that he agrees with the “slogan” that “*D&D* is too important to leave to Gary Gygax” (12).<sup>73</sup> In the following issue of the same zine, Gygax would agree and remark that *D&D* was also “far too good to leave to you or any other individual or little group either! It now belongs to the thousands of players enjoying it worldwide....” (5). The possible world(s) of *D&D*, for one moment observed and collapsed by Gygax, existed once again as countless possibilities after its publication catalyzed new opportunities to manifest relationships that allowed new players, new games, and new TRPG texts, to emerge.

The author is not dead; they are immortal and everywhere. The play of a TRPG is the observation, the temporally transient moment where the cacophonous voices (embodied in personal entanglements) collapse into one specific ludic and textual manifestation. The game, too, is as ephemeral: once it emerges, it is then interpreted, and re-interpreted by different agents who become entangled with their subjective experiences of play. The concept of entanglement, whether between photons & observer or text & audience, signifies that changes to one agent affect both. The emergence of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a new genre of media, as a new agent borne from the multiplicitous relationships from which it emerged, changes our relationship with the authors who inspired it. Nephew argues that “RPGs have irrevocably transformed the role of

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<sup>73</sup> This quotation is often attributed to Ted Johnstone (to whom Gygax is replying directly); however, it seems as if Swanson is replying to Johnstone. It is unclear if the “slogan” is derived from an earlier correspondence in another zine or whether Swanson has invented it.

the writers that inspire them, altering the authorial position into that of a transgressive, border blurring multiplicity that is directly postmodern” (2). Tabletop role-playing games changed how we interact and interpret the works, imaginations, and interpretations of the genre fictions which inspired them. *D&D* transforms our relationship with fantasy fiction – ergo, it transforms, via their entangled relationship, the authors listed in Appendix N.

The first way that *D&D* impacts those authors is through TRPG’s capacity as a practice that invites play into an existing media genre. The TRPG offers a mechanical system, a game, which invites players to inhabit worlds inspired by, or even directly based, on the worlds of the authors in Appendix N. *D&D* players can inhabit worlds that bear similarities to the fantastical worlds of Leiber’s Nowhen, Howard’s Hyborian Age, or Tolkien’s Middle Earth by embodying (through play) characters who live, battle, and journey within them. Miller’s *Traveller* (1977) invites readers to become players within science fiction universes that resemble the ones created by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Gordon Dickson. Petersen’s *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) is a direct translation of the “Cthulhu mythos,” created by Lovecraft. Grouling Cover claims that TRPGs are “a response to literature and a way of interacting in literary worlds” (8-9). In her consideration of TRPG texts and play as rhetoric, she contextualizes *D&D* as emerging from readers’ desire to know more about, and experience more intimately, the worlds of fantasy fiction. Peterson extends this by arguing that *D&D* “would fulfill a promise that the fantasy genre had always made to its readership, by transforming the visitation theme from something one reads to something one experiences” (*Playing at the World* 124). Peterson claims that the TRPG allows the player to transcend the vicarious experience of reading about the adventures of John Carter of Mars or Conan the Cimmerian into embodying their roles and inhabiting their fantastic worlds.

Similar arguments exist about the capacity of contemporary video games. In his seminal work, *Cybertext*, Aarseth argues that games are part of a new panoply of media forms (catalyzed by the modern adoption of digital technologies) known as “cybertexts.” According to Aarseth, cybertexts allow the reader/player to exert their own “narrative control” over these works. The reader, or player, believes the cybertext allows them to “tell *my* story; the story that *could not be* without me” (4). Games scholars, such as Murray and Jane McGonigal, have proceeded from this perspective that games are a new, singular medium. They are a new agent, whose very mechanics (that provide cybertextual algorithms), offer new experiences.

The problem with this perspective, which the TRPG illustrates, is that they fall into the fallacy of considering games as an entirely new agent – rather than considering that games are merely a reconfiguration of the relationships we already have with our imaginary narratives and worlds. Games *are* exciting and important, but not because they are entirely new. Their emergence is the consequence of the changing relationships – which include evolving sociocultural capacities and ambitions – that create, or prioritize, a particular mode of intersubjective engagement. No medium, no genre, exists before the capacity for a relationship to realize them (no agent exists a priori of a relationship). The modern game is the ineluctable consequence of our contemporary desire for more intimate connections with, and power over, the classic narratives of our mythologies. This dissertation is interested in the nascent origins of that growing ambition from 1974-1981. It is concerned with how TRPGs emerged, initially, from the readers and wargamers who experimented with play as a mode of practice to reconfigure their relationships with the fictions that compelled them.

Current games scholarship often focuses on examining the technologies and mechanics of modern videogames. This perspective considers our modern ludic movements as the result of

advancing technologies rather than changes in readers/players' capacity and ambitions. These perspectives focus on distinct *intersections* between individual audiences and texts rather than considering both as entangled entities whose relationship is necessary for either to exist.

Technologies only exist, and proliferate, if they have users who can understand and use them while also possessing the desire to do so. Barad argues that “individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway IX*). Any examination of the rise of games as a popular, and aesthetically important medium, whether it is within the wargaming subculture of the 1970s, or contemporary pop culture, must consider the relationships – and their impact on the agents (reader, gamer, audience, technology) that make them possible. The questions that seem more appropriate for modern game studies might be to ask why, in our current moment, have we become so enamored with exerting more control over and inhabiting, rather than simply observing, our narratives? What has changed within the popular subjective consciousness that has encouraged these new approaches to traditional media forms?

De Certeau examines cultural relationships, including between media and their audiences, in his 1980 study of *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau offers a compelling model for considering how human subjectivities relate to – and reconfigure the media around them (whether the medium is the design of a city or the text of a book). De Certeau posits that the initial ambition – whether it is subjugation, control, or profitability – of a text are the “strategy” of its designers and authors (and publishers). However, the consequences of implementing these strategies are rarely predicted accurately. In the same way that “no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy,” every text is transfigured through engagement with an audience. De Certeau defines the engagement of the audience as “tactics” employed by audiences to resist

control and subjugation – by transfiguring texts to serve their own purpose. He claims that “The presence and circulation of a representation...tells us nothing about what it is for its users” (xiii). The creation and play of TRPG represents a mode of *tactical* textual engagement to resist conventional engagement strategies (reading) that authors (and their publishers) intend for their narratives. The play of a TRPG is a tactical form of engagement with narratives that meets the reader/players’ needs while resisting the publisher/author’s intentions. *D&D* offered an opportunity for players to move past the semiotic representations of the pulp novel into an immersive and interactive exploration of their boundaries. Gygax & Arneson manufactured an entirely new tactic for resisting the expectations of what constitutes a rational engagement with a written text. Likewise, no study of the TRPG can be complete without considering how it is actually *played*. It is important, however, to avoid contextualizing strategy and tactics as a distinct binary. Each impacts the other: as De Certeau learned, how users actually traverse through a city’s streets will inevitably change not only the designs of future streets, but how all streets relate to one another. How readers actually interact with texts and genres – whether through reading or play – inevitably changes how they are written and how we understand their capacity. Strategy and tactics are as entangled as author, audience, and text.

The commercial history of *D&D* offers an illustration of this entanglement. Each successive edition of *D&D* (through six total editions as of 2023) has provided a new ruleset, with the *strategy* of establishing a uniform mode of play, which players always reconfigure to *tactically* meet their needs (and the needs of their individual game and players). The current publisher of *D&D*, Wizards of the Coast, is constantly attempting to model those reconfigurations in new editions (with varying levels of success). For instance, the fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2008) included rules mechanics borrowed from popular online role-



playing video games. This strategy was based on Wizards of the Coasts' commercial interests to broaden their potential market into the larger market of video gamers. However, the critical and commercial response from TRPG players was so negative that most of those changes were rescinded for its fifth edition – which provided a more traditional rule set combining the most popular design philosophies from every previous edition. The players' tactical resistance forced a change in Wizard's strategy; however, Wizard's strategies also dictate the major philosophies that players can resist. Orson Welles famously quipped that “the absence of limitations is the enemy of art.” Wizards creates a bounded system, that users push against (and reconfigure in dimensions its designers often never considered). Wizards creates the strategy of *D&D's* streets, but every *D&D* player forges their own path through them. Ultimately, engagement, text, author, and audience are reconfigured through exploring all the possible permutations of each. The game, its players, and emergent texts (like Gygax himself) are also entangled, and interpellated within, their society, culture, institutions, and “habitus.”

Jenkins illustrates how contemporary audiences have become “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise” and “undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property.” Through an application of De Certeauian tactics, modern audiences “raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions” (18). Jenkins analyzes the practice of “fan fiction,” where contemporary viewers appropriate the worlds and characters of mass media, such as television shows like *Star Trek* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to create their own narratives. The process of fan fiction authorship, where its authors crash the normative boundaries of historical publication tradition, has created a wealth of contemporary authors reconfiguring, re-imagining, and re-interpreting narrative worlds. The modern reader is presented with manifold possibilities

for engaging with fictional worlds. More importantly, however, it also invites every reader to consider their own capacity as an author. The modern movement towards cybertextual interactivity begins when readers become enamored, tactically, with the capacity offered by creative intervention.

The TRPG of the 1970s continues, and promulgates, the rise of fan fiction in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century – not only by demonstrating how genre fictions could be appropriated by their fandoms, but also by de-sanctifying traditional modes of engagement. The publication of *D&D*, and its initial ascendance into its sub-cultural worlds pioneered new possibilities while inviting intersections (and even more intimate entanglements) with the genre fictions and mythologies of popular culture, whether that myth was *Star Trek* or “Lord of the Rings.” The radical, explicitly tactical approach that Gygax demonstrated for engaging with fantastic, pulp fiction through the play of *D&D* may have provided a model for modern fan fiction practice. Fan fiction and the TRPG both actualize Barthes’ concept of the original “goal of literary work...to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). However, it is a bit facile to establish TRPG as a direct precedent. The emergence of *D&D* and fan fiction are similar but their proliferation into mass culture, is the product of as many influences (from late-stage capitalism to neo-liberalism to shifting technologies) as those texts which influenced Gygax’s imagination. It is enough to recognize the similarities and to recognize possibilities for future consideration. The synchronicity of this turn towards creating and exulting in intimate interactions with the traditional narrative predates the ubiquity of digital computers and networks and complicates the idea that technology drives modern media reconfigurations.

Those reconfigurations have consequences for the future *and* for those who we traditionally assume dwell within the safe distance of history. Our conception of the authors listed within

Gygax's Appendix N can no longer be dismissed as the simple scribes of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century disposable entertainment: their influence on Gygax, and his game, has ensured their worlds, narratives, aesthetics, and even perspectives on the universe – and the possibility of alternate universes – persist.

The rules of *D&D*, its inhabitants, and many of its possible worlds, are translated directly from Appendix N works. For instance, how the game's trolls regenerate severed limbs as well as the rules for role-playing a chivalrous paladin are directly inspired by Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961). The character class concept of thieves (and a thieves' guild which manages the criminal operations in medieval cities) is borrowed from Leiber's "Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser" tales. TSR would even publish an adventure scenario, *Lankhmar – City of Adventure* (1985), for *D&D* players to explore Leiber's (and Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser's) world as the setting for their game.<sup>74</sup> *D&D*'s spellcasting system, which requires that magic-users memorize spells every day is pilfered directly (as are the names of specific spells, such as "Prismatic Spray") from Vance's "Dying Earth" novels.<sup>75</sup> *D&D*'s possible worlds are a unified collection of ideas and concepts that Gygax translated from Appendix N texts. These examples represent a paltry list of the copious allusions that the rules of *D&D* make from Appendix N texts. Future scholarship identifying these allusions would be welcome, especially considering an

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<sup>74</sup> Leiber was also a wargamer. TSR would publish a *Lankhmar* wargame he had invented in college featuring his heroes, Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser, in 1976. *Lankhmar* is a fictional city in Leiber's Nehwon world that serves as a headquarters for the two heroes.

<sup>75</sup> Again, it is important to remember that there were countless other influences on the worlds, mechanics, and aesthetics on *D&D*. For instance, in addition to magic spells from Vance, there are also spells named for the first *D&D* playtesters: Gygax's own children. "Tenser's Floating Disc" and "Melf's Acid Arrow" are both contributions from his sons Ernest and Luke. Tenser is an anagram for his own first name, his father's, and his eldest son. In Gygax's home campaign world of Greyhawk, there is an area known as the "Pomarj," which is an anagram of his first wife's name, Mary Jo Powell.

approach that considers how Gygax unifies so many disparate perspectives on fantastic worlds into one, specific, and (usually) consistent *game* world.

The conventional perspective on TRPGS, advanced by Mackay, Peterson, and Grouling Cover, is that they represent an *intersection* between fantasy literature and wargaming; this assumes that they are both distinct agents and their union created TRPGs, a new distinct medium/agent. Grouling Cover argues that TRPGs are a “response” to fantasy literature; Mackay claims that they maintain a “reciprocal relationship” with literature where each influences the other (8-9; 31). The problem with this perspective, with the assumption of intersections between distinct pre-existing agents, is that it ignores the exigency of the relationships required, a priori, for the agents (whether the TRPG or texts) to emerge; It fails to recognize that the current state of the TRPG, the literature which influenced it, as well as its designers and players, depend on the current state of the others. The worlds of Vance, and our interpretations of Vance as creator of the Dying Earth, depends on our translations, interpretations, and observations of his worlds that emerge (and are reconfigured) through the play of *D&D*.

The game’s cultural emergence has also impacted the literary field directly. Norton, one of the two female authors included in Appendix N, authored a novel, *Quag Keep* (1978), directly inspired by the game. In *Quag Keep*, the protagonists are a group of *D&D* players who find themselves transported into the world of Greyhawk, the world Gygax designed for his home campaign. The back cover boasts that the novel’s players-turned-heroes find themselves in a “a land that mirrors the games they used to play.” Gygax himself would go on to write seven novels, featuring “Gord the Rogue,” that takes place within the same campaign world - and like *Quag Keep* features a fantastic narrative arc reminiscent of Appendix N works.<sup>76</sup> In 1995, Gygax

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<sup>76</sup> None of Gygax’s fiction, neither his Gord the Rogue series nor his four “Dangerous Journeys” novels (based on the worlds of another TRPG he helped design in the 1990s), are featured within the “Appendix N” in the fifth

would also write a story for inclusion in an anthology of stories featuring Elric of Melniboné (*Tales of the White Wolf*), the hero of Moorcock's celebrated epic. Moorcock and his works are included within Appendix N. Vance would include a "Lord Gygax," as an homage to Gary, in his 1973 science fiction novel, *Trullion: Alastor 2262*.

In 1984, TSR would introduce a new *D&D* campaign setting, "Dragonlance," through a series of connected adventure scenarios (or modules) for the game and traditional novels. The trilogy of novels, authored by Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis, told a narrative based on their experiences playing through the scenario. Players interested in playing the module are encouraged to use the characters Hickman, Weis, and their gaming group had used and that were the main protagonists in the novels. The "Dragonlance" series represented an explicit opportunity to "play" a novel through a TRPG. The series was an astonishing success for TSR, and "were so popular...that the revenue from the novels eclipsed that of the role-playing game products" (Mackay 19). The success of "Dragonlance" would lead TSR to publish hundreds of novels in many of the game's disparate campaign settings: R. A. Salvatore's "Icewind Dale" trilogy (1988-1990) tells the story of Drizzt Do'Urden adventuring in the Forgotten Realms<sup>77</sup>, P.N. Elrod's *I, Strahd* (1993) recounts the history of the evil vampire Strahd von Zarovich who holds court in the gothic realm of Ravenloft, Troy Denning's five-part "Prism Pentad" (1991-1993) series takes place on "Dark Sun," a post-apocalyptic setting which bears a remarkable resemblance to Vance's Dying Earth and Burrough's Barsoom (Mars). In 1982, TSR would

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edition *D&D Player's Handbook* (2014). However, his non-fiction works (including a series on how to build "Living Fantasy" worlds) are included in the fifth edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* (2014) in its "Dungeon Master Inspiration" list which is a selection of titles meant to help DMs create compelling game worlds and campaigns.

<sup>77</sup> The Forgotten Realms campaign setting was created by Ed Greenwood in 1967 as the setting for fantasy tales he wrote as a child.

publish a series of “Endless Quest” titles, inspired by Choose Your Own Adventure-style books, where the reader makes (limited) choices for the story’s protagonist. The protagonists in the first “Endless Quest” titles were based on actual races and classes from *D&D*.<sup>78</sup> In addition, comic books based on *Dungeons & Dragons* settings – and their heroes – would be published by outside studios.<sup>79</sup> As *D&D*’s cultural cachet grew, so did its disparate mythologies become increasingly entangled within the consciousness of genre fiction fandom.

TSR would even purchase the pulp serial magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1983 (where many Appendix N stories has initially been published). *Amazing Stories* kept its own dedicated editorial staff while TSR was building their own. TSR’s first forays into publishing had been through *Dragon* (1976-2013) magazine. This in-house magazine published stories from Appendix N scribes such as Leiber and Norton. According to James Lowder, the fiction line editor for TSR from 1988-1994, there were only 3-4 people working in TSR’s editorial department in the 1980s; however, during the 1990s, the department would consist of “one managing editor, four editors (one working remote), and one editorial assistant.” From 1987-1991, the number of fictional titles TSR published “exploded” and created more revenue for the

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<sup>78</sup> Later books in the series would be based on other TSR TRPGs, such as the spy game *Top Secret* (1980) and the science fiction-based game *Star Frontiers* (1982).

<sup>79</sup> Although this dissertation focuses on entanglements between literature and TRPGs, entanglements between *D&D* and film must also be recognized. Many mechanics in *D&D* were based on classic horror films; Mackay argues that the renaissance in fantasy films in the 1970s and 1980s can be partially attributed to *D&D*’s emergence into the pop cultural consciousness. He notes that “There was not a single sword-and-sorcery fantasy film released in America prior to 1978” (21).

company that its game rule books. Lowder explains that: “because the fiction outsold the game products so resoundingly, the novels took the lead on the developing the narratives for the shared worlds, with some game products serving more as support for fiction.”

In the late 1980s, the pulp stories of Appendix N, at one point a primary *influence* on the game of *D&D*, merged into a *confluence* with the game *D&D*. The narratives produced through, and created for, the game become indistinct from the earlier pulp tales which inspired them; the explicit,

capital entanglement of TSR and their direct entry into the publishing market was reflected in the expanding implicit, entanglements between TRPG narratives & worlds with their aesthetic inspirations (and original authors).

The worlds of Appendix N texts (and how they work), were once merely embodied in novels and short stories. They are now embodied within the games shaping modern culture and media. In addition to the current edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (fifth edition, 2014), other modern TRPGs, such as *Labyrinth Lord* (2002), *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (2012), and *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (2013), all promise to model ludic engagements with Appendix N-style works. These modern TRPGs, encouraged by the OSR community reflect a nostalgia for early



Figure 1 Dragon Magazine Ad

*D&D* play, but also demonstrate how compelling *D&D* play serves to encourage entanglements with the aesthetics and themes of the works that inspired it.<sup>80</sup>

*D&D* not only unified the worlds of disparate fantastic media, but it also adapted their mechanics into gameplay. In so doing, it created its own, specific popular mythology. This form of adaptation and translation are certainly not singular: *D&D* unified and translated these elements in much the same way that Appendix N authors, such as Tolkien and Anderson, had re-interpreted Western European myth and folklore. Peterson posits that *D&D*'s ludic unifications provided "a better primer on the sword-and-sorcery genre than any of the original sources it copied" (*Playing at the World* 561). What makes Gygax's creation compelling, from an academic standpoint, is to consider how its adaptation to a ludic environment, into the intimate arena of magical circles of play, might be different than earlier textual translations of mythology. This mythology has become entangled with our modern popular consciousness. The works of Appendix N and their authors resist the (illusionary) constraints of time as their worlds are born again within our modern ludic media.

*D&D*'s cultural influence – and its propagation of Appendix N aesthetics – extends beyond its own field; contemporary role-playing video games all borrow mechanics and themes from Gygax's game. The first text adventure video game, William Crowther's *Adventure* (1976), that required the player to navigate a deadly series of underground caves (dungeon), was partially

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<sup>80</sup> An argument could be made that *D&D*'s enduring stature as the most popular game in the TRPG market has forced it to abandon, or de-emphasize, stranger elements from its Appendix N influences – and opened a niche market for these TRPGs which explicitly celebrate them. This is not the first time that entanglements with late capitalism would influence the evolution of *D&D*.

For instance, *D&D*'s second edition, released in 1989, excised any mention of demons and devils in its catalogue of monsters (the "Monstrous Compendium"). This was a direct response to critics, and concerned parents, concerned about *D&D*'s (entirely unfounded) connections to the occult and Satanism.



inspired by Crowther's love of *D&D* (Maher). Other primitive computer games were direct adaptations of *D&D*, such as Gary Whisenhunt, Ray Wood, Dirk Pellett, and Flint Pellet's 1975 *dnd*. *Dnd* provided a primitive graphic representation of an adventurer braving dangerous dungeon tunnels on a hunt for treasure. Games released for the first home personal computer systems feature evolving translations of the same concept, such as 1979's *Temple of Apshai* (Epyx, Inc., Jon Freeman and Jeff Johnson), Richard Garriott's *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979), and Sir-Tech's 1981 *Wizardry* (Andrew C. Greenberg and Robert Woodhead). The cybertextual capacity for textual engagement embedded within TRPGs was a natural fit for the algorithmic capacity of digital machines. Unsurprisingly, early adopters of both platforms often shared an overlapping enthusiasm for both. Whether they were analog or digital, the computer game and TRPG were emerging new technologies manifesting in parallel cultural dimensions.

Modern computer role-playing games (CRPGs) follow these early traditions and continue translating Gygax & Arneson's nascent ideas to the digital screen and modern network. Games such as Blizzard's multiplayer *World of Warcraft* (2004) or FromSoftware's single-player(ish) *Elden Ring* (2022), feature mechanics, from characters "leveling up" to embodying an imaginary persona in a fantastic medieval realm, translated from *D&D*. One of the most anticipated upcoming computer role-playing games is Larian Studio's *Baldur's Gate 3*, and employs *D&D*'s fifth edition ruleset.<sup>81</sup> These CRPGs feature themes, aesthetics, and narrative arcs familiar to Appendix N readers: powerful antagonists battling unspeakable horrors in order to conquer (or save) fantastic realms. Howard's Conan of Cimmeria serves as the archetype for an Azerothian barbarian in *WoW* while the setting of Vance's "Dying Earth" novels offers a model for Elden

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<sup>81</sup> *Baldur's Gate 1&2* (1998, 2000), developed by BioWare studios, were based on *D&D*'s second edition rules.

Ring's "Lands Between." *D&D*'s influence, nascent in the 1970s, is ubiquitous in the modern moment.<sup>82</sup>

*D&D* would not exist without the texts of Appendix N to inspire it; however, the pop cultural popularity of *D&D* ensures an interest and enthusiasm for the narrative works embedded within its rules and worlds. Our new games media transforms every previous interpretation of their works. Our modern observations of Appendix N texts are now entangled with our understanding of them as ludic playgrounds; our modern observations of their worlds are now entangled with our experiences exploring them. Our contemporary observations, from dynamic observers existing within a dynamic habitus, change the past, and its population. The authors of Appendix N can never be the same after the publication of *D&D*. The more human agents become entangled with TPRGs, the more those authors, and their works, will bear little resemblance to who, and what, they were in the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The concept of entanglement transcends time and space. No matter how close or far apart they are, one change to an entangled quanta changes the other simultaneously. Observations of our mythologies, legends, and narratives do as well. If Tolkien translated the concept of dwarves from "medieval Eddaic poems like the *Völuspá*," for his epic novels, it was Gygax whose TRPG allowed you to now *play* as a dwarf (Peterson, *Playing at the World* 142). We continue to dream,

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<sup>82</sup> *D&D*'s influence extends beyond tabletop and computer role-playing games. In his biography of Gygax, Witwer eloquently states that: "If you have ever played a first person shooter video game like *Call of Duty*, a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMO) like *World of Warcraft*, or a computer role-playing game like *Final Fantasy*; if you have ever logged on to an online virtual world like *Second Life* or experienced the wildly popular *Game of Thrones* television series and books, then you are already tangentially familiar with the work of Gary Gygax" (xii).

Witwer's mistake, which suits the main argument of his reverential portrait of Gygax as the creator (emperor?) of an "empire of imagination," is to consider Gygax as an individual agent. Gygax emerges only from the family, media, political, and cultural relationships (the "habitus") necessary to create him. These other agents include Appendix N; Gygax did not simply re-interpret or adapt them as a lone auteur, but manifested his own subjectivity, entangled with these influences, in a game that subsequently became entangled within popular culture.

play, and exult within the same legends that have existed for centuries. Through the play of *D&D*, players exist within the mythological narratives of our past – while using their archetypes and perspectives to explore alternative possibilities for our personal, and cultural, futures. Scholars such as Eco laud literature’s capacity for transporting readers to different times and spaces. Gygax & Arneson’s new game was a transformation of that capacity through a new mode of media engagement. This new mode of engagement is an echo of our continuing fascination with the subjective dreams, visions, and worlds of other people. McLuhan claims that “We impose the form of the old on the content of the new. The malady lingers on” (86). Modes of engagement, through our emerging new games and “cybertexts,” change but they are not an evolution or progression towards more effective intersubjectivity. Each new experiment in media, and media capacity, provides an illustration of our ongoing, desperate desire for entanglement – through visions, dreams, narratives, and play – with our fellow authors, designers, players, and observers. That we have yet to (completely) succeed is evidence that the malady, the illusion of subjective separation and isolation – at the expense of recognizing our intrinsic entanglements, “lingers on.” The question becomes: is each experimentation a closer step towards intersubjectivity, or another failure in a Quixotic quest for connection?

Agential realism advocates for a conscious approach for how we wield the agency implicit in determining what worlds we wish to create through our observations of their limitless possibilities. However, agential realism does not advocate for an aesthetic favoritism, but a conscious recognition of the agency of observation; observation and engagement are creation. Subjectivity is too dynamic, and too entangled within media, culture, systems, and even biology – to determine what consists of appropriate fiction: we can judge the consequences of our entanglements through the worlds which they & we create. What are the consequences, real or

imagined, of a readers' entanglements with Burrough's colonialist perspective, of wallowing in Lovecraft's fear of the unknown, of Howard's romance of power? How does the immortality of our ancient mythologies, from *Beowulf* to "Lord of the Rings," influence the way we observe, and continually create ourselves through their images? How do they expand, or limit, the possibilities of our future selves and cultures? The consequences of this literature for Gygax would be the creation of a game that required a new engagement with them, and one that forever altered the course of popular fiction, fantasy fiction, and modern culture. McLuhan claims that:

All media... are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered... Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. (26)

Miéville's point about fantasy literature not being a political priority is misguided: the works of all our fantasy fictions are entangled within modern culture, and our modern selves, that they not only provide insight into the modern moment, they chart its future. Fantasy fiction, and the tastes, desires, needs, and subjectivities from which it emerges are the same from whence our collaboratively-observed, modern universe emerges. If Caillois is correct that the "destinies of cultures can be read in their games," then those destinies are also embedded within the texts which inspire them (35). The most compelling argument for the study of "popular" texts is their impact on culture: the critical disregard shown to these texts is a critical disregard for the subjectivities, and the culture, entangled with them. Appendix N is not simply an appendix to a 1979 game rulebook; it is an appendix of textual works that have become irrevocably entangled with how we translate our past and navigate our future. The creation of possible worlds, inside and outside the magic circle, begins with the recognition of the agency inherent in *all* our observations and engagements, and the subsequent entanglements they forge. Appendix N is us and we are Appendix N. What does the TRPG, and its practice through play, teach us about how

we author both? What does it teach us about our agency for transfiguring their futures? The TRPG emerges from the mythologies that inspire it. In the next chapter, I examine how Miller translated the mythologies of science fiction into the architecture of a TRPG rules system.

## Chapter Four: Worlds & Adventures (*TRPG Rules*)

“*Traveller* is a game system intended for role-playing situations in the far future. It envisions certain standards for human behavior, for space travel, and for alien worlds. It details the basics of life and of endeavor. From the background, players assume the role of adventurer and set out into the universe in search of fame, glory, fortune, and power.” – Advertisement for *Traveller*, *The Journal of the Travellers’ Aid Society* #1

“Gallop[ing] around the cosmos is a game for the young, Doctor.” – James T. Kirk, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*

In 1977, Game Designers Workshop (GDW) released the tabletop role-playing game *Traveller*. The game was primarily designed and authored by Marc Miller, one of the founders of GDW. *Traveller* was designed to offer players the opportunity to leave the labyrinthine crypts of *D&D* behind and explore the galaxies and star systems of science fiction. *D&D* allowed players (and readers) to intimately explore literary fantastic worlds, such as Tolkien’s Middle Earth that was experiencing a pop cultural renaissance in the 1970s. *Traveller* took advantage (although perhaps not as consciously) of the science fiction craze during the same decade. *Traveller* had the good fortune of being released the same year as George Lucas’ space opera *Star Wars*. Peterson claims that “as the sword-and-sorcery tradition taught prospective dungeon masters how to plot their perils, so did *Star Wars*, in the earliest days of *Traveller*, provide a familiar blueprint for futuristic fantasies” (*Playing at the World* 585).

*Traveller* was also published during the initial wave of tabletop role-playing games. It belongs to the first cycle of a medium translating genre fictions from the literary text to the gaming tabletop. Every decision that Miller – and his fellow designers at GDW – made to effect that translation provides insight into their attempts to reverse-engineer the worlds of fantastic literary futures from reading fiction into a format that allowed them to be played. However, *Traveller’s* mechanics are not simply a legend of the decisions, cuts, and creative decisions

required for a ludic translation of science fiction fantasy; they are a recollection (and even remediation) of the intimate, specific observations of how those worlds exist affectively. The rules of 1977 *Traveller* are the artifactual record of an attempt to reproduce a literary experience within cybertextual algorithms; game rules are the physics – which, if Bohr’s Interpretation holds are constantly in a state of fluid, collaborate construction – of the TRPG game world. They provide the contract between the players (and game master) on how a world works. To examine the rules of a tabletop role-playing game, to analyze the decisions made with regard to their mechanics, is to examine how its designers understand the rules of the literary fantastic – and how they push the possibilities of observations (and interpretations) for the real.

### **An Intergalactic History**

Game Designers’ Workshop was formed in 1973 by Miller, Frank Chadwick, Rich Banner, and Loren Wiseman. It emerged from the Illinois State University Games Club. All four were active and dedicated members of the Club. Like many members of the 1970s wargaming scene, their obsession with simulated conflicts led to a desire to design their own. They approached the University about funding their potential designs – and formed a program known as “SIMulation Research and Design” (SIMRAD). Miller, Chadwick, Banner, and Wiseman described the project as an opportunity “to help instructors, who would produce specifications for simulation games that SIMRAD would then create” (Appelcline 156).<sup>83</sup> SIMRAD designed eight games over 18 months until Illinois State discontinued funding for the program. Miller, Chadwick, Banner, and Wiseman’s experience working on simulations for the classroom

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<sup>83</sup> Several decades before the modern critical acknowledgment of the aesthetic and artistic capacity of games, SIMRAD was ahead its time. The concept of using ludic simulations specifically designed for a particular area of study is a compelling academic project. The TRPG offers a mode of existential and identity exploration that could be perfectly suited for critical study (and experiments) within the fields of history and the humanities.

inspired the “core SIMRAD members” to form Game Designers’ Workshop (GDW), a commercial venture for promoting and publishing the team’s designs (Appelcline 157). GDW’s initial headquarters was in Miller and Chadwick’s apartment in Normal, Illinois (the same city where Illinois State’s campus is located).

The designers of GDW attended Gygax’s GenCon VI in 1973, held in Gygax’s hometown of Lake Geneva, to display one of the first games that GDW designed: the wargame *Drang Noch Osten!* (Banner and Chadwick, 1973). *Drang Noch Osten!* is a sophisticated and comprehensive simulation (it includes five maps and over 1,500 game pieces, or counters, representing combat units) of the World War II invasion of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union. It was intended to be part of a series of games that would simulate the *entirety* of WWII. Peterson speculates that the “acclaim” that the small, independent GDW received at GenCon may have inspired Gygax to form a company (TSR) to publish his game designs rather than continue his initial plan to solicit them to the mainstream wargame publishers (77). While GDW were influencing Gygax’s commercial strategies, the release of Gygax & Arneson’s *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 would be revelatory for GDW’s designers. In an interview with Garry Snow of Dieku Games, Miller recounts the impact *D&D* had on his young company:

Somebody from the Michigan game community visited us...and pulled out their copy of *Dungeons & Dragons*. I don’t remember quite how they started it but it took our company by storm...somebody took that game away from the guy who brought it, took it downstairs to a copy shop and made five copies on crummy Xerox paper so we would all have copies...because we couldn’t get a copy. They were hard to get. A week later, Frank Chadwick, the president of Game Designers’ Workshop, decreed that we were not allowed to play *Dungeons & Dragons* while the sun was up. No work was getting done. Literally, no work was getting done...We had games on the schedules. We had things we had to do. We had shipping to do. We had stuff to go out and nobody was working. They were all playing *Dungeons & Dragons* all day long. (“Marc Miller” 4:28-5:39)

Role-playing was not an entirely new concept (even if the terminology was). When GDW’s designers were creating games for SIMRAD, they encoded role-playing opportunities



within their historical games: the player in any wargame is required to “role-play” a fictitious officer or general giving orders to his military units. However, Gygax and Arneson’s game made the concept explicit and encoded role-play into their games’ specific algorithms. While the military officer in a wargame is unquantified and ambiguous, the heroes in a game of *D&D* are algorithmically encoded and observed. Miller claims that “Gary Gygax’s conversion of role-playing from a touchy-feely analog system to an easy-to-use digital character system was brilliant, even if we couldn’t quite put it into words” (Wolf 2017). The “fighting man” of *D&D* has definitive characteristics (such as strength, or intelligence and charisma) that collapse ambiguity into an accessible interpretation of a game’s protagonist. This translation also makes the protagonists mechanically accessible: instead of relying on constant and dynamic translations, the game character’s capacity, personality, and traits are collapsed into a mechanical system.

As noted in Chapter 2, The legacy of the tabletop role-playing game is based on emergent relationships whose agents become entangled: between designers, rules, players, and the worlds they attempt to model. While GDW had initially seen itself as a publisher of traditional wargames, the introduction of the capacity of role-playing games made their initial wargaming design ambitions seem quaint. The TRPG offered an algorithmic opportunity to design entire worlds and narratively connect the conflicts within them. The introduction of *D&D*’s design did not simply represent the introduction (or even evolution) of new ludic possibilities but rather the provocation of new observations of the capacity of play. Gygax & Arneson’s new experiment irrevocably changed GDW’s design team, their ambitions, and their subjectivities; GDW’s response – as players and as designers – would irrevocably change the landscape for *D&D* and all TRPGs.

According to Miller, Gygax & Arneson's design inspired him and Chadwick to begin working on their own TRPGs (Wolf). Chadwick, with input from Darryl Hany, John Harshman and Wiseman designed and published *En Garde!* in 1975. *En Garde!* simulated the swashbuckling swordplay of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Paris featured in adventure novels such as Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844). Unlike *D&D*, *En Garde!* was designed to be played in a single session. Players did not play the same character throughout a serial campaign but completed the game in one session.

Miller's contribution to the TRPG genre, *Traveller*, created with assistance from Chadwick, Wiseman, and John Harshman, followed two years later in 1977.<sup>84</sup> Although *Traveller* was released only three years after *D&D*, it was not the first science fiction TRPG.<sup>85</sup> TSR's *Metamorphosis Alpha* (James M. Ward 1976), Flying Buffalo's *Starfaring* (St. Andre 1976), and Gamescience's *Space Patrol* (Michael Scott Kurtick and Rockland Russo 1977) all precede *Traveller's* publication. Neither *Starfaring* nor *Space Patrol* found much of an audience and are no longer in print. While *Metamorphosis Alpha* introduced a science fiction theme to tabletop role-playing, its rules are derivative of its fantasy predecessors. Game designer Lawrence Schick describes *Metamorphosis Alpha* as simply a "radical *D&D* variant set in the

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<sup>84</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to Miller as the principal creator of *Traveller*; however, it is important to note that this does not indicate any agreement or advocacy of auteur theory. *Traveller* is not the sole creation of one subjectivity or one agent but rather emerges through the relationships which made it possible (and inevitable), just as Miller, himself, is the consequence of the relationships (sociopolitical, biological, cultural) which made him possible (and inevitable). I do propose that the interpretation of Marc Miller in 1977, embodied within a specific designer at GDW, is the one manifested agent most responsible for collapsing possible interpretations of science fiction into the artifact and practice we consider *Traveller*.

<sup>85</sup> Miller's *Traveller* was also not the only attempt to ludically translate science fiction literature into a game. Wargame publishers Avalon Hill and Simulation Publications (SPI) released strategy games (that had more in common with the classic wargame simulation) based on the conflicts featured in classic science fiction novels. Avalon Hill released *Starship Troopers*, based on Heinlein's intergalactic military adventure novel in 1976 and would also publish *Dune*, based on Frank Herbert's sprawling epic, in 1979, shortly after *Traveller's* release. SPI released *John Carter: Warlord of Mars* (after Burroughs' science fiction adventure series) in 1979.

corridors of a vast lost starship rather than in underground dungeons” (25). *Metamorphosis Alpha*’s rules would evolve into TSR’s second foray into science fiction role-playing with 1978’s *Gamma World* (designed by James M. Ward and Gary Jaquet).<sup>86</sup> Maliszewski claims that “*Gamma World* has remained perhaps the second most successful RPG produced by TSR, with a new edition of the game having been produced as recently as 2010” (Sep 2020). *Gamma World* focuses less on exploration among the stars, but adventuring within a mutated, post-apocalyptic Earth. Even *Gamma World* would never reach the popularity of GDW’s *Traveller*.

For the 1970s and 80s, *Traveller* became the standard-bearer for tabletop science fiction roleplaying. *Traveller* has been continually published and in print since its initial release –by multiple publishers that have released different evolutions of the original game. The last two editions were released in 2019 (Far Future Enterprises’ “5.10 edition”) and 2022 (Mongoose Publishing’s “second edition”). Appelcline posits that, in addition to the fortuitous release of



Figures 2,3,4 *Space Patrol*, *Starfaring*, and *Metamorphosis Alpha* TRPGs.

<sup>86</sup> The original edition of *Metamorphosis Alpha* was reprinted in 2014 by Goodman Games (publisher of the OSR fantasy game *Dungeon Crawl Classics*). Like *D&D* and *Traveller*, it was an attempt to simulate a literary world: the diegesis of Brian Aldiss’ 1958 science fiction novel *Non-Stop*.

Lucas' *Star Wars*, *Traveller's* "professionalism" was responsible for its success – and how it set itself apart from its competitors. TRPG Game designer Schick claims that *Traveller* was "the first comprehensive and credible SF RPG" (25).

The artifacts of *Traveller's* initial release were organized in a similar fashion to Gygax & Arneson's first edition of *D&D* (Miller used them as a model). The first edition of *Traveller* consisted of three digest-sized rulebooks enclosed within a small black box. However, unlike *D&D*, the covers of the *Traveller* rules did not feature illustrations: each book's cover featured only its title in text over a stark, foreboding, solid black background. The box in which the rulebooks arrived featured the dictated text (white and red letters over a black background) of an enigmatic distress signal originating from an unknown star ship. This distress signal appeared above the game's title: a teasing, mysterious hint of the types of experiences the game offered:

This is Free Trader Beowulf,  
 Calling anyone...  
 Mayday, Mayday...we are under  
 Attack...main drive is gone...  
 Turret number one not responding...  
 Mayday...losing cabin pressure  
 Fast...calling anyone...please help...  
 This is Free Trader Beowulf...  
 Mayday...

There is only one illustration (of a possible player character, or PC) in the entirety of *Traveller's* 1977 rulebooks.<sup>87</sup> The three rulebooks are "Characters and Combat," "Starships,"

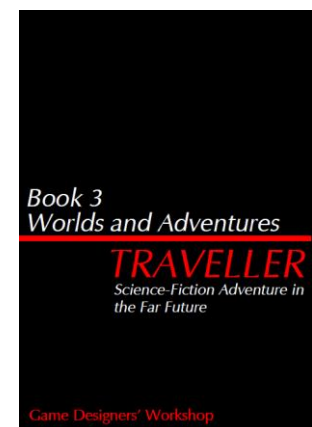
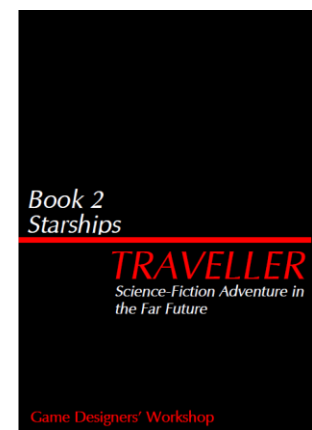
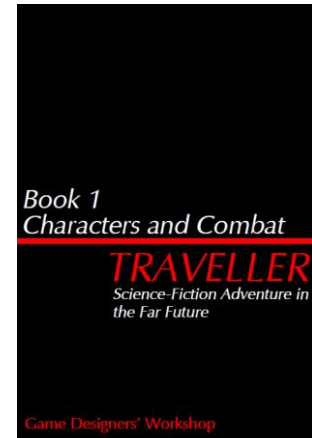


Figure 5 *Traveller* Rulebooks

<sup>87</sup> This is a departure from *D&D*. Every edition of *D&D* includes illustrations of its gallery of possible fantastic heroes and monsters. *Traveller's* rule set is remarkably less playful; it resembles an instructional manual more than

and “Worlds and Adventures.” All three rulebooks are about fifty pages long. All three provide the rules necessary for a game master (referred to within *Traveller’s* lexicon as “referee”) to create, and populate, a science fiction universe for players to explore. Unlike *D&D*, *Traveller* did not require any special dice: standard six-sided dice were sufficient for resolving contingent situations.

Although *Star Wars* was instrumental to *Traveller’s* commercial success, its primary influences were literary, similar to *D&D*, and often equally obscure. Like Gygax, *Traveller’s* main designer, Miller, was a voracious reader. Like Gygax, it was his father who introduced him to the literary genre which he would one day simulate through a tabletop roleplaying game.

Miller writes that:

My father often brought home strange titles like *Fate Magazine* with its emphasis on flying saucers and the paranormal. He never really brought the books to me: they were for his reading and recreation. They were lying around the house and I found them interesting and readable.

Then he brought home Heinlein’s *Sixth Column* in paperback (around 1958). I picked it up and enjoyed it.<sup>88</sup> Although *Sixth Column* was not for kids, Heinlein did have a line of juvenile titles readily available in the public library: *Space Cadet*, *Red Planet*, *Farmer in the Sky*, and all the others. That line of a dozen or so titles was filled with adventure combined with science that appealed to me, and I devoured them. From there, I searched the library for other SF and expanded into those titles as well. (Personal correspondence)

Like Gygax, Miller was raised in a middle-class family in the Midwest, had military aspirations (although unlike Gygax, he actually completed an Army tour of duty in Vietnam) that did not entirely pan out (after his tour of duty, Miller was not invited to continue his career as an officer). Like Gygax, it was Miller’s father who introduced him to the compelling narratives that serve as the diegetic foundation for his game designs. Like Gygax, his father would pass away

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a rulebook for a game that simulates heroic science fiction.

<sup>88</sup> *Sixth Column* was originally published in a serial format in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1941. It was attributed to “Anson MacDonald,” a pen name for Heinlein. *Sixth Column* was published as a hardbound novel in 1949.

early in his life. Miller's father died when he was twelve years old. The creation of *Traveller*, like *D&D*, is not a compensation for the loss of these intimate entanglements – but a process for their subjective perdurance. The emergence of the tabletop role-playing game is the consequence of relationships not only between story and game, or between author and player, or habitus and subject, but the tactical engagements and entanglements between *people*.

The *Traveller* rules that we consider in this chapter are one possible interpretation – of science fiction tabletop roleplaying *and* of new engagements with narrative mythologies – that are the inevitable consequence of the relationships that catalyzed their observation. The authorship of a novel is a form of observation, a conscious attempt at collapsing human experience into an interpretative narrative for binding existential interpretation: to make meaning as a form of social construct. The design of the game is a similar form of observation, a conscious attempt at collapsing the possibilities of media engagement within a contractual form accessible to bind a ludic domain. Both designs (novel and game) are codified contracts as the basis for future relationships (and entanglements) within them – though they are also indicative of a collapse of possibility. The literary text and the game provide a social contract, but they also limit possibility through the boundaries of the meaning and experience they require.

### **Literary Entanglement**

The *Traveller* rule books do not include an analog for the *D&D Dungeon Masters Guide* “Appendix N;” however, Miller has identified numerous texts, through interviews and writing, that were influences on the game. In *The Science Fiction in Traveller*, Appelcline examines many of the most influential texts and genres which influenced the game's design (2016). In “Deciphering the Text Foundations of *Traveller*” Michael Andre-Driussi connects *Traveller*'s aesthetic and mechanical conventions with literary analogs (2020). The literary inspirations that

Appelcline and Driussi refer to are based in 20<sup>th</sup> Century pulp fiction. As with the lurid, fantastic action-oriented titles that inspired Gygax for *Dungeons & Dragons*, many of *Traveller's* literary antecedents are fairly obscure. Appelcline identifies Dickson's "Childe Cycle" series, H. Beam Piper's space operas, Keith Laumer's comic science fictions, E.C. Tubb's "Dumarest" saga, and David Drake's military science fiction stories, as primary inspirations. Miller has also attributed science fiction authors such as Asimov, Anderson, and Larry Niven as influencing *Traveller* (Wolf). Most of these fictions first appeared in pulp serials, such as Laumer's "Jame Retief" series which first appeared in *Fantastic* magazine (January 1960), Piper's Space Viking, serialized in *Analog* (1962-1963) and Dickson's Childe's novels (the first story, "Dorsai!" appeared in the May 1959 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*). The works that inspired *Traveller* belong to the paraliterature of genre fiction within the traditions of the serial pulp magazines.

Miller has stated that the main character of Tubb's "Dumarest" saga, Earl Dumarest, is the "quintessential Traveller" (Wolf). Driussi claims that the very title of Miller's game likely comes from Tubb: in a passage from the first book in the 33-volume (!) series, *The Winds of Gath*, Dumarest is directly asked: "What is it like being a traveler?" (5).<sup>89</sup> This refers to

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<sup>89</sup> The spelling of *Traveller* – with the English-style double "L" instead of an American single "L" – is a little confusing. In an online interview, Miller attributes it to honoring the British Tubb and his influence on the game. However, Tubb uses the American spelling in his Dumarest works (see above and even later, as Driussi identifies, in the tenth book of the saga (*Jondelle*) where Tubb explains "A traveler...A wanderer who had seen a hundred worlds" (6).

Driussi gives a more interesting, but potentially specious, claim for the change: "By using the older, British, 'two-L' form, GDW deftly evokes an imperial history of far-flung territories: the exotic English-speaking world beyond the American shore: South Africa, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, etc" (8). Without using the term, Driussi's suggestion is that the double L is a (veiled) reference to colonialist tropes.

The theme of imperialism would play a central part in later editions of *Traveller*; however, the first edition of the game does not include any mention of an empire – or include any *specific* intended setting at all. Every decision that Miller makes, conscious or unconscious, trivial or essential, is an agential cut that effects aesthetic and

Dumarest’s nomadic adventuring – an aesthetic element of the stories that, as Driussi identifies, is crucial to *Traveller* gameplay. Tubb’s saga centers around the “Earl of Dumarest,” an intergalactic adventurer journeying through countless star systems on a quest to find his original home planet, the mythical Earth. Despite being firmly planted within the galactic worlds of science fiction, the core narrative motivation – of adventure into strange and “savage” worlds – is analogous to *D&D*, where heroes navigate lost crypts, dungeons, and labyrinths in search of treasure. However, *Traveller* does offer the novelty of future technologies; Driussi identifies several science fiction concepts from Tubb’s saga that Miller purloined for his game. For instance, Miller borrows specific modes of interstellar travel, weapons and armor, and even futuristic drugs from “Dumarest.”

Although Miller has cited Asimov’s “Foundation” series as influential to *Traveller*, most of the works that Appelcline identifies belong to a more heroic, adventurous legacy of science fiction (which might also lend themselves more accessible to a game that requires players to role-play compelling action-oriented heroes) (Wolf). Appelcline posits that *Traveller* is a “child of the ‘50s and ‘60s,” because its inspirations belong to a mode of science fiction based on an interstellar manifest destiny. The *Traveller* universe offers a frontier that is dangerous, where human empires rise and fall, but it is also a frontier that offers vast riches for the heroes (and “travellers”) brave enough to risk the voyage. The textual works that inspired *Traveller*’s design prominently feature futuristic technologies, alien races and civilizations, and exploration among the stars – however, they are often used as the fantastic backdrop for their heroes to adventure and explore among, rather than to consider the intellectual or existential ramifications of. One of *Traveller*’s first advertisements claims that “players assume the role of adventurer and set out

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affective consequences through its consequent entanglements. The ubiquity of TRPG tropes within the modern consciousness compel contemporary observations of even Miller’s smallest choices.



into the universe in search of fame, glory, fortune, and power” (*The Journal of the Travellers’ Aid Society #1*, 1979).

All generalizations – like any observation – are problematic by inevitably limiting the complexities of interpretive possibility, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that *Traveller’s* inspirations emerge from a publishing format based on commercial accessibility. Play itself exhibits an intrinsic quality of exploration and adventure, through which intellectual interpretations – like the imposition of narrative on human experience – inevitably follows but is not an intrinsic part of the actual experience. Miller’s ambition was to ludically interpret science fiction literature for the new tabletop role-playing genre that Gygax & Arneson pioneered for fantasy literature. However, the diegetic world of the TRPG, no matter how ripe with narrative and experiential possibility, is bounded by the requirements for communal play. Huizinga and Malaby remind us that the game, like the story, requires a “circle” or a “contrived domain” for play.<sup>90</sup> This exigence became quite clear to Miller as he designed *Traveller*. In 2022, Miller writes that:

I envisioned a generic science-fiction system that would enable players to emulate almost any science-fiction they had read. But science-fiction is a truly broad category and by the mid-1970’s had advanced far beyond simple space opera adventure. As I wrote (/designed), I needed to make decisions about content: Do I include all possible forms of starship drives, or settle on one? If there’s a space navy, what is the government that controls it? Are there aliens? or just humans? And so much more.

So it came about that *Traveller* could not be all forms of science-fiction to all people: I had to make decisions on what to include and what to omit. The Classic *Traveller* that you see is the fruit of those many decisions. (Personal correspondence)

The rules of *Traveller* are the decisions that one agent determined: Marc Miller, the embodiment of the observations, interpretations, and entanglements from which his subjectivity emerged. The

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<sup>90</sup> Malaby’s concept of the contrived domain is in sharp contrast to Huizinga’s more starkly-delineated “magic circle” concept; however, both agree that games rely on manufactured spaces.

rules of *Traveller* are a microcosm, a triptych, and the observations of this subjectivity interpreting the unbounded possibilities and bound physical rules of science fiction narratives. They are a translation of these possibilities and rules for play. In her advocacy for agential realism, Barad argues that all observations make “agential cuts:” they are determinations of reality that erase other potentialities. What is observed becomes real, what is “cut” away remains diffracted and unreal (as discarded, or alternate, possibilities). The design choices that Miller makes “cut” away other possible realities for his game. Miller – a bounded, physical agent – is a limited human observer. The rules of *Traveller* reflect his capacity as author/designer and his bounded limitations of observation (he cannot see all things, ergo, his game can only simulate some). Both game and author, entangled, betray the limitations of each: the magic circle binds Miller; Miller’s bounded powers of observation bind the possibilities of his game’s rules.

The rules of *Traveller*, like the rules of any game, are an indeterminate reflection of and portal through (what Barad refers to as diffraction) the relationships from which they emerge (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 71-94). They echo, distort, and reproduce those relationships while compelling future engagements and entanglements between the agents responsible for them and the players of the game. Every observation is a subjective construction of reality; the observation of the world into a ludic simulation is a manifested reproduction of an even more bounded, and specific, representation. Rebecca Borgstrom argues that the “static published form” of TRPGs “describe a large multidimensional space of fictional worlds and stories organized by unifying data” (57). She also claims that the “structure” of game rules “restricts the field of possible stories and limits the set of potentially emergent meanings” (59). Eric Zimmerman argues for rules as part of the formal structure of a game, that “delimit and order the boundaries of the gaming experience” (qtd. in Mackay). The rules, however, are not simply a boundary of

play; they also organize, structure, and provide the social contract for play to become a game. They are a series of observations of specific modes of play in order to translate them into an accessible format that “generates interpretable outcomes” (“Beyond Play,” Malaby). A set of game rules represents the collapse of the unbounded possibilities of play into specific observation of how to play the game.

Modern games theorists argue for the importance of the algorithmic codes embedded in games as the locus for understanding their rhetorical arguments and perspectives. Juul argues that “We cannot ignore the role of the rules without ignoring a basic aspect of the player experience: that different games yield different kinds of experiences” (159). An examination of the algorithms of any game are an examination of how it attempts to construct a specific experience. Aarseth’s concept of the “cybertext,” is based on the premise that modern media is moving away from linear, progressive models of narrative and towards ergodic genres. This move requires scholarship that analyzes how the experience of those texts, and their experiences, are configured (through the algorithms & rules of the game). Bogost extends this argument through an advocacy for “procedural criticism” based on the assumption that “any medium...can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning” (IX). The argument of this dissertation is to consider the rules, just as the inspiration for their themes and aesthetics, and their play, as momentary observation of a series of dynamic relationships from which games, players, designers, and creators all emerge. The argument is that no agent can be examined as a distinct entity, but only through subjective observations that reconfigure them (and their observers). Every agent is the emergent consequence of a series of subjective observations.

Game rules are a series of semiotic codes that can be interpreted as dynamically, as subjectively, and synchronously as any form of language. While Borgstrom is correct that games “restrict” and “limit” possibility, the boundaries of the TRPG are liminal and can always be redefined through collaborative consensus. Game rules are a social contract for, and by, the players, but one, especially within tabletop role-playing, that is constantly under construction and reconfiguration. What follows is an examination of the rules of *Traveller*, from every agential construction to every agential cut, to consider one specific instant of observation – one collapsed apparatus of reality-construction – meant to reproduce a legacy of entangled speculative fiction within a world of play. We consider these rules within the cybertextual whole, as the units of experiential configuration, but also with an appreciation of how our own observation of this phenomena, our own translation of how we understand it, inevitably transforms the rules and the game: we will examine the rules of *Traveller*, and ergo, be ineluctably changing what they mean, what they can be, and what they are.

### **Outlines of a Universe**

One of the first decisions that Miller made when designing his rules was determining how they should be organized. The first “cut” that he had to make was in defining their basic outline and structure. Like many other designers (including Gygax & Arneson), Miller asked: *what worked before?* The three rule booklets for *Traveller* mirror the original edition of *D&D*. They are collated into three separate subjects for the gamemaster/referee. The subject matter of each rulebook also followed Gygax & Arneson – who organized their rulebooks around the basic *agents* within classic narratives. The first rulebook of *OD&D* is “Men & Magic.” It contains the rules for creating a character (and how to take advantage of their fantastic abilities). *Traveller’s*

first rule book is titled “Characters and Combat.” Again, the rules for creating a new character (and their capacities, in this case, for resolving violent conflict) represent the first section of rules. The literary analog for TRPG characters, the roles that players will inhabit through performative roleplay, are the protagonists of a story. The character creation rulebooks for both games are meant to be read first – both feature an introduction that loosely defines the core themes and aesthetics of the game – suggesting that the protagonist is the primary motivator and agent of the TRPG world and its realization.<sup>91</sup> This is unsurprising considering the entanglements that these TRPGs (and their designers) share with early 20<sup>th</sup> century pulp fiction (and their authors). The worlds of these fictions – whether the medieval fantasy of Howard or the speculative futures of Tubb – rely on their heroes – whether that is Conan the Barbarian or the Earl of Dumarest – for their animation. The settings of these fictions are the playground for these heroes to explore (and often conquer). The configuration of the TRPG experience is likewise built on establishing a similar foundation for their play: the game cannot even begin unless it has both its heroes to manifest the game’s adventure tropes and avatars for the players to adventure through (and within).

*Traveller’s* second rulebook is titled “Starships.” The rules begin with creating protagonists for the game, and in this second rulebook provide these heroes their most essential resource. The world has not yet been established, but the means and tools for which to explore are provided first. Miller is establishing the core conceit of his game. If the title was not

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<sup>91</sup> Although subsequent tabletop role-playing games, over the course of 30+ years, have changed the organization of their rule sets, character creation is usually the first set of rules presented in every system. Even five editions removed from *OD&D*, the current edition of *Dungeons & Dragons’* (2018) first chapter is titled: “Step-By-Step Characters.” The character creation process is more accessible in fifth edition but creating heroes for play remains the most important foundation of the game. Rules for creating an “investigator,” in Petersen’s *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) likewise follows an introduction to the game’s aesthetic (and represent the first set of actual game mechanics).

suggestive enough, the game is based on the concept of a series of endless journeys through a mysterious cosmos. In 1977, tabletop roleplaying was a nascent medium. Many of the tropes that modern players take for granted (such as designing character motivations, complicated character narrative arcs, and backstories) were not routine; however, even in the earliest TRPGs, the one motivation that was necessary for the game was that the characters would *move*. Miller realized, of course, in a science fiction universe (unlike the medieval heroes of *D&D*) that the characters would need the means to do so. His second rulebook is based on providing the means of this movement. The second rulebook provides the capacity to adventure and explore a universe where intergalactic travel is possible and routine (although not always safe).<sup>92</sup>

*Traveller's* third rulebook is titled "Worlds and Adventures." These rules shift from designing and improving the game's protagonists into manifesting the diegetic universe they are made to explore. The third rulebook also provides rules for the game's antagonists (including rules for creating entirely new species of intergalactic beasts). However, despite the title, there are still two chapters, "Equipment" and "Psionics," that augment the capacities of heroes. Even in a book centered on creating a world for exploration, Miller continues to keep the characters – and their emerging capacities – in mind. Even if the worlds of *Traveller* are meant to be compelling playgrounds of mystery and adventure, it is hard to dispute that the center of the *Traveller* universe is still its heroes.

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<sup>92</sup> The second rulebook for original *Dungeons & Dragons* is titled "Monsters & Treasure" and provides rules for the game's antagonists and the loot they hoard (and which the heroes can acquire through conquest). Miller would list "monsters" for the heroes to face in the third rulebook but unlike Gyax & Arneson, his second rulebook is not focused on antagonists for the heroes but rather builds on the player characters' capacities. Two of Miller's three rulebooks focus on the heroes and their tools.

## Characters & Combat

The first section of *Traveller's* first rulebook, "Characters and Combat," opens with an introduction to the concept of tabletop role-playing, a necessary initiation for inexperienced players experimenting within a new ludic genre. It explains what materials (beyond the rulebooks) are necessary: dice, paper, pencils, and the option to employ hexagonal maps, miniatures (like those used in classic wargames), and a calculator. After brief explanations on TRPG campaigns, how the dice are used, and the role of the referee, Miller introduces the themes and aesthetics of the type of fiction his game simulates. He writes:

*Traveller* covers a unique facet of future society: the concept that expanding technology will enable man to reach the stars, and to populate the worlds which orbit them. Nonetheless, communication will be reduced to the level of the 18th Century, reduced to the speed of transportation. The result will be a large (bordering ultimately on the infinite) universe, ripe for the bold adventurer's travels. Using this three-book set, players are capable of playing single scenarios or entire campaigns set in virtually any science fiction theme. ("Characters and Combat" 5)

In the 1981 reprint of *Traveller's* rules, he revised this introduction by adding the statement that "...no set of rules can totally define the universe and how it works" ("Characters and Combat" Revised 5).<sup>93</sup> Miller contextualizes his game as a specific observation of the possibilities of speculative future technologies becoming entangled with the possibilities of human exploration and adventure – an observation that is, like any observation of any universe, bounded and finite. Intersubjectivity, whether through reading, play, or navigating a speculative future, must be

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<sup>93</sup> After the initial success of the original edition of *Traveller*, GDW released a slightly modified version with minor fixes to rules and edits to the copy in 1981. This dissertation deals (almost entirely) with the original 1977 release – however, this note added to the reprint's introduction is compelling in that it identifies a concept Miller, and his fellow designers, likely discovered after the game was played by new agents (who had been promised a universe "bordering ultimately on the infinite"). As expansive as the play of TRPGs might be, their rules could never simulate the entirety of a speculative universe. The simulation of areas that the rules could not cover would have to be created, collaboratively and during gameplay: the rules were a static and finite starting point.

bounded to be read, played, navigated – or even *comprehended* through the faculties of finite observers.

In this opening section Miller also offers a complication to this dissertation’s assumption that TRPGs require a collaborative effort to construct a universe. He mentions that *Traveller* can be played solitaire. He writes that: “One player undertakes some journey or adventure alone. He handles the effects of the rules himself. Solitaire is ideal for the player who is alone due to situation or geography” (“Characters and Combat” 2). Many of the rules, especially in the “Worlds and Adventures” rulebook, are designed so that a single player, relying more on the mechanical algorithms rather than cooperative collaboration, could construct their own speculative universe. However, even as Miller notes here, this style of play – while possible – is predicated not usually by choice but by disadvantageous circumstances. One of *D&D*’s competitors, St. Andre’s *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), also attempted to translate its rules for solitaire play – although that translation ends up having more in common with “Choose Your Adventure” novels than TRPGs (and *D&D* would also release a series of solo adventures in a similar format). This dissertation is mostly concerned with the most common style of play of *Traveller*, as part of a longer campaign involving a group of players, but with the acknowledgment that *Traveller* could, and was, played in ways that resist rigid definitions of tabletop role-playing. In the end, the players of a game, not its designers or academic scholars, decide how it is played.

This section also includes two paragraphs on the foundation of *Traveller*’s mechanic for resolving contingent situations. During the play of *Traveller*, and the majority of mainstream modern TRPGs, the outcome of contingent situations can be handled in three ways, and according to the following agential hierarchy: through referee fiat, by dice roll, or by consensual



agreement among the game's players. Like *D&D* (and the majority of modern TRPGs), *Traveller* relies on random dice rolls for resolving specific situations. Unlike *D&D*, which requires several forms of unusual dice such as four- and 20-sided dice, *Traveller* requires only the six-sided dice common to contemporary mainstream, commercial board games. The situations that require dice rolls are identified in the rules (although additional exigencies that require rolls can be identified by players and referee during play). In *Traveller*, these include determining if a character's laser rifle shot hit is target, whether the target space monster's retaliatory blow hits the character, or even more general matters such as whether a starship reaches its intended destination.

The decision to use the dice is a choice to shift observations of the game's status, narrative, and world from the subjective and conscious direction of the gaming group into the unconscious (but not entirely objective) of the physical collision between plastic cubes and a wooden table. Malaby and Costikyan argue that the compelling nature of games relies on their randomness and unpredictability: most social systems (such as government bureaucracies) attempt to limit contingency, but games revel in the anticipation of their unpredictable outcomes (2007, 2013). In a TRPG, even without dice, the game's world and narrative are contingent: the game is a collaborative construction that relies on the disparate subjectivities, interests, desires and imaginative capacities of its players. Even with final adjudication responsibility, the referee cannot predict what will happen in a game. The referee cannot predict what actions the player characters will make – they are only responsible for interpreting the outcome. Malaby claims that the “unfolding of contingent outcomes in a semibounded domain such as a game is inherently compelling, presenting as it does just the right mix of the expected and the unexpected” (107). Costikyan argues that “games require uncertainty to hold our interest, and that the struggle to master uncertainty is central to the appeal of games” (2). The random outcomes impact the

experience that is translated by the players into an accessible narrative to make meaning from their play: any factor that impacts the experience, transforms the emergent & constructed narrative. The (multiple & unbounded) authors of the TRPG must “mix” the “expected and unexpected” while offering an opportunity to its players to experience an illusion of mastering “uncertainty” to function effectively; it is the entanglement of direction, process, engagement, and interpretation that allow the game to emerge and be *interesting*. The contingency, whether direct by player collaboration or dice rolls, is an embedded function within the game.

A TRPG’s rules for manifesting (and translating) the unexpected is not necessarily an insight into how the game’s (multiple & unbounded) authors observe how contingent outcomes in the material world but are constrained by the same boundaries (and habitus) of their author’s entanglements. *Traveller* and *D&D* rely on dice for resolving contingency because of their audience’s familiarity with them (through wargames and commercial board games) and their ready accessibility. A game relies on observers and players to manifest it through observation; in the same manner that physical and social realities are constructed through their observation, navigation, and translation. The players must know how to use the tools of the game for these translations; Gygax, Arneson, and Miller decided on dice not necessarily because they were the best mechanism for producing random, contingent results, but rather because their audience was familiar with their use in other games. No analysis of a particular TRPG system can be complete without considering the context of its emergence. Malaby argues that games are a continual process, and “moving targets, capable of generating new, emergent effects that then inform the following instances of the game” (“Beyond Play” 103). As games and TRPGs have been reconfigured through the ubiquity of modern ludic engagements, game designers have experimented with alternative mechanics. For instance, Jonathan Tweet’s 1991 *Everway* relies

on “fortune” cards to produce contingent outcomes; Erick Wujcik’s *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* (1991) and Ben Robbin’s *Microscope* (2011) have no mechanical systems for producing random outcomes but rely on the unpredictability of game players’ creativity.

*Traveller’s* dice rule system is elegant and simple: almost every contingent situation in the game is adjudicated by a “saving throw” of two (sometimes more) six-sided dice.<sup>94</sup> The player must roll higher than “target” number based on the difficulty of the action the player’s character (PC) is attempting to accomplish. This target number can be modified by the PC’s faculties and equipment. A roll higher than the target number indicates success; a lower number indicates failure. In this regard, *Traveller* sets itself apart from many of its contemporary TRPG competitors. Early in the evolution of the genre, the ethos of early TRPG designers was based on lengthy rules for simulating any possible game situation.<sup>95</sup> *Traveller’s* rules books are more compelling – from the perspective of what the algorithms reveal about Miller’s observations of science fiction – not because of how they simulate contingency but rather by *what* Miller felt needed to be simulated. As he notes in *Traveller’s* revised rulebook, not every contingency can be simulated. Every cut is not only an observation but an exclusion of alternate (simulated) realities and interpretations.

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<sup>94</sup> The term “saving throw” is also used in *D&D* although in a different context. In *D&D*, a saving throw is rolled by players whose characters are attempting to avoid a threat (which could be physical, mental, or even magical). The classic version of *Traveller* uses the term much more liberally to include any contingent situation that requires a dice roll.

<sup>95</sup> One of the most infamous examples of this would be Gary Gygax’s own *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) – in which Appendix N appears (see last chapter). Gygax’s ambition to continue having *D&D* lead the field in TRPG innovation led him to provide rules for modeling the most esoteric situations for fantasy heroes: there are tables for determining diseases, such as generative organ disorders or skin afflictions that heroes might acquire on their travels (14); a definition of naval terminology for using ships (55); a section on the “duties, excises, fees, tariffs, taxes, tithes, and tolls” that PCs might have to pay (89); a monetized list of items, such as plinth or splay batters, for constructing castles (107); and a wealth of appendixes on categories such as the “random generation of creatures from the lower planes” and “herbs, spices, and medicinal vegetables” (194, 220). While Miller argues no rules can comprehensively simulate a universe, the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* is one (although it was not unique in this ambition) that makes the attempt.

The random dice rolls used for determining the outcome of contingent situations is also used for determining the initial starting “statistics” of the player’s characters. The section after Miller’s introduction provides rules for constructing the diegetic observers and agents that will explore the game’s universe. In his examination of the emergence of *D&D*, Peterson notes that the pulp fictions that inspired Gygax & Arneson’s game often include a “visitation” trope. This literary trope involves an inhabitant of modern-day Earth, such as John Carter in Burroughs’ novels or Holger Carlsen in *Three Hearts and Three Lions*, who is transported to a fantastic setting – Mars for Carter; a medieval realm based on Northern European myth, for Carlsen. Within narratives, the “visitation” trope allows the reader to vicariously experience a fantastic, alternate world through a relatable protagonist entangled within the habitus of a recognizable world, society, and laws of physics – rather than a fantastic character entangled within an alien habitus. While the characters within TRPGs are not transported from a mundane realm to the fantastic, the “visitation” trope provides a metaphor for the experience of playing an RPG: the game’s player will inhabit an avatar (the player character), created within the fantastic world and a member of its population.<sup>96</sup> The relationship between player and player character is more intimate than the pulp novel: the player is directly translated into the role of a fantastic character. It is the player, not a narrative character, who is “visiting” the fantastic world.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> There is one interesting exception to this statement. Arneson’s *original* home fantasy campaign (that helped him experiment with the rules that would be published as *D&D*) featured characters that were supposed to be the *actual* players; the narrative concept was that the players had been transported into the world of Blackmoor through a “time warp.” According to Schick, this presented a number of complications for Arneson’s game: in addition to making the players uncomfortable, it limited “dramatic tension,” because while Arneson might threaten the player’s characters with danger, he refused to actually kill them because they were based on the real, living people around his game table (18).

<sup>97</sup> There is one distinction between the genre fictions and the TRPGs that they inspired. Most of the heroes in Gygax’s Appendix N or within the science fiction fantasies that Miller enjoyed, adventure alone. Visitation heroes such as John Carter, Holger Carlsen, and Harold Shea (*The Complete Enchanter*, Pratt & de Camp) are the primary agents of their tales. Many of the protagonists of these tales often have companions but usually only briefly, and they are easily replaced. Even the protagonists exploring their home universe (Conan, the Earl of Dumarest) are

TRPG rules provide mechanics for this visitation. As noted, character creation is almost universally the first set of rules provided within TRPG game systems. The players can neither view the game world, nor act upon it, without the ludic extension of an (imaginary) agent who dwells and acts within it. These characters *play* within the worlds of the fantastic world in much the same manner their players play their own roles in the “real” world (Fine). The character that players inhabit provide a subjective point of view for interactions with the world that the game master presents to them. TRPG rule systems represent how the game designers observe the agents from the fictional genres they are translating: their character creation algorithms provide the “procedural units” for configuring playable avatars within a game world. The agents of the game world are constructed according to these mechanics.

In addition, the characters that TRPG players play within a game bind the players’ agential capacity within the game. One of the contracts of any form of gameplay is the tacit agreement that players play by the rules. In a TRPG, one of those rules is that players adhere to the fictional verisimilitude of the game world. The term “role-play” implies that players perform the role of the character that they have created. The social contract necessary to play a TRPG bounds player agency by the limitations of the capacities, knowledge, and perspectives of their imaginary characters. Players must imagine that within the game world, they *are* these characters. Miller explains that the character “serves as an alter-ego to the player, who manipulates him, and lives through him” (“Characters and Combat” 4). Any actions that players

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only accompanied briefly by companions (who are often disposable).

The main narrative belongs to the journey of the lone wolf and revels in the power fantasies of their individual conquests. In TRPG play, multiple players are playing heroes, and the narrative (and the creation of the world for their exploration) is a collaborative one. An argument could be made that the TRPG splinters the comprehensive literary heroic figures into distinct, finite facets of their personalities that are represented by the multiple PCs in TRPG (for instance, Howard’s Conan is at different times: a thief, a fighter, a barbarian, and even a ranger. All of those roles are specific character classes, that individual PCs can belong to, in *D&D*.)

want their characters to make must not only make sense within the game's world (obeying its physical and cultural laws) but also according to their character's traits. The *D&D* warrior must act accordingly to the limitations of their low intelligence score (while also taking advantage of a high strength score); the *Traveller* character is similarly bound by the faculties of the character inscribed on each player's character sheet.

Character creation in *Traveller* begins in a similar fashion as most other TRPGs. Players roll dice to quantifiably determine their character's starting "abilities" (two six-sided dice are rolled for each, to produce a number between two and twelve, with the most common variation being the mean of seven). In *Traveller*, these abilities are Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, Intelligence, Education, and Social Standing. Three of these abilities are meant to model physical characteristics, two model intellectual faculty, and the final one models the character's sociocultural prestige. It is tempting to consider the classification of these scores within a ratio of agential hierarchy: if physical skills represent half of these skills, does this mean that physical prowess is the most important characteristic of a character? If social standing only represents one ability score, does this relegate it to being the least important capacity of a character? While tempting, however, these scores do not necessarily relate to the frequency that they will be used in a game – or the severity of the contingent consequences in which they are put to use. It is more interesting to consider why Miller decided these categories needed further distinction. Why do physical abilities need to be broken down into two distinct scores? Why is mental acuity divided between raw "intelligence" and acquired "education? Why isn't Social Standing divided into abilities that reflect "standing" within political, cultural, or even intimately personal contexts?

The act of character creation in *Traveller* is a dynamic process that requires the new character to undergo expository adventures before the gaming campaign can begin. The characters in *Traveller* are not intended to be the neophyte adventurers (or “level 1” characters) of *D&D*. Miller positions them as characters who have already gained enough experience to be formidable starfaring adventurers. He writes: “A newly generated character is singularly unequipped to deal with the adventuring world, having neither the expertise nor the experience necessary for the active life” (“Characters and Combat” 5). The player, despite dwelling within a universe that contains countless forms of life (sentient and otherwise), must be human. In order to gain the necessary experience and expertise necessary, the nascent *Traveller* character has only one option: a military career.<sup>98</sup> The character can enlist (or be drafted) into one of six services: “Navy, Marines, Army, Scouts, Merchants, or Other” (5).<sup>99</sup> The cut that Miller makes here, binding *Traveller* characters’ history to military service, is based on *some* of the fiction that inspired the game: Piper (*Uller’s Uprising* 1952), Heinlein (*Starship Troopers* 1959), and Dickson (*The Genetic General* 1960) were all early pioneers of the military science fiction subgenre. However, not all of the science fiction inspirations feature heroes with military backgrounds. At the risk of speculation, this *Traveller* requirement may also have inspiration from Miller’s own life: before Miller emerged as *Traveller*’s designer (before his own “character creation” as architect for the *Traveller* universe’s physical, simulation algorithms), he was a

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<sup>98</sup> For a game that whose primary ambition was to simulate *any* form of science fiction genre or science fantasy adventure, the limitations of player’s characters being forced into a military background is strange.

<sup>99</sup> The *Traveller* category of “Other” slightly complicates the idea that all of these represent a standard military career. Miller explains what was meant to be contained in this category: “Some of the possibilities were agent (secret or not), bureaucrat, colonial, and all the others that have been identified since. But no single one seemed right. I picked the catch-all ‘Other’ and I know in my mind I thought that it was probably at the edge of the law, so at least slightly shady” (Personal correspondence). Even if this category is not directly aligned with traditional military service, it still represents a formalized set of training.

Vietnam veteran who served in the U.S. Army. Miller's personal entanglements influenced the possibilities he allowed his players: TRPG authorship continues to be a dynamic entanglement between multiple and unbounded authors.

The branch the player chooses for their new character (or in the event of being drafted, has chosen for them) will impart diverse types of skills for the PC. It also presents disparate levels of danger for the new PC. *Traveller* is infamous because it is possible for a new PC to *die* during their creation. At the end of each term of military service, the player must roll a number higher than their "service's survival number to avoid [their character's] death in the line of duty" ("Characters and Combat" 5). If the player does not roll high enough to meet this number, their character's adventures are over. The player must start over with a new character and repeat the process until they do roll a high enough number to survive the process.

This contingent possibility, during character "creation," raises the question of asking when the "play" of *Traveller* actually begins. Most examinations of TRPG play focus exclusively on the play that begins when all the players are assembled synchronously, and when their characters' attributes, capacities, and contexts have been determined – in much the same way that previous examinations of TRPGs proceed from similarly problematic assumptions about "primary" authorship. TRPG authors are not bounded by the constraints of time. All are entangled: the authors who wrote TRPG's inspirational fictions (often new translations and reinterpretations of embedded mythology), the game designers who pen their rules, and even the authors of the sociocultural habitus which interpellate players' perspectives and creativity. Each offers dynamic and varying levels of responsibility for how the game (like reality) emerges and manifests itself as an agent.



The play of a TRPG is likewise bounded only by a diaphanous, dynamic, and negotiated boundary. During character creation, a player, who may be working alone, is creating characters and animating them (perhaps to their untimely demise) within a subset of the *Traveller* campaign game world. The game world of their character creation is a microcosm, or more accurately a limited observation, of the game world that their eventual and viable character will inhabit once the group meets. The group will then collaboratively construct a larger canvas for the adventures of their PC “party.” As authorship of the TRPG exists before its design and extends beyond its play, the play of a game exists before its emergence as interpretable narrative. It is experience, process, possibility; only observations, the observation of a specific character, the collapse of particular set of possibilities into a specific form and bounded by the imagination of one player, bind it within the magic circle boundary of a specific TRPG campaign and universe.

Each quantification, distinction, and decision that Miller makes for the architecture of his player’s avatars represents an agential “cut,” an exclusion of other possibilities. Characters are defined by a settled typology of specific observations in a finite and static set of traits. Sofie Sauzet contextualizes agential cuts as “momentary stabilizations, doings, rather than beings. They enact that which is inside and outside of phenomena in a single movement.” If quantum observation is the act of collapsing possibility into a specific reality, the act of character creation is the collapse of subjective possibility into quantified, mechanical agency. It is a translation of human, and subjective possibility, into ludic, mechanical functionality. However, unlike a quantum observation, for the purposes of the game, the character and their abilities are fixed. The observation is recorded and resolved. The character, unlike the itinerant player, might face random situations – but they will always do so with a fixed, and accessible set of capacities to

use.<sup>100</sup> *Traveller* even includes a numeric shorthand for defining these traits that can be used for player's character as well as the non-player characters controlled by the game's referee. Miller describes this as the "Universal Personality Profile." On page 8 of the "Characters and Combat" rules, Miller explains the concept:

Characters may be precisely defined using the Universal Personality Profile (the UPP), which expresses the basic characteristics in a specific sequence, using hexadecimal (base 16) notation. In hexadecimal notation, the digits 0 through 9 are represented by common arabic numbers; the digits 10 through 15 are represented by the letters A through F. The highest single digit in base 16 notation is 15. Characteristics are listed as a string of 6 digits, in the order originally rolled: strength, dexterity, endurance, intelligence, education and social standing.

For example, a character who is totally average in all respects would have a UPP of 777777. If, however, he were highly intelligent, his UPP would be 777B77 (the B in the 4th position indicating an intelligence of 11).

While the use of the UPP is voluntary, it is made available to allow the referee and other characters to see at a glance the characteristics of persons they encounter and deal with.

The "University Personality Profile" is an observation, recorded within a numeric typology that represents the characteristics necessary for the translation of a science fiction hero-protagonist into an accessible character ready for TRPG play. It is the collapse of unbounded possibilities for a character into a series of definitive traits that can be accessed by the game system. In the 1978 *Traveller* supplement book, *1001 Characters*, Miller would directly quantify nine heroes from *Traveller's* inspirational fiction by translating their literary characteristics into the alphanumeric codes of his TRPG. However, he does not use their "real" names, but rather

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<sup>100</sup> At least within a particular game or game session. Most RPGs, although surprisingly not *Traveller*, feature some form of a "leveling up" system where characters earn "experience points," that allow them to improve their traits and acquire new skills. In *Traveller*, there are no levels, and a character improves their capacity mostly through acquiring new equipment and wealth or by raising their social standing in the game universe. PCs can improve some of their basic skills in the course of play but not at the level of other TRPGs. In contemporary TRPGs, the process of significant "leveling up" mechanics has become so pronounced as to be almost absurd. It is now a convention of the genre; *Traveller's* disinterest in the process is a rare exception.

uses an easily-recognizable description of each. For instance, the Earl of Dumarest, from Tubb's series, is catalogued as:

**4 Homeless Wanderer BFCA98 Age 34 Cr - 0 to 100,000**

Blade-6, Most other edged weapons-4, Most guns-4, Streetwise-3, Steward-2, Pilot-1, Tactics-3, Leader3 (43)<sup>101</sup>

When a contingent situation arises within a *Traveller session*, the player refers to these attributes to modify the dice roll (for instance, their dexterity score allows them a greater chance of success firing a laser pistol and their intelligence score improves the possibility of deciphering an alien language). These traits are necessary for the game to interpret the character's position, and agential capacity, within the universe of the *Traveller* game. They provide a static mechanism for representing player agency. They are inputted into the system's algorithms based on the dynamic game states which emerge during actual TRPG play.<sup>102</sup> Miller's UPI shorthand is a mechanical representation (prone to all the flaws of mechanical determinacy based on assumptions of a determinate, material universe) and designed for input into a mechanical system of universe simulation of human agency. In addition to providing rules for determining character attributes, Miller provides a section on specific skills that PCs will have (such as "weapon expertise" and "engineer") that are based on the type and length of their military career. Each skill provides a modifier to a game roll based on the PC's base attributes.

However, what makes TRPGs often so compelling is that these traits, attributes, and skills – which are static and finite when the game's rules need to access them – are not

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<sup>101</sup> The BFCA98, an extremely elevated level of attribute scores, represents the numbers of the Earl's Universal Personality Profile. Cr is a reference to the credits (wealth) that the Earl possesses at a given time. "Blades," "Most other edged weapons," all refer to specific skills; the number denotes the level of his skill with each and modifies rolls related to their application during actual play.

<sup>102</sup> If a computer metaphor is helpful, we can consider player characters as files, the rules systems as software, and the player's imaginations as the computer processor.

comprehensive. The character sheet, and the numbers and formulas that populate them, are not a comprehensive map of the actual character. The UPI might provide a shorthand of a character, but in the same way that a high school student cannot be entirely defined by their SAT scores (or the Earl of Dumarest by a line of alphanumeric code), it does not reflect all of the dimensions that players can provide to their characters.

Depending on the imaginative capacity of individual players, characters can embed traits that Miller never imagined for their characters. TRPG players are known for creating elaborate “backstories” (or expository biographies) for their characters – not only to be able to create a more intimate engagement with them but also to provide narrative motivations and ambitions for their PCs. Players may imagine that their character has many traits, attributes, and capacities – or even flaws and phobias – based on their imaginary character’s background and context; none of them may ever be listed on a character sheet. Some may not even be fully defined before the actual play begins. Some observations of a character only happen when an exigency during play requires it: This is what separates TRPGs from the modern *computer* role-playing games (CRPG): human agents can *make things up as they go along*, in the same manner they construct the game world, as a collaborative construction administered, and adjudicated, by the referee. A player could decide their character’s experiences as a space navy pilot have provided them with an uncanny capacity for navigating seas and oceans on alien worlds – or perhaps that an encounter with a water monster has left them with an overwhelming fear of alien shellfish. In the following chapter, I examine how the practice of TRPG play complicates all the static observations that the rules require (and how the relationship between rules & play is dynamic and unsettled).

It is important, however, in our examination of *Traveller's* rules systems that we recognize that – again, unlike the binary determinacy of computer algorithms – the rules not only can be challenged and complicated by the collaborative consensus of the game group, they are also not comprehensive. A character, like the human agents animating them, are not reducible to a collection of finite numbers. The systems – whether it is capitalism or the game algorithms of *Traveller* – that surround, interpellate, and limit human agency require the collapse of subjectivity into mechanically-accessible formats, but these do not, and cannot, fully represent the unbounded potential of actual human agency based on individual subjectivity. Systems require observations; they collapse potentialities into determinate positions.

The next section of rules in Miller's first rulebook provides a system for resolving violent conflict within the *Traveller* universe. Miller present violent conflict as a core component of the game, writing that: "As adventurers journey through the cities and wilds of the worlds they visit, they will encounter both men and beasts. At times, the only way such encounters can be dealt with is by force" ("Characters and Combat" 26). The universe of *Traveller* does not abide pacifism – unsurprising, perhaps, in a game that requires all of its PCs to complete military terms of service. This section is not particularly compelling in its equations for simulating violent force. Because of the different types of weapons (especially ranged weapons such as the "laser carbine") used in science fiction stories and the emphasis on standard six-sided dice, there are certain variations, but mostly the combat is derivative of *D&D* (and the wargaming conventions that inspired both games). PCs and NPCs (including monsters) take turns trading blows, their chance of scoring a hit is based on combining environmental factors, such as cover and distance, with the traits and attributes of the adversaries. A roll of the dice determines if an attack is

successful. Each adversary's turn constitutes a combat round. Hits reduce each side's attributes until one side or the other is defeated (and usually slain).

The decision to include combat is unremarkable. Violent conflicts are a staple of the literary genres that inspired *Traveller*. Its status as warranting the first section after players have created their characters contextualizes it as one of the core functions of PCs. In fact, half of the attributes determined during character creation impact conflict resolution (strength, dexterity, endurance) for resolving conflict resolution. The legacy of TRPG's wargame roots is easily identifiable here. Mackay argues that the TRPG represents the sum of the equation: "Fantasy Literature + Wargames = Role-Playing Games" (17). An argument could be made that TRPGs are not necessarily a descendant of wargames but rather a modification of them. Especially for early tabletop role-playing games, such as *Traveller*, the games seem less an entirely new genre, but more of a narrative *shell*, that provides context, and compelling motivations for, the violent conflicts at the heart of their actual play. As seen in the previous chapter, Mackay's equation is a linear simplification and reduction of their relationship.

The TRPG, as an emerging agent, is not simply the consequence of this intersection but an emergent practice from the entanglements of fantasy literature and wargames and their readers and players. This entanglement transforms these agents inside and out of time. However, Mackay also defines this intersection as a "marriage," a more apt metaphor for highlighting the entanglement that TRPGs catalyze. Through the interpretation of the TRPG, the narrative conflicts must be, or become, explicit, physical, and violent. Through the interpretation of the TRPG, violent conflicts must be contextualized by a compelling narrative. The title of *Traveller's* first rule book, "Characters and Combat," is a perfect expression of this marriage/entanglement: characters (the protagonists) are entangled with combat (the narrative

tension). This entanglement (of characters & combat) is also a direct translation of Miller's interpretative observation of the science fiction that inspired him. Richard Bartle argues that "the ethics of a virtual world reflect those of its designer" (702). The design of any TRPG system requires specific and explicit observations of the worlds it is attempting to simulate. Considering how the TRPG is entangled not only with fantasy literature (or science fiction in the specific case of *Traveller*) and wargaming but also the communities from which both are entangled: as Peterson aptly identifies throughout *Playing at the World*, these communities were integral to the survival and celebration of both genres; it was in fact their overlap (Tolkien + *Chainmail*) that made their emergence possible and successful. Any approach to TRPG studies must consider the impacts, both backwards and forwards in our translations of evolving media, of these entanglements upon the systems that both necessitated their creation and that depend on cultural systems for their reproduction. How has this entanglement, between the simulation of violent conflict and literary narrative, influenced the TRPG, TRPG (and fan) communities, and contextualized modern games; what are the consequences of these specific literary and ludic entanglements (based on the constituents of their relationships) within the play of modern culture(s)?

## **Starships**

*Traveller's* first rulebook, "Characters and Combat," established a system for creating player avatars in the game's universe. Those rules defined the primary agents within the *Traveller* universe – and ultimately, who the universe would be defined for: its heroes. In the second rulebook, "Starships," Miller introduces rules to establish the mechanics for the material resource which defines those heroes: the starships that allow them to travel. He begins this rulebook with a wonderful tautology: "Travellers travel. They move between worlds as well as

on their surfaces. The distances such travel covers may be interplanetary or interstellar in scale” (1). From the perspective of agential realism, the first book was concerned with creating and defining the agents within the *Traveller* universe. The second rulebook establishes the essential resource (or extension) that those agents must form a relationship with to emerge as *travellers*: have starship, will travel. In these rules, Miller departs from modifying other game systems into providing rules for systems that are unique to the aesthetic of his game.

If Miller’s first rulebook is concerned with the primal motivations and activities of humanity (acquisition of wealth & violent conflict), “Starships” is more preoccupied with the intellectual. If “Characters and Combat” is more concerned with simulating the violent heroics of works such as Piper’s *Space Viking* (1961), then “Starships” is closer to the technical science fiction found in works such as Asimov’s “Foundation” series (1942-1950). The first page of the rules contextualizes this foray into *Traveller’s* scientific focus with a mathematical equation for determining space travel distance and time. Miller writes:

The typical travel times list indicates the time required to travel a specified distance (assuming 1 G constant acceleration, turnaround at midpoint, and 1 G constant deceleration). Specific distance travel times can be calculated by the referee or by characters, using the travel formula shown, where T equals travel time, d equals the total distance travelled, and a equals the acceleration used. Constant acceleration, turn-around, and constant deceleration are assumed. It is suggested that the units used be 1000 miles, 10 minute periods, and 1 G (2000 miles per [10 minutes]). (“Starships” 2)

This section is typical of Miller’s second rulebook and stands in stark contrast to “Characters and Combat.” In the section detailing how starships move during combat, Miller provides three pages of information for determining their spatial positioning. Included among these rules are elaborate mathematical formulae for adjusting the ship’s position based on the mass, density, and gravity

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**TRAVEL FORMULA**

$$\mathbf{T = 2\sqrt{d/a}}$$

*Figure 6 Traveller Space Travel Formula*



of local planets. Miller's design for starship combat is dissimilar to the fantastic (and unrealistic, but spectacular) space battles of *Star Wars* through a simulation of credible starship combat. In many ways the text feels like a departure from the first book that began by situating characters as heroic protagonists. In book 2, the protagonists' context shifts from dangerous lone wolves prowling through dangerous planets to interstellar navigators juggling complicated physical computations.

Even beyond the physical formulas for determining planetary effects on velocity and acceleration, "Starships" features a wealth of numeric and sophisticated information on the economics of purchasing and designing starships. The fixation on getting the specific details right is pervasive. There are detailed rules for financing a starship ("Standard terms involve the payment of 1/240th of the cash price each month for 480 months"), how to manage the operating expenses of that ship (which include the costs of fuel, life support, routine maintenance, crew salaries, and berthing costs), the costs and capacities for varying modes of hull construction, and how to outfit ships with weapons, cargo, and navigational computers ("Starships" 5-21).<sup>103</sup> Miller offers an impressive array of options for starships and presents each option – from economics to physical construction – as equal to the verisimilitude of "serious" science fiction literature. If the protagonists of "Characters and Combat" represent awesome and heroic explorers, their tools and resources are grounded in a much more mundane, complicated, and quantifiable universe. The rules of "Starships" are governed not by the laws of the compelling literary narrative, as we find in "Characters and Combat," but rather by the physical laws of the material universe. However, the protagonists of *Traveller* remain the player characters; unlike in

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<sup>103</sup> This level of detail is mirrored in the contemporary digital MMORPG, *Eve Online* (CCP Games 2003), that also requires complex economic calculations for building ships and journeying in them; Fans, and critics, of *Eve Online* often refer to it as a "spreadsheet simulator."

the most realistic science fiction texts, the technology is never fully capable of agency. Works such as Asimov's "Foundation" series are less concerned with individual subjectivities as characters but rather the influence of technology on the emergent systems constructed by them. For instance, "Foundation" is more concerned with the technology of "psychohistory" (a speculative form of logic that Asimov presents as capable of predicting the future) and its impact on human sociological development rather than individual people within those futures. A starship may be entangled with PC's agency and capacity, but it represents an extension of their capacity, a resource which the PCs utilize for their personal means.

One of the economic systems that *Traveller* players must master is capitalism. The game is based on an assumption that future humanity will still center on reproducing the modes of acquiring (and concentrating) wealth. Unlike *D&D*, there is no "experience point" system in *Traveller*. Characters emerge from character creation (if they survived it) as capable heroes ready to travel among the stars; no amount of exploration changes their base attributes. The two ways that characters can increase their agency through the mechanics of the *Traveller* TRPG is through resource acquisition. Schick claims that "The major flaw of the *Traveller* character system is that, once a character's skills are determined, there is little provision for character improvement except through the acquisition of more and better equipment" (25-26). The considerable section on starship economics proceeds from the assumption that characters will improve their vehicle through the conquest and plunders of their adventures. Many of the initial adventure modules (pre-built scenarios for referees) are based on this conceit of the player characters as treasure seekers (which is very much borrowed, as well, from *D&D*). This is explored more fully in the third and final rulebook in Miller's initial black box set.

*Traveller* never loses its focus on its characters and their ambitions. The players represent narrative characters, not technology, existential philosophies, or speculative predictions, within the game. Ergo, the game's rules contextualize starships (and laser pistols and navigational computers) as extensions of man – in the McLuhan sense – rather than man as subservient to his systems. It is a philosophy that ultimately reflects the more heroic fictions of Piper and Tubb: it contextualizes man as a master of systems and not their slave whether that system is economic, technological, or alien. Eventually, the game implies, players can master all the unexplored star systems within the *Traveller* universe. It is important to recognize that *Traveller* does not have only one influence, but emerges from Miller's personal entanglements with a complicated, nuanced, and eclectic genre of fiction. In the same ways that TRPGs cannot be linked to primary authors, TRPG worlds cannot be directly linked to primary texts. They emerge from relationships and entanglements. No relationship is binary, static, or fixed: certain texts influence *Traveller* (or any TRPG) more than others at various times during the authorship of a specific game. Agents emerge from the relationships that catalyze and require them.

The rules of *Traveller* emerge not from a singular point of origin but from Miller's subjective observation of scores of texts, ideas, and perspectives he became compelled by – and entangled among. Miller asserts that he understood during the design process that “*Traveller* could not be all forms of science-fiction to all people” (Personal correspondence). It would require observations based on his subjectivity and interest; it would require agential “cuts” to quantify an accessible rule system that could translate science fiction literature into the TRPG cybertext. *Traveller* emerges not from the intersection of Tubb and Asimov, but rather through the subjective interpretations, and creative remediations of their relationship with Miller's subjectivity.

## Worlds & Adventures

The first *Traveller* rulebook is concerned with the creation of the game's narrative protagonists and the configurative entry point for players to "visit" the game's world. The second concerns the creation and use of the most important resources of the game's protagonists: their means of travelling. In the third and final rulebook for *Traveller's* initial rule set, Miller presents rules for the game's setting and antagonists. "Worlds and Adventures" provides a catalog of rules and algorithms for the simulation of the specific worlds that the game's PC's will visit and the dangers they will encounter there. "Worlds and Adventures" provides the narrative conflicts to make the *Traveller* play, and the players' explorations, compelling. The first two books provide rules for the promotion of the capacity of the game's agents, "Worlds and Adventures" provides the obstacles to sustaining and improving that capacity. *Traveller*, like *D&D*, represents one of the first forays into the translating of a literary genre into a ludic one; it is unsurprising that, even unconsciously, the rulebooks follow the basic patterns of classic textual narrative conceits and into a narrative structuralist typology of protagonist ("Characters and Combat"), resources & allies ("Starships"), and diegesis & antagonist ("Worlds and Adventure").

The TRPG, and Miller's observation of it, is not simply an indication of his entanglement with science fiction, but also his entanglements with how to process, share, and translate the very medium of storytelling. Game designer Ian Livingstone argues, in 1982, that "*Traveller* owes its popularity to the fact that, so far, it offers the best compromise between realism (the imagined realism of science fiction literature and films, that is) and playability" (124). Like Gygas (and other contemporary TRPG designers of the late 1970s), Miller is wrestling with the challenges inherent in defining a ludic translation with only one historical model (*D&D*). Herman argues that the logic of textual narratives (stories) "is an unreplaceable resource for structuring and

comprehending experience, a distinctive way of coming to terms with time, process, and change” (22-23). Miller is attempting to translate the cognitively-accessible logic of the linear textual narrative to the configurative process of gameplay: how does the designer restructure an ergodic experience that produces narratives similar to their textual inspirations?

The analytic temptation – regularly acquiesced to in modern game studies – is to define a distinct boundary between experience and interpretation. The issue, of course, is that the relationship between them is how both emerge subjectively: no experience exists without the context of narrative schemas which make them possible; human cognition invariably turns all experiences – no matter how isolated – into narratives. Jerome Bruner argues that narratives are the cognitive instrument for creating reality (“Narrative Construction” 6); Bohr’s argument is that every observation of reality becomes the subjective construction of it. An analysis of the design process of the first TRPGs is the study of attempts to identify, and separate, individual elements within the entanglement of narrative/experience in order to simulate them.

“Worlds and Adventures” is Miller’s specific translation of the settings and conflicts of science fiction into rules algorithms. The universe of *Traveller*, that makes it both ludically and existentially compelling, is one of considerable possibilities. The exigency of ludic simulation (within a “magic circle”) requires they be bounded but Miller’s rule set is an expansive toolbox which allows for the gestation of numerous forms of civilized, savage, dangerous, and even “mostly harmless,” planets (Adams). Miller’s ambition in this book is to provide a means of generating settings for compelling, galactic adventures analogous to the worlds of heroic science fiction. The rules for creating “Worlds” begins by establishing how and *when* each planet should be generated. Miller explains that:

The referee has the responsibility for mapping the universe before actual game play begins. The entire universe is not necessary immediately, however, as only a small

portion can be used at any one time. In unsupervised play, one of the players can generate worlds and perform mapping on a turn by turn or adventure by adventure basis. (1)

The worlds of *Traveller* exist, like spatially indeterminate photons, within states of possibility. They collapse into specific positions – or instances – when they are required by play. The play of the TRPG is not just a construction of its game world; it is constructed, piece-by-piece, when it becomes necessary.<sup>104</sup>

It is interesting to note than in *Traveller*, unlike *D&D* and most other contemporary TRPGs, the game's players assist in the universe's creation. Miller presents a purely algorithmic process for creating worlds: it relies much less on referee (or dungeonmaster) fiat and creativity and more on contingency: anyone can roll dice. In *Traveller's* initial design, worlds and planets are just as likely to emerge from random chance than conscious design. Miller provides rules and tables for determining where planets might exist in a particular sector of space, the size and physics of those planets, their major flora and fauna, and even the level of technology that their civilizations possess ("Worlds and Adventures" 1-12). All these traits can be determined through rolling six-sided dice (although referee and the players have the agency to modify or discard these random results, with the referee being the final arbiter).

Modern game theorists, such as Jenkins who contextualize games as a form of "narrative architecture," often laud games for their capacity for "emergent storytelling" ("*Game Design*"). The argument is that game narratives are not as strictly limited as classic texts; players can author their own stories within the (dynamic and diaphanous) magic circles that games provide through their rule systems. Each game sets a radical new set of boundaries based on their rules,

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<sup>104</sup> This is also how Gygax's own *D&D* campaign world of Greyhawk was constructed. Initially, Greyhawk was simply a mad wizard's dungeon underground with negligible narrative context. When his players wanted to explore above ground as well as below, however, Gygax realized he needed to build cities, towns, and wildernesses to meet their exploratory ambitions. Greyhawk's entire campaign world of Oerth was created through this process: as a means of continually meeting the exigence of his players', and their characters', observations of it.

setting, and user interfaces. However, in *Traveller*, even those boundaries emerge through a playful mode of construction: the world itself can be (if the players agree) *procedurally generated*. Out of the chaos of random dice rolls, an ordered universe emerges. Once planets are generated in this fashion, they can be classified due to a basic alphanumeric string that Miller provides: “planetary characteristics should be expressed as a string of digits, in much the same manner as the Universal Personality Profile is used for the easy identification of persons” (“Worlds and Adventures” 4). Miller has provided rules for a digital quantification of the traits of both people *and* planets for *Traveller*. It is a ludic system for making mechanical, determinate observations of radically complex elements within the game’s diegesis.

This design decision shifts the observation of the *Traveller* campaign universe from deliberate, creative decisions towards the unpredictability of random chance. Procedural generation is a staple of modern video games, but *Traveller* provides an earlier blueprint of their construction for ludic worlds. Grouling Cover argues that TRPGs preceded video games in complicating perspectives about rhetoric and narrative. She claims that TRPGs provide a more compelling model for the contemporary academic debate between narratology and ludology and how to define the intersections between the two (76). I argue that the concept of entanglement is more helpful than intersections (as Grouling Cover and Mackay advance). Intersections imply that two distinct agents collide and transform each other but maintain their individual (if changed) distinct integrity. Entanglement posits that the collision is not a change in individual agents but the genesis of an emergent *relationship* which irrevocably changes each – any future changes to either agent impacts the other. Agents are not distinct entities but the consequence of relationships; changes in the relationships from which they emerge, irrevocably reconfigure the agents that catalyzed them.

This is especially true within the current debate of games and stories. In the modern moment, the capacity of games for playing with stories means that human agents now recognize that stories can be played with. They also now recognize that games can produce more meaning with the application of (conscious) narrative schemas to their play. I concur with Grouling Cover that TRPGs offer an especially relevant model for dissecting how these modes of engagement intersect (or become entangled) but they also provide insights into the origins for the agential construction of game & story. Grouling Cover asserts that “the key difference between the TRPG and the CRPG [computer role-playing game] is not that the TRPG involves social contact (as that is becoming more common in computer games as well), but that the nature of that social contact is one that involves a high degree of agency” (48). The current move of video games into the mainstream has transformed them into a significant sociocultural crucible of reconfiguration; the TRPG is a particularly relevant “test case” (in Grouling Cover’s words) for understanding how – within early 1970s subgenres of fantasy geeks and wargaming nerds – the entanglements of game & story emerged and the entanglement of digitally-produced procedural systems & the agency of human subjectivity developed.

*Traveller’s* system for creating worlds within its campaign universe is such a model. The worlds of *Traveller* can be created procedurally, but only through the consensus of its players. Players (and the referee) can modify – or even ignore – any decisions that do not fit the overall aesthetic or themes of the players’ intended universe nor meets the requirements of providing a compelling background. The procedural systems and tools are not agents, but extensions of the human agents that guide the game. These early experiments provide insight into an early mode of balancing agency between human subjectivity and digital systems: what happens when authorial control shifts towards the artificial? Where is the locus of authorship in any system that relies on



procedural processing: what does the shift of authorial power mean for the conscious – and creative – control we have over modern narratives and classic mythologies?

There are three remaining sections in Miller’s “Worlds and Adventures:” “Equipment,” “Encounters,” and “Psionics.” “Equipment” and “Psionics” seem oddly misplaced: they both provide rules on increasing the capacity of PCs. The equipment section contains rules for the resources (from “oxygen tanks” to “pressure tents”) for characters to acquire and assist in their adventures; Psionics is a science fiction translation of magic (manifested through futuristic psychic abilities). These sections would seem more at home in Miller’s first book about characters. However, “Encounters,” provides rules for providing additional allies and antagonists scattered through the game’s universe. Miller breaks down encounters into: “ordinary or routine encounters, random encounters, and encounters with patrons” (“Worlds and Adventures” 19). Each posits a different form of engagement with a *Traveller* world: ordinary and routine encounters include often mundane interactions with NPCs (such as a “store clerk”). Random encounters are procedurally generated and provide opportunities for emergent narratives. Miller writes:

If a random encounter occurs, consult the person encounter table to determine the identity or occupation of the person or group encountered. Throw two dice consecutively, and index the result to the table. Indicated on the table are a basic description or identity for the encountered individuals, a dice throw to determine their number, an indication of their vehicle, if any, and a description of their weaponry and armor. (“Worlds and Adventures” 19)

Depending on the group’s proclivity, capacity, and interests – these random encounters can change the narrative of the current campaign; provide an interlude from the adventure (or “main quest”); or simply reinforce the illusion of a ludic universe populated by multitudinous entities with their own motivations. This all depends on what the dice reveal and the players’ engagement with that revelation. The rules set the boundaries of the player’s experience – by

defining who the group will encounter and how often. These tables are familiar to *D&D* players where rules for random encounters with monsters were created, specifically to keep players from loitering (the more time spent in a dungeon heightens the danger towards PCs).

An examination of the tables that Miller presents provides insight into how he observes the worlds of the science fiction form which he is simulating: for instance, of the 30 possible outcomes, seven belong to the military or law-enforcement. Bartle argues that virtual worlds reflect the ethics of their designers; this is true, however, the ethics of worlds such as *Traveller* are indirect translations (702). Miller is translating, through his own subjectivity, the ethics of worlds which he does not necessarily promote as objectively ethical, but rather as ludically compelling (and, hopefully, the game that emerges from his design choices as commercially lucrative).

Bogost argues for an analysis of the procedural units that constitute games in order to gain perspective on how they construct rhetorical arguments (IX). Analysis of the types, frequency, and even disposition of the encounters Miller lists in his random encounter tables provide insight on how he observes the ethics, worlds, and perspectives of his favored science fictions. His encounter tables are his subjective translation of those perspectives into a ludically accessible mechanic. One of the characteristics that makes the study of a TRPG algorithm singular is that their procedural units are explicit. In *Traveller*, the algorithms of its world construction are printed on a page. They are not hidden behind code – nor can they be changed or “modded” without the explicit consent of the players. Consent and application are socially-manifested before and during play – as Grouling Cover identifies, a greater level of human agency is catalyzed within TRPG play. The boundaries of play, the social contract that guides it, and the interpretations and translations of its narrative are, during play, in a state of emergent

construction. The capacity for those constructions proceeds from the subjectivity, experiences, and ethics of the game's players.

Miller's rules for "patron encounters" that follow "random encounters" in "Worlds and Adventures" illustrate the concept of how a TRPG rhetorically advances an ethical perspective: in *Traveller*, the PCs are expected to be searching for wealth. The advancement of a character in *Traveller* comes mostly from the acquisition of items and advancement of social positions. Despite its universe existing thousands of years in the future, spanning light-years of possible locations and societies, that can be categorized into 13 different forms of governments, the main economic system which interpellate *Traveller* PCs remains capitalism (with a dash of monarchist tradition). As Miller explains: "One specific, recurring goal for adventurers is to find a patron who will assist them in the pursuit of fortune and power" ("Worlds and Adventures" 20). These patrons provide the tasks (quests) and the promise of a reward for completing them. There is little in *Traveller's* first rule book that gives much information about forming a longer narrative arc. This is left up to the referee's discretion.

Miller's TRPG is founded on similar principles that Gygax & Arneson's *D&D* (initially) was, and both are a likely reflection of the genre's nascent medium: these base motivations for PCs were compelling enough to early players and the capacity of the medium for evoking more complicated narratives was still being explored.<sup>105</sup> In this regard, the basic structure of *Traveller*

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<sup>105</sup> There is a curious parallel with early computer video games. Many of the earliest computer adventure games, such as Will Crowther's *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling 1977) task the player with exploring fantastic locations to hunt and retrieve their treasures. This repeating pattern of exploration for material acquisition as the model for early ludic experiments suggests it is an emergent consequence of authorial entanglements with capitalism. Crowther, Anderson, Blank, Daniels, and Lebling were also all *D&D* players.

All of these games, early TRPGs and computer games, were designed from the assumption that they were games; they existed within a commercial, social, and critical landscape that was not as critical of "procedural rhetoric." These games represented early commercial forays into ludic engagements and were more focused on, like the player characters that reside within their worlds, commercial acquisition than producing complicated, ethical

and earlier RPGs seems to follow the same narrative MacGuffin of a simple board games such as *Monopoly*: the acquisition of material wealth. This acquisition of wealth is contextualized as the means to acquire more.<sup>106</sup> Encounters in the *Traveller* universe are distilled, for the purposes of their translation into the mechanics of game rules, in regard to their relationship towards advancing (patrons) or obstructing (random, unfriendly NPCs, and alien “animals”) the PC’s capital ambitions.<sup>107</sup> Despite the myriad possibilities of worlds, civilizations, and alien encounters that the *Traveller* universe allows its players to procedurally generate, the player’s characters remain at the center of it.

An analysis of any text is never the examination of a simple, static, form but rather a momentary observation of the author’s relationships. This is true whether the text is literary, cinematic, or ludic. A game’s narrative motivations, rule system algorithms, and even the boundaries of its game world emerge from the relationships from which their designers emerged: entanglements with sociocultural system, their relationships, the texts (ludic and literary) that inspired them. The TRPG is a compelling model, because of its explicit, accessible algorithms, its complication of determinate authorship, its ludic exigency of shared, synchronous construction, for considering how relationships are the locus of agential emergence. The

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arguments. In the 1970s and 1980s, all these texts were considered simply *games*, before that term would radically change dimensions.

<sup>106</sup> Game Designers Workshop would release several adventure scenarios, in a similar model to *D&D’s* adventure “modules,” that provided ready-made campaigns and (sometimes) more complicated narrative arcs. The first, *The Kinunir (1979)*, was released in the same year as the initial rules and is based on those rules’ premise of a mysterious patron seeking out the adventurers to offer a reward for completing a task (in this case, to steal trade secrets). However, successive adventurers provided more complex scenarios that were not always based on service-for-hire contracts. The second published scenario, *Research Station Gamma (1980)*, for instance, has the party tasked with rescuing an alien family from a research station. Both were written by Miller.

<sup>107</sup> The last form of encounters listed in “Worlds and Adventures” provide procedural generation algorithms for creating species of alien animals to be encountered: depending on the role of the dice, these encounters can range from innocuous to deadly.

observations in this chapter offer insights about how Miller has observed his world & society, his experiences & ambitions, and the texts & ideas from which he as a designer and agent have emerged. Any observation of the *Traveller* rule set and any interpretation – such as the ephemeral ones made above – collapse each into a perspective that is equally reconfigured through the relationships and subjectivity of the observer; any interpretations reveal as much about the text (possibility) as the reader (observer). The rule systems of *Traveller* are the procedural units – that express a rhetorical argument, immerse players in a virtual world simulation constructed by a subjective perspective of texts and ideas – but also exist within a continuum of authorship and manifestation. “Characters and Combat,” “Starships,” and “Worlds and Adventures” are constantly being authored and re-authored through playful interpretations of their inspirational texts, through their actual play during campaigns, and even through their academic analysis. What can we learn, of our agency as observers, scholars, and players through each new observation? Where is the locus of the game when so many authors express their agency in its emergence? We reconfigure texts through every engagement we have with them. How have these reconfigurations and our expanding capacity for acknowledging them transformed our agency within all forms of media engagement?

The TRPG is an explicit agent of reconfiguration. *Traveller*, from the perspective of its rules is an agent of rhetorical argument, virtual world simulation, and textual remediation. Any analysis of the TRPG implicitly antagonizes structuralism, predicated on linear and fixed positions of construction. The dynamic and subjective relationships necessary for TRPG play are only possibilities until the moment of observation – and then, afterwards, expand back into possibilities, that wait for the next observation. A TRPG’s argument, game world, and narratives

only emerge (as intended) through direct engagement with human agents. In the next chapter, I examine another level of authorship and manifestation of the TRPG: its actual play.

## Chapter Five: At the Mountains of Madness (*TRPG Play*)

“Fuck escapism. I play *D&D* to force the fictional reality inside my head onto physical space and project it outward. I kidnap reality and hold it hostage for a few hours... I don't run from it.”

– Liz Larsen, quoted from Nicholas Mizer's *The Greatest Unreality: Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*

“Do you know that Einstein is wrong, and that certain objects and forces *can* move with a velocity greater than light? With proper aid I expect to go backward and forward in time and actually *see* and *feel* the earth of remote past and future epochs.”

– *The Whisperer in the Darkness*, H.P. Lovecraft

### Part I: Subjective Entanglements

I have been playing tabletop role-playing games since I was gifted the *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* box set, edited by Tom Moldvay, in the early 1980s. The concept of role-playing games was an extension of the imaginative play that occupied my childhood. Like many children of the 1980s, I was obsessed with fantasy (because of *Star Wars*), science fiction (because of *Star Trek*), speculative fiction (because of Ray Bradbury) and any Japanese anime programs or kaiju programs I could find on the local UHF TV channels (because of *Battle of the Planets* and *Spectreman*). As the only child in a military family that moved often, the indulgences and voyages of my imagination were the focus of my interests and pleasures; for the most part, even 40 years later, this is still true. Tabletop role-playing games were initially designed for a young crowd. Almost all of the ink spilled about TRPGs in the 1970s and 80s contextualize them (especially *Dungeons & Dragons*) as a diversion for young kids and teenagers. The artwork of the early editions of *D&D* reflect this ethos: the art from TSR staff artists such as Erol Otus, D.A. Trampier, and David C. Sutherland III, would not look out of place on 1980s heavy metal album covers. Perhaps the most famous *D&D* work of art is the front cover of Gyax's 1978 *AD&D Players Handbook*. Illustrated by Trampier, the scene is an evocatively uncanny representation of the aftermath of a fantasy battle: a large group of adventurers (but not likely

heroes) are wiping blood off their weapons, disposing of the corpses of lizardmen monsters, and consulting a dungeon map. The most notable image is the titanic crimson statue of some fantastic deity or pagan god that occupies the center of the frame. The statue suggests strange, forbidden societies that worship dark, evil powers from worlds beyond. In the illustration, two of the adventuring party's thieves attempt to steal its gemstone eyes. TRPG enthusiasts, such as Maliszewski, often laud the image for its introduction to the aesthetics of *D&D*: in one image, it demonstrates the mysterious, foreboding worlds that *D&D* players explore within the game, the types of monsters they might encounter, the powers that hold sway over the world, as well as the potential spoils of meeting their dangers. It is not surprising, considering the evocativeness of this image and its aesthetic similarity to other “dangerous” music of the time, that *D&D* books became so popular with children and adolescents. To fans of TRPGs, these books and the games embedded within them, were portals into ludic, and intimate experiences within the uncanny, mysterious, transgressive worlds that occupied their imagination.

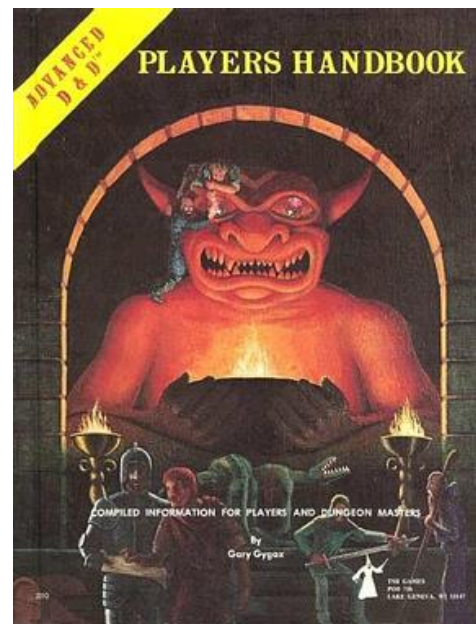


Figure 7 Advanced D&D Players Handbook Cover

I was one of those kids. Tabletop role-playing games, their stories, play, rules, and mechanics have all been entangled with my subjectivity as long as I can remember. This entanglement has not always been consistent or static; there have been periods where I played more, and sometimes not all. However, these games were always a part of my subjectivity and imagination: even if I was not directly involved in a campaign, the lore, aesthetics, rules, and



lexicon of *Dungeons & Dragons* are always a part of my imaginative and cultural vocabularies. My relationship with TRPGs has very much resembled the quantum wave function: many possibilities existed for an observation – through a specific game – to collapse it into a specific manifestation. Because my experience is not singular, and because of the modern “gamification” of our culture, TRPGs have come of age in much the same way their original audiences have. TRPGs ceased being just for children (or marketed to them) long ago. According to a 2020 report about *D&D* players by Wizards of the Coast (the current publisher of *D&D*), the smallest base of players is between 15-19 (12%), the largest is between the ages of 20-24 (24%), grognards (like me) over 40 make up 13% of the 50 million people Wizards boasts played their flagship TRPG in 2020<sup>108</sup>. The world of TRPG is much different than the one that Fine analyzes in his 1983 ethnographic analysis *Shared Fantasy* – where his players were almost universally teenage white males (women now make up 40+% of players). In addition to the games, even a cursory glance of the numerous “Let’s Play” games streaming (through platforms such as *YouTube* and *Twitch*) illustrates the ethnic and demographic diversity of the modern role-player. The most famous streaming TRPG game is the *Critical Role* show: its players/actors are all in their 30s or 40s. The point, however, is not that TRPGs have become a popular mass medium but to identify how important and personal they have become for their players. The experience of TRPG play is different, and more intimately involved with our evolving subjectivities, than other games; players of *Settlers of Catan* or *Monopoly* do not (usually) live stream their games, share the ongoing narrative arcs of campaigns, nor have their mythologies become embedded within their ontological perspectives.

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<sup>108</sup> In the idiocultural lexicon of the TRPG community, a “grognard” refers to older TRPG players and is associated with players who prefer the “old school” approaches to roleplaying. Like many TRPG terms, it originated in wargaming and military history; it was the term given to Napoleon Bonaparte’s original imperial guard.

I am currently running a *Dungeons & Dragons* game using the rules from its 1989 second edition. All our players, except one (32), are in their 40s. We grew up with the game. All have experimented with different TRPGs, but all of us often return to *D&D*. *D&D* remains a popular choice both because it is associated so closely with the nostalgia of our childhoods and because the game remains a cultural touchstone; *D&D*'s reimagining, remixing, and remediation of classic mythologies has created a wholly new series of legends that we have all become entangled with and grown up alongside. Monsters, such as the troll, refashioned from European mythology through Anderson's translation in *Three Hearts and Three Lions* are as much a part of our fantastic, imaginary lexicon as beasts such as the beholder, a monstrous multi-eyed floating globe created in the game's initial playtesting, that is emblematic of *D&D*'s monstrous bestiary. Terms from the game, such as hit points, armor class, alignment and THAC0, are reference points we all share and provide what Bauman identifies as "keys" for establishing framers for sub-cultural communication and performances.<sup>109</sup> The lexicon of *D&D* provides the secret language and handshakes of the TRPG subculture, a culture that is increasingly becoming mainstream.

Our current campaign is running one of the most famous adventure arcs from early *D&D*: the "GDQ" series of modules, designed and written by Gygax and Sutherland. These modules present a narratively-linked series of adventures that begin with a battle against giants and then descend into successively more dangerous subterranean caves and dungeons before facing a final encounter against Lolth, the "Queen of the Demonweb Pits." The purpose of the group – and our reason for playing an older ruleset and adventures written in the early 1980s – is reflective of our

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<sup>109</sup> THAC0 stands for "To Hit Armor Class 0/Zero." This *D&D* mechanic was dropped from the game's third edition but was an infamous mechanic from the second edition. It is a reference to the number that a PC must roll with a 20-sided die to successfully attack a monster based on their current "armor class," which is an abstraction of how difficult they are to strike in combat.

aesthetic and affective entanglements with the game.<sup>110</sup> We are entangled with our youth (and its intrinsic sense of awe) as our younger selves are diffracted through the adult experiences of play. We experience playing second edition simultaneously as observations of ourselves as “adults” and the children that emerge subjectively and inevitably through remembered and *remediated* experiences of play. One of the players in my game, Meg Lauber-DeLuca, explains:

I've been playing RPGs for almost exactly 40 years, in some form or another. I've played a very wide variety of RPGs, as early on my b[oy]f[riend] and I were friends with the owner of the local shop and got to try out a lot of different systems. So many, I don't even remember them all. But I always come back to *D&D* as my favorite, not because of the ruleset, but because it was the first thing I ever played, the thing I've played the most, and fantasy is my jam. It's familiar, it reminds me of so many times I've been happy and having a good time, and it's just a damn good time.

Lauber-DeLuca's experience reflects my own as the group's dungeon master. My decision to run a campaign based on the OSR style of role-playing, running modules written by one of the genre's primary authors, within the early aesthetics of its emergence, is not only an exercise in producing the past within the present but also a continued renewal (and diffraction) of the media, and the relationships and engagement with them, that have produced me in my current observation.

The name of my campaign is “The World of Apshai,” and was planned to last as long as I do: the campaign has no set endpoint but will run as long as I am physically and cognitively able to manage it.<sup>111</sup> I would also like to imagine the possibility my children would continue to run

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<sup>110</sup> I make the caveat that the youngest player in our group, Travis Koontz, who is 32, did not play the second edition of *D&D* on release and did not play TRPGs until 2018. His first experience was with a paid fifth edition introductory campaign that I ran. I invited him to join my home campaign in 2019. He explains that he felt frustrations with the newer versions of *D&D* and that “true R[ole]P[lay]-ing is better in the earlier games.” This player was not allowed to play *D&D* as a child because his parents' fears that it contained Satanic influences.

<sup>111</sup> The name of the campaign's world is a reference to a 1979 computer role-playing game, *Temple of Apshai* (Jon Freeman & Jeff Johnson). It is my favorite CRPG of all-time. I played it on my grandfather's Commodore 64 personal computer and like early editions of *AD&D* has both nostalgic, familial, and personal resonance for me. Play, and the moments of play, seem to be singularly situated within human subjectivity. As we age, our capacity, or perhaps the opportunity and social legitimacy, for play diminishes and our memories of play grow in personal

the world and play within it. One of the best arguments for how compelling TRPG play is that academics studying the game rarely resist telling stories from their own games: Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games* showcases the ongoing narrative of her home game to illustrate her argument. Mackay provides all of the specific details from his Forgotten Realms campaign to augment his. Even Fine remarks about how his own play, and his immersion within it, informs his ethnographic conclusions and passion for the subject; it is a ubiquitous trope within the TRPG subculture that people can never resist sharing stories with others about their personal TRPG campaigns – as a way to relive, reinterpret, and re-experience the joy of their play.<sup>112</sup>

Time is an illusion and the play of TRPGs breaks it.<sup>113</sup> The play of TRPG is a process of ludic and subjective entanglement. As Gygax poetically describes in the first edition AD&D

*Player's Handbook*:

*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is a fantasy game of role playing which relies upon the imagination of participants, for it is certainly make-believe, yet it is so interesting, so challenging, so mind-unleashing that it comes near reality. As a role player, you become Falstaff the fighter... This game lets all of your fantasies come true. This is a world where monsters, dragons, good and evil high priests, fierce demons, and even the gods themselves may enter your character's life. Enjoy, for this game is what dreams are made of! (7)

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importance. We remember more fondly what we lost.

More than one TRPG player in my game, and others, remark about the capacity for TRPGs to recreate both a sense of wonder and a socially-acceptable form of radical imaginative play: they provide a "socially-legitimate domain" for adults to play at the pretend fantasies of their youth, indulging simultaneously in affective modes of whimsy, escape, and nostalgic delight (Malaby).

<sup>112</sup> It is also a common trope that these stories are almost *always* more interesting for the teller than their audience; the intimate nature of the performative and social frames from which TRPG and its narrative emerges can rarely be communicated through a simple oral telling. You really had to have been there. Shows like *Critical Role* which showcase live play of TRPGs are heavily edited and explicitly performative for their outside audiences. The main audience for a majority of home games are the players themselves.

<sup>113</sup> In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams famously wrote that "Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so" (21). The implication of not only time being an illusion but a socially constructed one represents much of what TRPGs (and the legacy of our attempts at intersubjective mediation) explicitly demonstrate through play.

I am not arguing that other textual forms do not possess the same capacity; quite the opposite, all forms of media are able to connect, and entangle, the embedded authors and audiences within each text's emergence. I argue that literary texts should be considered less as staid artifacts of historical simulation but rather as diffractive lens of potential observations – that obliterate concepts of past & present by merging them into potential interpretations and experiences.

The TRPG does embody characteristics unique to its form. First, the text of the TRPG is embodied simultaneously through different artifacts and experiences: its rules, literary (and cinematic) antecedents and inspirations, and play; the text of the TRPG is remarkably elusive – collapsing into a specific form only when observed. The popular aesthetic and affective entanglements of the TRPG – through its evolving acceptance over the last 50 years – is a compelling case in how ludic experiences can be personally embedded with the subjectivities of the players who, in turn, manufacture our cultures, social habitus, and emerging capacity for experiments in mediated intersubjectivity. The TRPG is also a catalyst for reconfigurations of engagements with the mythologies (its media inspirations), algorithmic mechanics (rules), authors, and its players. Each author's subjectivity becomes embedded within – to different degrees, based on the current need – the emergence of the TRPG text for each audience. Second, the translation of TRPG text is based on construction through a collaborative consensus. Unlike the film or novel, readers must interact with other readers in order to ensure each specific interpretation of the text is similar enough, and complementary enough, to be navigated mutually; the TRPG text does not require a lone interpretation – as a novel might invite – but rather radical cooperation. Third, the TRPG is explicit in each of the exigencies for its

emergence (and often invites meta-analysis of its components). Finally: the TRPG text’s final requirement for its emergence requires *play*.<sup>114</sup>

The concept of defining what play is (and how games bind and manufacture it) remains a site of truculent contention: ludologists, narratologists, anthropologists, and cultural critics have all attempted to quantify and identify play’s specific characteristics and forms. Early sociological treatises from Huizinga and Caillois attempt to identify particular forms and forums for how and where it emerges (Huizinga’s “magic circle” and Caillois’ play style taxonomies) (1938, 1961). The modern emergence of play – and especially digital video games – as a form of popular entertainment has led to new approaches for contextualizing play (and games) from scholars such as Bogost (games as procedural rhetoric), Eskelinen (games/play as configurative practice), Wark (play existing within “gamespace”), and Gonzalo Frasca, (ludology as methodology).

Each offers a particular observation of a moment of gameplay. In his criticism of previous definitions of play, Malaby rightly points out that many of the previously defined features of play “holds an intrinsic, universal feature of games when they are examined empirically” (96). Games and play exist as possibility, collapsing into a specific manifestation through the exigence and desire of its agents (or players). A game could become competitive or collaborative depending on the ambitions of its players; it all depends on what the players need and want for a specific period of play. A game of Parker Brother’s *Monopoly* could be competitive (I want my opponent to go bankrupt) or collaborative (I will sell you Park Place in exchange for Baltic Avenue and \$500) and this all depends on players’ adherence to *Monopoly*’s traditional ruleset. There is no restriction that I cannot interpret the entire experience as a surreal

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<sup>114</sup> It is possible to read a TRPG rulebook and not play it – in the same manner it is possible to read Lovecraft and never play *Call of Cthulhu*. However, this dissertation is focused on the TRPG text as manifested through all of its modes. All engagements with TRPG artifacts are valid and compelling; in this instance, though, we observe the TRPG within the played experience it was intended and initially designed to compel.

manifestation of a Warkian “Gamespace” that players can choose at which levels to engage – or disassociate from: I am playing the game *Monopoly* but resist its capitalist assumptions or ignore its satire of consumption and wealth. When bound within a game, play exists not only through multiple modes of activity and dispositions but also different (and dynamic) modes of subjective interpretation. One of the reasons that players, such as Lauber-DeLuca, find TRPGs compelling is the modes of engagement that their play invites. If games do possess different characteristics from other forms of media, it is the affective experience of play that binds a subjectivity to the memories of its engagement.

This chapter provides an analysis of one specific moment of play. It does not offer any new definitions or taxonomies of game or play but rather pauses to consider what we learn by close reading one specific text, or observation, of TRPG play. This chapter is an empirical analysis of one specific text – with the recognition that its text, the sessions of play, are likely to move throughout several functions, characteristics, and features of play. I examine each observation, each exigent manifestation as – in the words of Bogost – the “procedural units” of one particular TRPG campaign. The founder of baseball sabermetrics, Bill James, explained his methodology for examining and quantifying baseball statistics through the lens of William James’ (no relation) pragmatic philosophy of determining objective truths through the minute study of individual details and experiences.<sup>115</sup> In an interview, Bill James explains:

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<sup>115</sup> Sabermetrics, a field not specifically related to the study of TRPG, is based on the quantitative analysis of another form of gameplay, the American sport of baseball. Although not related to the study of TRPGs, it has provided as much insight into our interpretations of play and the manufacture (and distortion) of reality within game spaces as modern game studies has.

The parallel emergence of game study and analytic baseball discourse within the last 20 years illustrates games’ (and sports’) entanglement with mass modern subjectivity and sociocultural perspective. We are only beginning to realize how their popular engagements shape subjective observations of our reality, of capacities, and affective experiences. Both have provided compelling observations about why we create imaginary and physical spaces to explore alternate modes of engagement with reality through play. Both have also provided complications into simple interpretations and explanations of their functions and consequence; conclusions about the “meanings” of

Building understanding is a matter of breaking down the great questions which have no real answers into smaller questions which have slightly more objective answers and smaller questions which have yet slightly more objective answers until you get down to the level at which you reach the level of questions which have answers and then you can build up. (14:34-14:52)

In “Beyond Play,” Malaby makes a similar argument about games, that each specific game manifests its own set of exigencies, engagements, and experiences. He claims that games are “like many social processes, dynamic and recursive, largely reproducing their form through time but always containing the possibility of emergent change” (104). Each game is a specific observation of a mode of play based on the exigencies of its animating agents. Any strict definition of play or games refuses to acknowledge the dynamism inherent in playful activities even when bound through the rules of a game. This dissertation concurs with Bill (& William) James and Malaby that smaller, empirical observations of experience are the most appropriate locus of study – although I resist the concept that any objective truth waits at the end of our analytic rabbit hole.

I propose that those answers are specific to the exigency of the moment and that even their interpretation is subjective. We may not be able to extrapolate a larger “answer” but rather understand how players, in one moment of observation & play, find *theirs*. We may discover “answers” about the process of experiential construction and interpretation in play but with an acknowledgment that no experience (or translation) is fixed and changes based on time, context, and observer. Our analysis of play is focused on the observations of moments of experience within the TRPG that are neither bound backwards nor forwards in time. We could follow the

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TRPGs and baseball are equally elusive and subjective.

Any scholarship on “make-believe” worlds, whether on the baseball diamond or around the role-playing table, should be considered as complementary in the same way that the study of any game or sport should be considered as valid and revelatory for considering the entanglement of play within sociocultural systems.



creation of the play through its direct inspirations as we did with *Dungeons & Dragons* in Chapter 3 or through Lovecraft's mythology for the game we are about to consider.<sup>116</sup> We could follow the play of the TRPG text through its affective consequences of its player or even on its player characters. We could continue to follow the impact each TRPG text has made on popular mythology, in the same manner that *D&D's* mythology is embedded within the modern popular consciousness. The play of a TRPG ensures an enduring experience and recollection of their narratives: games evolve as vehicles for previous mythologies and their play, the exploration of new worlds, and live on in both the subjectivities and creations of their players. This practice ensures a renewal not only of these ancient mythologies but of the continued practice of the need to escape within, dwell among, and produce them. Time does not bind games; they are bound only by the limitations of their players to observe (and play) them.

This dissertation proceeds from the assumption that the text of a tabletop role-playing game is not fixed. It is not fixed as practice, artifact, or engagement but is capable of existing in any of those forms or modes, depending on the exigency of a specific observation. The game designer needs the TRPG to exist (or be observed) within pulp fiction artifacts in order to provide an aesthetic model, cultural & literary touchstones, and genre archetypes for the rules system (Chapter 3). To build a specific and accessible game world, the dungeon master observes the TRPG within those rule systems (Chapter 4). In order to create a compelling mode of play, the players of a TRPG need for it to exist as a mode of engagement, a social practice, and a communal act of authorial creation (Chapter 5, *You Are Here*).

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<sup>116</sup> Even these inspirations are drawn from previous mythologies. Tolkien, Howard, and Burroughs' work draws from the epic legends of our ancient past that – like the games they inspired – they simply renew. The old legends, themselves are simply the oral re-tellings of traditional prehistoric folklore.

The question of where and when the text exists is not a new question within literary studies: Foucault, Barthes, and Eco have all made arguments about the challenge of defining the position of audiences, authors and the loci points for their engagements. This dissertation claims that the position of any of these is radically reconfigured based on the subjectivities of each observer (whether they are positioned as author, audience, designer, or gameplay practice) and the requirements of their specific observations. Following the arguments of Barad (and the principles of the Copenhagen Interpretation), I argue that each subjective observation is not a passive act, but a radical moment of invention. Worlds, physical and fantastic, are manufactured through these dynamic process of collaborative observation and emergence.

This dissertation presents the TRPG as one of the most explicit illustrations of this process: the TRPG demonstrates the narrative's transcendence from material artifact, or simple gesture of intersubjective communication, into a series of engagements (or relationships) necessary for its play and translation. Ludologists might argue that it is the imposition of play into the narrative engagement which provokes this separation. I counter that play has always been embedded, and possible, within textual engagements; many texts invite a more playful approach (what Barthes terms the "writerly text") from Sterne's 1759 *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), authors have often asked us to play with their narratives. However, texts that do not explicitly invite them, are unable to prevent a playful interaction if the reader so chooses: they can choose to read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) upside down, right to left, while marking it with a crayon, and in any unreasonable fashion they choose. However, readers do not have any more agency necessarily than the author; in the end, a text is needed for any experience of intersubjective communication. The process of effective intersubjective mediation is the agential agreement for

*collaboration*. The literary text proceeds from a number of assumptions about the reasonable modes of engagement; diverging from the traditional left-to-right, beginning with the first page and reading to the last, model is a betrayal of this contract. Game rules provide the material, explicit contract for a game's mode of play. They provide a contract for designer and players to abide by with the expectation of a specific mode of practice and experience. Joseph Thomas, applying Barthes' perspective to *Dungeons & Dragons* makes the following argument:

The texts that constitute the corpus of *D&D*...are writerly in the most direct and unambiguous sense, if by writerly we mean what I think Roland Barthes means by the term: a kind of text that encourages a special sort of productive relationship between reader and writing; for a writerly text, at least in the articulation found in Barthes's *S/Z*, "is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages." (5; original emphasis)

So the writerly text, like those produced for *D&D*—even allowing the "rules," which are so often broken, bent, or reimagined improvisationally as context and intuition demand—encourages its reader to become "no longer a consumer, but a producer of text" (4). (486)

All texts require the reader to, at some level of the engagement, share the responsibility to produce the text. Thomas claims that the TRPG applies this mandate in the most "unambiguous sense:" the reader willingly adopts the role of player, consciously accepting the *agential* obligations for the creation of a specific game and specific game universe. In this chapter, I examine one instantiation of the application of that agency. I look at one specific game, one specific instance of the collaborative, "writerly," creation process through play.

It is important to establish one caveat: The form of the TRPG does not conclude with a manifestation through play. Although this dissertation concludes its specific analyses of the TRPG text through an examination of its play, this is not meant to imply that its authorship ends after it is played. The observations of play (like the observations of its inspirations, rule sets, and historical antecedents) do not bind the TRPG but rather collapse it into a position necessary for

specific, and ephemeral, observations. The TRPG exists beyond the limits of the chronological and theoretical lens we are observing it through; successive and previous interpretations, translations, and observations of the TRPG manifest it within radically different positions. Each observation is valid; each changes the TRPG and its players & observers in a process of mutual entanglement – within which neither can remain the same.

The artifactual form of the TRPG continues to change through novel entanglements with new designers and players. The play of the original edition of *D&D* catalyzed a new manifestation in the ruleset of “first edition,” and is now in its fifth edition (with a new version expected in 2024). *Traveller* boasts over 10 different editions and revisions from its original publication in 1977. *Call of Cthulhu (CoC)*, the text we analyze in this chapter, is currently in its seventh edition. Each edition represents a new observation and translation of the genre fictions that inspired each game. Unbounded by time, any edition can still be played and digital platforms, such as DriveThruRPG, make acquiring previous rules editions simple. The modes of engagement each edition provides is available for novel translation and interpretation.

The engagement mode of TRPGs is as dynamic, and as open to new translations, as their physical manifestations: rule sets rely on subjective play; as players change so do the way they play their games. Rule sets, especially ones that explicitly rely on consensual interpretation and consensus, can never definitely fix the way they are engaged with. Play is a form of agency that is based on the subjectivity of its players; as players change, they constantly redefine the practice of play – and the interpretation of their games’ rules. This chapter does not argue that manifestation through play is the final emergent form of the TRPG, but merely one more observation, of the text’s continuing emergence, translation, and interpretation within the continuing emergence, translation, and interpretation of its *players*. Barad argues that all agents

emerge from their relationships; as long as the relationships (and playful engagements) exist and adapt, TRPGs, designers, and players will continue to emerge from them, and adapt to new configurations within them.

## **Part II: Playful Entanglement**

### *The Call of Cthulhu*

In this chapter, I observe a short campaign of the role-playing game, *Call of Cthulhu* (*CoC*). The game was initially designed by Sandy Petersen, and published by Chaosium, in 1981. Like *D&D* and *Traveller*, *Call of Cthulhu* is one of the most enduring and popular TRPGs. As mentioned, it is currently in its seventh edition, and its publisher, Chaosium, routinely creates new adventures and supplements for its flagship game. It has also been translated into videogame adaptations such as 2018's *Call of Cthulhu* by Cyanide SA. Unlike *D&D* and *Traveller*, however, *Call of Cthulhu* is not based on a genre of pulp fiction – but rather the works of a particular pulp writer, in this case, Howard Phillips (H.P.) Lovecraft (1890-1937), and his “Cthulhu mythos.” Like many of the writers identified in Gygas’s Appendix N, Lovecraft’s tales of uncanny horror were featured in early 20<sup>th</sup> century pulp fiction magazines; his fictional aesthetic belonging to the legacy of early American horror tales from writers such as Edgar Allen Poe.

Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythology originated in short stories published in pulp magazines such as *Weird Fiction*, where “Call of Cthulhu” initially appeared in 1928. The story is a harrowing tale of mariners coming face-to-face with a horrific, monster from beyond time and space and is representative of the type of narratives that comprise the “Cthulhu mythos.” According to the rules of the *Call of Cthulhu TRPG*, 13 short stories and one poem (“The Fungi from Yuggoth”) form the “heart of the mythos,” from which the game’s history, lore, and

aesthetics are derived (6).<sup>117</sup> The mythology is based around the concept that there are ancient, evil Gods and spirits that dwell beyond the borders of the modern, civilized world. These Great Old Ones, such as the tentacled, winged, weird monstrosity of Cthulhu, are biding their time (or waiting to be summoned by evil cults) before they re-emerge and reclaim their kingdoms which once ruled the Cosmos. Lovecraft's work, and especially his Cthulhu mythos, belong to a genre of supernatural fiction that emphasizes old, forbidden magics, secret cults, ideas and powers beyond the ken of modern man; even to engage with such forbidden knowledge and powers would drive the modern man hopelessly insane.

Lovecraft's personal philosophy, of "Cosmicism," that influenced much of his art, is diametrically opposed to the concept of agential realism. Agential realism asks human agents to acknowledge their agency within the construction of our physical and sociocultural universes and to apply that agency responsibly and ethically. Lovecraft believed that humanity was impotent in the face of the cosmic powers that ultimately held thrall over it. In a 1927 letter to Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *Weird Tales*, he explained:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (150)

It is impossible to read Lovecraft and not acknowledge the visceral level of fear and loathing that Lovecraft holds for anything he views as alien – an attitude reflected in his racial xenophobia. However, Lovecraft's horror fiction is also a visceral warning against the hubris of human ethnocentrism; it is a nihilistic take on subjective agency. The TRPG *Call of Cthulhu's* aesthetics

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<sup>117</sup> This list represents *Call of Cthulhu's* "Appendix N."

and themes resonate with, and attempt to ludically recreate, this perspective. The game was initially conceived as a simple modification of rules for Chaosium's *RuneQuest* TRPG, a medieval fantasy game and early competitor with *D&D*. *CoC* uses many of the basic mechanics of *RuneQuest* including the use of two 10-sided dice (or "percentile dice") for determining contingent outcomes with probabilities between 1-100. However, Petersen created an entirely new magic system and a bestiary of weird monsters in order to design rules that evoke an experience of play based on supernatural horror rather than heroic fantasy. As Petersen recounts:

I needed spooky happenings to get the players chilled, I needed black horrors that would chill the minds and blast the souls of the intrepid investigators, and I needed to make sure that the game did not degenerate into a slugfest or simple matching of power against power. (84)

Petersen wanted to capture an affective experience for *CoC*'s players where they could explore a universe where their actions were compelling in the short-term, however, almost all of their agency would be meaningless in the long. PCs in *CoC* can hold off the forces of evil temporarily. They can heroically fashion barricades to hold off ancient evils, but, eventually, those efforts become pyrrhic. One *CoC* player explains that defeating the monstrous powers of *CoC* "is not any more possible than it is to defeat time or gravity or the concept of momentum. If winning means buying another day or year or killing these cultists here and stopping them, then yes, winning is possible." Eventually, humanity embodied within the player's characters are forced to reckon with their intrinsic ephemerality and "negligibility."

One of the core mechanical differences that Petersen designed to differentiate *Call of Cthulhu* from other TRPGs, such as *D&D* and *Traveller*, is that player characters are not expected to improve, or become more capable, throughout a game's campaign. PCs in *D&D* earn experience points and become more powerful by defeating monsters, solving quests, and amassing treasure; *Traveller*'s PCs earn wealth and prestige by completing tasks for their

patrons. In *CoC*, PCs must continually make “sanity checks” to determine if their characters are able to maintain their sense of reality in the face of the uncanny alien horrors they must encounter. The longer that the PCs adventure, and hold back these alien threats, the lower their sanity score drops, which impacts their skills and capacities; it also makes them more prone to finally succumb to the permanent madness inherent in their cosmic impotence. Petersen writes that the “whole concept of Sanity permeates the game and makes it what it is” (85). *CoC*’s core mechanic is not one of agential progression but agential suppression. The PCs of the *CoC* universe find that their capacity for constructing a universe through its observation becomes limited as the means for their avatars to make those observations – their capacity to directly interpret and navigate the game’s world – becomes fractured. Since Lovecraft posits the universe as an objective frame, PCs lose their sanity because their observations can no longer construct a universe in which they can maintain any agency. The game’s rules are a mechanical admonishment that (human) agency cannot exist and a ludic representation of Lovecraft’s resistance to agential realism. It is existential philosophy as gameplay.

However, whether the mechanics work or not rely not only on Petersen’s subjective design relationship with Lovecraft’s Cosmicism; they also depend on how they are played – and how players interpret both. I have argued that engagement with TRPGs represents a compelling (if not singular or novel) engagement with many levels of authorship. I have argued that TRPGs are an explicit avenue of reality construction that depends on the agency of its players. These themes become embedded within a mode of engagement, play, whose core mechanics, are a celebration of imaginative agency. The TRPG is based on converting the traditional literary narrative into a Barthesian “writerly text” (or Aarsethian “cybertext”) by translating it through a mechanism for play.



Another *CoC* player complicates my previous assertion that Petersen's game offers an intrinsically nihilistic perspective. He argues that the game players' interpretations can provide an important observation of the Lovecraftian milieu and the opportunity to resist an acquiescence to meaningless impotence. He argues that if a *CoC* group plays a long-term campaign a player could go "through 15 characters per player and then you win as you hold off the evil. I really don't see any nihilism in this in that each day I don't view eating as 'merely holding off starvation until something else gets me'."<sup>118</sup> Even in the midst of an encroaching darkness, players can interpret their momentary victories as meaningful – as a point of agential light in a field of encroaching darkness. Agency, itself, becomes defined within the experience of play, and the interpretation & observation of its players.

These opportunities to exert agency within the TRPG highlight how it becomes a compelling model for considering contemporary theories about the relationship between games and narrative. What happens to a narrative based on the powerlessness of humanity when it is configured into the cybertextual agency offered through gameplay; can the basic thesis that underlies Lovecraft's melancholic philosophy remain intact when readers can play with the format and structure of the stories in his mythology? If this is true, does a TRPG like *Call of Cthulhu*, whose conceits are based around creating both rhetorical (Lovecraft's philosophy) and ludic resistance (the sanity mechanic) to agency complicate that argument? Can a TRPG, designed around and inspired by an objective, uncaring universe, still promote or catalyze a radical acknowledgement of our agency in the construction of our multiple realities? What is the relationship between the mode of engagement (play), the procedural rhetoric of its game systems (rules), and its antecedent inspirations: which is most important for the emergence of a TRPG?

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<sup>118</sup> The quotations from these *Call of Cthulhu* players are from conversations in a Discord channel dedicated to TRPGs ("Plot Points").

This dissertation resists definitive answers; each observation is subjective but our own subjective observations can only be constructed with an attention to a manifestation of the TRPG that is if not superior to, at least equal, to the authorship of its inspirations, rules, and histories. To paraphrase a certain bloke from Stratford-upon-Avon, “the play *is* the thing.” It is important to consider the TRPG in its manifestation through play to make some initial observations about how rules, inspiration, aesthetics, themes, rhetoric, and player agency all influence, and emerge through, its play.

As I have mentioned the field of TRPG studies has often branched in one of three directions – depending on the background and observational context of the scholar. Ludologists direct their study toward the focus of rules and rules systems; humanists focus on the contingent narratives produced by games, and anthropologists focus on the wider cultural implications of games and play’s social entanglements. The most famous study of TRPG play, Fine’s seminal *Shared Fantasy*, examines what made the nascent art form compelling in the late 1970s and early 1980s and what its emergence signified for contemporary social structures. Fine examines the TRPG in the aggregate; *Shared Fantasy* is a collection of insights, analysis, and observations of multiple gaming groups, players, and sub-cultures becoming entangled with one another through their engagement with TRPG play. Dennis Waskul and Matt Lust continue these ethnographic sketches through their 2004 study of the performative frames that tabletop role-players adopt – that involved 90 hours of observation with 30 role-players (2004).

Zagal and Deterding’s *Role-Playing Game Studies* (2018) is divided into chapters on “Definitions,” “Forms,” “Disciplinary Perspectives,” and “Interdisciplinary Issues.” Their collection of articles is an eclectic, welcome, and invaluable contribution to the field; it is also a collection of TRPG analysis that centers on the broader meanings, taxonomies, and scholarly

implications of the TRPG's growing entanglement within modern culture: what the TRPG does, and is capable of doing, within our contemporary media environment. The conclusions that these studies reach provide insight into the larger consequences of these cultures – and how they emerge and are performed, interpreted, and understood in modern society. Mackay and Grouling Cover's studies do provide insights into a specific TRPG campaign – in both cases, their own home games – however, these games are not entirely the locus point of their scholarly engagement; they are used as illustrations to provide evidence for their larger conclusions about the mediative characteristics and capacity, performative and rhetorical respectively, of tabletop roleplaying games.

TRPG studies have rarely focused on a specific analysis of individual moments, contexts, experiences – or more accurately, has rarely considered each session of TRPG play as a distinct text in the same fashion as a literary (or cinematic, or ludic) text. Previous studies study on the macro-field, sociocultural implications and communal consequences, of the TRPG; this chapter focuses on the quantum observations that manifest those cultural and community realities. This is an experiment; but one that proceeds from the assumption that the aggregate of observations is what form our consensual interpretations of reality – but the constitutive elements are the individual observations that agents make of it. This chapter offers a “close reading” of TRPG play.

This analysis proceeds from both the scholarly perspective from classic literary studies (if we want to understand how the world is read, we might want to consider what it is reading) and Barad's insistence on viewing all agents as the manifestations of their relationships (every reading, and every game played, is necessary for readers, players, and the world they create, to emerge from them). Waskul and Lust concentrate their analysis on the individual

“performances,” based on Goffman’s concept of performative frames, that make up a game. This perspective is instructive but also reductive because it considers these performances as the emergent actions of distinct and isolated subjectivities – accountable to and manifesting from individual needs & ambitions – rather than within the larger context of their relations. The worlds created through TRPG play, like the agents who author them, are established through relationships. They are not intersections, but entanglements of needs, wants, ambitions, and all of the performative, cognitive, sociocultural frames that emerge when people (in their capacity as agents) form new relationships. Within the context of TRPG play, relationships are explicitly formed for the purposes of creating and authoring a specific experience.

The experiences of my own games has been highly illustrative of this concept for me personally (as they were for Grouling Cover and Mackay). In one session of “The World of Apshai,” I am not merely presenting and managing a ludic world for players: I am also constantly navigating my performance as friend, social mitigator, rules lawyer, and party host simultaneously. I must step into each performative role when the game’s exigency requires it. The success or failure of my performance of each role – and the success, failure, or qualities of my players’ performance – is how the TRPG text emerges. Our motivation is to create a specific experience, the ludic exploration of a diegetic world based on literary genres that capture and excited our imagination. The world that is created is a consequence of our efforts and performance but not our primary motivation. The challenge, for this dissertation, and for any future study of collaborative play, within the confines of TRPGs and beyond, is how to focus our analytic lens not on individual texts, or authors, or even moments but rather the consequences of these *entangled* relationships.

My own game is too close to me to report on within even a performative objectivity so let us look at another game. Over a period of three months in late 2022, members of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) Serious Play collective played a mini-campaign of the 1982 ruleset of *Call of Cthulhu*.<sup>119</sup> Serious Play is a collective that is part of UWM's Digital Cultures Collaboratory which is "an interdisciplinary research collaborative that has several pursuits, most of which revolve around the convergence of streaming technologies and games." The graduate students involved in Serious Play come from different disciplines including anthropology, the humanities, and JAMS (Journalism, Advertising, and Media Studies.). I solicited Serious Play – which I was involved with from 2017-2019 – to play this mini-campaign of *Call of Cthulhu* to provide a specific text for my observations of the TRPG's textual manifestation through play.

The game was played between August and September of 2022. It was played online through the messaging application Discord and recorded using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS).<sup>120</sup> On the Discord application, players were able to post images and "out-of-character"

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<sup>119</sup> A brief note: I had hoped that the group could play the original 1981 version; however, finding a copy of the very first edition was as difficult as it was cost-prohibitive. While there are minor rule changes made for the 1982 edition, it is much closer to a reprint of the rules than an entirely new edition. The 1982 edition still reflects design philosophies of early TRPGS although by 1981/2, the TRPG was already seven years old and evolving beyond its original conceptions.

<sup>120</sup> These elements diverge significantly from the play styles of the 1970s & 80s and ineluctably have an impact on the form of the game. The impacts of digital tools, formats, and capacities are specifically considered in Grouling Cover and Stephanie Hedge's 2021 study *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age*. This dissertation attempts to stay focused on the TRPG text itself – the oral dialogs between Liebeseller and her players – however, it is naïve to suggest that the tools of the game do not impact its emergence; the medium may truly be the message since both are entangled. Although virtual tabletops, such as Roll20 (which I use for my *D&D* campaign) and Fantasy Grounds, have become ubiquitous for modern play, Liebeseller and her players did not employ one.

For the purposes of this chapter, we limit our observation (mostly) to the dialog of this game. It is important to note that this bordered observation is incomplete but exists not only within the continuum of TRPG manifestation from inspiration->rules->play but also within a continuum of artifactual mediation genres print->print->digital. All are part of the relationship; observations can never be comprehensive if they are biologically manifested, but I want to express a recognition of the paucity of the limitations of any observation – and of how important the technical modes of mediation are.

meta comments on the game (for instance, a player could post a humorous GIF image reflecting an emotional state, such as confusion).

The group consisted of four players and a “Keeper of Arcane Lore” or simply “Keeper” which is the appellation for the dungeon master/referee in *Call of Cthulhu*. Anthropology PhD candidate Laya Liebeseller played the role of Keeper. The other players included Dr. Jennifer Dworschack-Kinter, Dr. Paul Dworschack-Kinter, English PhD candidate Casey J. O’Ceallaigh, and his friend George Fowler. All of the players are familiar with the mechanics of TPRPGs and distinguished role-players. Each player brought considerable expertise, skill, and passion for this genre of game. Liebeseller studies TRPGs and modern gaming cultures; her studies and analysis concentrate on considerations of the broader communities that form around shared engagements of play (she has also played and designed TRPGs for 16 years). Jennifer is the Assistant Director of Composition at UWM, has played TRPGs for 30 years. She has designed rules and supplied material for five rule supplements for modern TRPGs including the superhero-based *Mutants & Masterminds* (Stephen Kenson 2002) and the science fiction game *Starfinder* (Paizo 2017). She co-authored a novel, *Between Worlds: Malcontent* (2021), with her husband Paul for the cyberpunk TRPG *Aetherium* that he designed in 2020.<sup>121</sup> Paul is currently designing *Pillars Narrative Roleplaying Game: The Unknown World*. He has been playing TRPGs for over 30 years and is also a professor of English at UWM. O’Ceallaigh’s study of focus is sound theory within disparate media genres. He studies the capacity of pedagogical applications within modern forms of gameplay. Fowler has been playing and game mastering TRPGs for over four years and currently plays in three weekly campaigns. The Serious Play Collaborative is based on creative and critical intersections of play, culture, and media; this specific member group

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<sup>121</sup> I was a playtester for *Aetherium*.

provided a singular capacity not only to role-play, but also to *critically* play. Their attention to the conscious construction of the game world, its narrative arc, and its constitutive elements provided an invaluable engagement with the worlds & play of *Call of Cthulhu*.

Each player accessed the game through a PC with a camera and microphone; most of the players were in different neighborhoods in Milwaukee. Two of the players were a married couple and were located within different rooms of the same Milwaukee home. However, Fowler joined from his residence in Wyoming. Every member of the playgroup kept their camera on during play, except for Fowler who broadcast only his voice for the first three sessions. He did broadcast his camera image for the first half of the final session of play.<sup>122</sup> If you would like to “read” along with my analysis, you are welcome to do so. *The Call of Cthulhu* campaign we will examine can be watched via the Serious Play (UWM) YouTube Channel by searching for “Millvale Campaign.”

### **Session Zero**

The first session of the “Millvale Campaign” begins with what is referred to by modern TRPG players as a “Session Zero.” A Session Zero sets the basic ground rules for the game, introduces players to one another, and establishes the aesthetic/affective interests – and limitations – of the campaign. Session Zero is a fairly contemporary addition to the customs of TRPG play. Within the last 10 years, this practice has become standardized for TRPG play especially as the intimacy of the TRPG practice has merged into the mainstream.

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<sup>122</sup> Fowler did not broadcast his image because of not feeling as if he had the 'emotional capacity' to do so (and because of weather problems which would have necessitated the camera going on and off in a distracting manner); the play of an RPG is an intimate, subjective engagement. Fowler played the game but kept part of his personal identity slightly obscured to conserve his affective reservoirs.

One of the reasons that Session Zeros have become a standard part of TRPGs is because they allow players to explicitly express concepts, themes, and aesthetics that they want to include in a game and those they wish to avoid. The term, Session Zero, is a strange one, because it denotes that this session of play is removed from actual gameplay. However, it is very much an important part of TRPG play. The negotiations that take place during a Session Zero are explicit and unambiguous to avoid potential challenges from attempting to navigate player's expectations – and sensitivities – by intuition alone once the characters have moved into their performative roles actively. Session Zero is what Stephanie Boluk & Patrick LeMieux characterize as a “metagame,” the process where the context of a game – or additional needs, motivations, concepts of the players outside the game – influences the game's play. In this case, the world of Liebeseller's *Call of Cthulhu* game is influenced by the interests, sensitivities, and interests of its players; the aesthetic of the world is based on Lovecraft, Petersen's rules mechanics, and now, in Session Zero, Liebeseller and her players begin to exert their subjective influence.

The modern TRPG is entangled with the history of its play and the lessons that players and designers have gleaned from their experiences. In 1974, the potential consequences of engaging with TRPGs had not been significantly explored; they had also not been significantly explored within communities beyond the original wargame & fantasy reader clubs from which the game emerged (and was authored). In 2022, TRPGs are an embedded, and profitable genre of modern games; the diversity of the modern audience reflects that, and the diversity of people's expectations and ambitions for the game has grown alongside its expanding accessibility. Twitch streams and Internet series, such as the show “Critical Role” (which boasts over a million viewers per episode), have significantly broadened the audience and potential players for TRPGs.



A Session Zero allows for the game master/keeper to establish mores, standards, specific frames and boundaries in order for players to be comfortable through the experience of play. Perhaps the most notable and infamous consequence of a game that did not include a Session Zero is Adam Koebel's "Far Verona" campaign. Koebel was a highly-respected TRPG designer and professional game master. During a March 2020 YouTube recording of a session of the TRPG, *Stars Without Number*, Koebel initiated a non-consensual sex scene with one of the player's characters in the game. Broadcast in real time, the shock and horror that registers on Koebel's fellow players is a testament to the power, and subjective presence, that these games hold over their players (1:16:00-1:18:53). After the session, all the players quickly quit the game, ending the show, and Koebel's career as a game designer and RPG personality remains in jeopardy. Since 2019, he no longer broadcasts games and has published no game design work. This may have been avoided if Koebel had run a Session Zero and established boundaries for his players. A Session Zero would have prepared his group for the possibility sexual content, or more importantly, allowed his players to explicitly *forbid* it. In Koebel's subsequent apologies for his actions, he admits that his omission of a Session Zero was directly responsible for the errors he made during play. Koebel incorrectly attempted to intuit his player's boundaries and has suffered significant professional consequences for his error. Session Zeroes have become such an important part of contemporary TRPG play because of the consequences of violating players' affective boundaries.

Liebeseller always includes Session Zero for her TRPG campaigns. Horror games such as *Call of Cthulhu* are especially fraught with affective danger since they explicitly include disturbing horror elements and themes. In "Millvale Campaign's" Session Zero, the players introduce themselves and their "real world" identities. Social relationships form before their

player characters are constructed; in TRPGs, the meta-social frame is a prerequisite to creating their diegetic roles. Liebeseller then introduces the main aesthetics and themes of the game and the rules themselves (mentioning that they will be playing the 1982 edition of *Call of Cthulhu*). She introduces the mechanics of the game and the base expectations of the campaign and its implicit entanglement with this dissertation. While *Call of Cthulhu* games can take place in any era, most campaigns take place around the 1920s – to reflect the contemporary setting of Lovecraft’s fiction. However, the “Millvale Campaign” takes place in 1983 – to reflect the contemporary setting of the game’s initial design era.

In Session Zero, Liebeseller introduces basic elements, although no narrative arc, that will be included within the game. I had requested she include specific elements from Lovecraft’s fiction, including appearances by Lovecraft’s Great Old Ones (malignant deities that once ruled over the Earth – and lie in wait to reclaim it).

Although Session Zero is explicitly scheduled to concentrate on the players’ specific construction of the constitutive elements of the game, its diegesis, and its eventual protagonists; there is significantly more conversation about gaming systems, gaming philosophies, each player’s playing histories – and the jokes, discourse, personal sharing that is intrinsic to any social engagement. The social framing and keying of the game is an integral element to the TRPG; the collaborative creation process is founded on a tacit understanding and recognition of the other observers (and their subjectivity) present at the table or via the computer screen.

Is this conversation a part of the TRPG text? The casual observer would consider that this initial discourse not part of the game, but rather the social effluvium that surrounds it (the “metagame”). However, like any game, its context will always be embedded within its play: the relationship between the players cannot be disentangled from their characters. Fine, Mackay, and

Waskul & Lust in their studies of TRPG performance identify the performative frames that players move between while playing the multiple roles of player, player character, and social presence. The concept of a frame is useful and complementary to the concept of dynamic agential observations: at any moment in the game, a player in the game is performing their social role, their player role, or their player character role depending on the exigency of gameplay and the social situation. While the narrative is being created within the diegetic worlds, its authors exist outside it and rely on social performative frames and tools for its manifestation.

Each performative frame is analogous to the concept of quantum observations: the players move into a specific role, dismissing other possible roles, to collapse possibilities into one determinate frame. As Mackay notes, the performance of each of these roles is simultaneously the authorship of the game (5). The TRPG text itself exists – depending on the observation – within its diegetic world but also within the social worlds (and frames) of its authors. Even watching the YouTube videos of the “Millvale Campaign” does not bound it within a linear framework; it only bounds our observations of it. The text can be found within and move between Lovecraft’s fiction and Petersen’s rules to Liebeseller and her player’s performance in a similar fashion to how its players move between their social & ludic frames.

This dissertation is divided into chapters based on specific observations: collapses of the text into specific forms that dissipate and return to possibility after each observation. We observe its play within the same fashion: the game exists only where (and when) we look at it – in its game world, beyond its diegesis, within the subjectivities of its player/performers. TRPG play begins before the players are present at the table and remains after they exit its stage as long as an observer, though a video recording, memory, or the reading of this dissertation constructs it.

Liebeseller and her players fashion affective and thematic boundaries for the game in this first observable session. Each of the players in the game identify specific elements they do not want Liebeseller to include. For instance, O'Ceallaigh and Fowler both request that the game avoid visceral or explicit gore. The group agrees to avoid body disfiguration and medical stories. These guard rails are set to avoid affective distress for the players.<sup>123</sup> Fowler illustrates this by explaining:

I cannot do gore at all like any level of bodily fluid or blood it's just a pain reaction on my end. I don't know what it is but I can literally feel that pain and it makes me very queasy...if you want to do that I'm fine you just got to give me the heads up... you might get a fainting person on your hands if you don't do that. (52:35)

However, Session Zero also provides an opportunity to establish themes and elements that the players would like to include in the campaign. Liebeseller asks the group directly: “What types of stories are interesting to you? What type of things do you want to explore in the 1983 Cthulhu land?” (30:19). The group agrees on some basic structures to the game, share their literary and narrative interests, and even request a few specific details for Liebeseller to include. O'Ceallaigh even requests that a possible scene take place in a Department of Motor Vehicles office to have the cosmically uncanny collide with the bureaucratically mundane.

One of the most compelling themes that the players decide to include is racism within the game's world. Despite playing within a world based on Lovecraftian mythologies, the players make a “conscious” decision to resist a problematic element of the author's subjectivity.

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<sup>123</sup> Liebeseller also introduces the mechanical tools that the game will employ to limit any unforeseeable dangers: in this game, she employs “lines” and “veils.” A line can be used when player characters engage with an activity that the players do not want to directly role-play; as Liebeseller explains, the game would “fade to black” so the players can avoid performing, through role-play, the activity. It happens “off screen.”

A “veil” represents the concept that distressful things, such as sexual assault, occur in the diegetic world of the game but will never be directly engaged by the players directly; it exists within a “veil” beyond the game (as a quantum possibility that, for the purposes of this game, will never be directly observed). These safety tools are not featured within Petersen's rule set and were not included in early versions of TRPGs.

Liebeseller explains that this “conscious” decision was made to resist racism “because of Lovecraft’s own issues with it... we needed to play with them [the rules] subversively on purpose.” This is compelling for two significant reasons: first, Liebeseller and her players contextualize Lovecraft (and his racism & xenophobia) as dwelling within the rules themselves. Second, the ludic play of the game allows players an agential opportunity to confront Lovecraft’s racism directly. The players recognize the entanglement of Lovecraft not only within the world that their PCs dwell within, but the mechanics that allow gameplay to emerge. They also accept that play itself provides a conduit for directly exercising agential realism; if they are going to create a world together, they are going use it to antagonize, resist, and push back against one of the *other* core authors of it, the haunting spectre of Lovecraft himself.

It is tempting to think that authorship has passed from Lovecraft (then to Petersen, then to players), but at any moment any of those authors will re-assert themselves into the text. Lovecraft’s mythology is one of the aesthetic foundations (and forms much of the existential nihilist philosophies) that the players must turn to as they build and explore the game world. Petersen’s game mechanics – such as the “insanity check” roll required when facing a Lovecraftian monster – emerge when a contingent situation requires resolution. Authorship of the TRPG is a collaborative process that transcends the biological limitations of constructed space and time: a ludic discourse between living and the dead.

The living, of course, are the main arbiters of the discourse around the table (or screen). In Session Zero, the group determines a setting for the game: a small town near Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania with a population under 5,000 people, a real town named Millvale. Liebeseller’s players create protagonists, their player characters, to explore the world. These characters represent the avatars that each player use to navigate the diegetic scenario; affectively, these

characters represent the subjectivities that the players will pretend to inhabit. They agree to pretend and perform responses to the scenario in the same (imagined) manner that their (imaginary) characters would. The characters are based on the subjective interests and creative capacity of the players as well as dice rolls which provide initial attributes for each character. This represents an early introduction to TRPG's intersection of creative ambition and random contingency that will eventually become entangled during play.

Fowler creates a 29-year-old traveling pharmacist who has recently returned to Millvale and always carries a bloodletting knife handed down by his great, great grandfather. Jennifer creates Iris Cooper, a private investigator that Millvale's population calls on if they find themselves in trouble; Jennifer bases some of Cooper's characteristics on the Marvel comics' superhero Jessica Jones (which summons Jones' initial creators, artist Brian Michael Bendis and writer Michael Gaydos, into the authorship entanglements of the game).<sup>124</sup> O'Ceallaigh creates Reason Cloudfang, a 42-year-old camp counselor that lives on a local campgrounds and runs events for the town's children. Finally, Paul's character is Hank, a 73-year-old parapsychologist who authors books on the occult and lives in an antique farmhouse. Each decision the group

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<sup>124</sup> Jennifer's familiarity with the character is from the *Jessica Jones* television show not from the original 2001 Marvel comic, however. This means that not only could Bendis and Gaydos be considered as authors within the "Millvale Campaign," so too must the writers and directors of the show (including showrunner Melissa Rosenberg), and even actress Krysten Ritter, that have a direct impact on Jennifer's translation of the character and that provide a significant influence on the emergence of Millvale's Iris Cooper.

This rabbit hole, however, could go even deeper. Fowler's PC, Edward Newgate, is named after a character from the anime show *One Piece* (based on a manga created by Eiichirō Oda). In the first session of play, Liebeseller mentions that she is taking inspiration from the television shows *Lovecraft Country* (2020), *Them* (2021-), and *Midnight Mass* (2021). O'Ceallaigh's PC is based on a *D&D* character he has played before with the same name: like Gygax and Appendix N, every subjective imagination is an entanglement of the cultural fictions (and fictional environments) from which our basic capacity to imagine alternate possibilities and observe them emerge from.

Every step down the rabbit hole continues to complicate any notion of singular authorship: texts, like people, emerge from the relationships entangled with their construction. The answer to Foucault's query is that the author is everyone.

makes is an agential cut within the comprehensive mythic possibilities provided by Lovecraft and the ludic possibilities that Petersen's rules simulate (which represent agential cuts themselves of the nigh-infinite possibilities of fictional worlds). With all of the potentialities, the group has decided to observe 4 specific characters in a specific town within a determinate amount of time to produce a compelling experience that invites translation into a comprehensive narrative; within Malaby's definition of the game this represents the "interpretable outcome" for a TRPG (96).

The group decides to create important non-player characters (NPCs) for the town and to establish their PCs relationship with them. This provides an opportunity to entangle their PCs with the social habitus of Millvale. For instance, the group decides that there are town rumors that Hank is in a cult, Edward may be brewing his own meds, and that Reason might be at fault for a child who died at the local campground. The group creates Orion McGuinness, a war buddy of Hank's that enjoys drinking with Reason at a local pub. Iris has a relationship with a crow, Janice, that she feeds regularly and who rewards her with shiny objects in return. The group even creates an incompetent mayor to preside over Millvale. Again, these additional elements foster entanglements for PCs and their town – and provide opportunities to build (or modify) relationships within it. Millvale, its town, and its characters – like the authors who have created them – emerge from their relationships. It is these relationships that provide a ludic verisimilitude for the small town. Barad argues that: "Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (*Meeting the Universe Halfway IX*). This is as true in the world of the TRPG as it is in the social world. The characters, like their players, only become "real" when they can manifest through the relationships that make them possible and inevitable.

As Session Zero concludes, Liebeseller and her players have formed the framework, guardrails, setting, and protagonists for their game. The session concludes with the players, performing their social and material selves, scheduling a time and date for their next observation of Millvale and to begin the explicit performance of four compelling residents who exist, interrelate, and may even meet their fate there.

## **Sessions 1-2**

The observations of Millvale's residents, however, do not wait for that performance. Between Session Zero and the first session, Liebeseller sends each player a questionnaire. This questionnaire asks specific questions of each character. This provides the Keeper with more specific information about each character that she can then use during the performative play sessions. The questionnaire also allows each player to "play" their character before the next performance by considering in more depth, the character's history, relationships, minor quirks, and in some cases – even what they eat for breakfast. For instance, here is the questionnaire (that Liebeseller created) and the answers that Fowler provides about his PC, Edward:

**What pocket do you keep your wallet in?**

Inner left chest pocket of his vest.

**Do you doodle when taking notes or writing?**

Always, he finds it easy for his mind to wonder.

**Where do you do the making of drugs?**

(Where do you do the making of the drugs, lmaooo) But for serious, likely just in his house. Being the mid 1900's he'd likely have access to most commercial powders, so he'd mostly do the capping and bottling. And whatever he doesn't have access to he'll usually ask the vet or stink bomb steve, or even find herbs in the wild and grind them down into powder.

**Name 1 frequent customer and their usual order at the pharmacy.**

Probably Lilian Smith. She likely comes in often for a blood thinner.



**Which sense do you favor? (sight, hearing, etc...)**

He relies heavily on his sight. His philosophy is like, it's either a toss-up between sight or hearing since both are important to be clued in to his surroundings, but that his hearing is more easily lied to than sight.

**As a child what was your favorite object/toy? And do you still have it? (teddy bear, a baseball, etc...)**

He seems like the kind of guy to like have one of those early Mr. Potatoheads and that likely sent him off on his path of medicine. Though he definitely left that behind once he moved away from this town the first time.

**What is a safe smell for you? (for instance a mothers lilac perfume, the scent of pine trees, etc...)**

Oddly enough embalming fluid, like that rich formaldehyde smell That's likely inherited from his time around his grandfather's office.

**How do you wake up in the morning and how do you go to bed? What is your routine (if you have one)?**

He begins his days early, usually around dawn. Will get up and do some small stretches to warm his body up, brewing a pot of coffee while that's going. He usually has like a Russian breakfast, so a shot of vodka with his coffee and a cigarette while he reads the newspaper. For bedtime, it's usually reading a good book as the sun starts going down and then just a bath and in bed.

**If you were on death row, what would your last meal be?**

Probably a beef wellington and a side of garlic mashed potatoes, a little on the lumpy side, served with brown gravy made from bacon grease.

**What kind of shoes do you wear?**

Size 11 brown leather loafers.

**Do you go to church?**

Nah, his mother was pretty strict about that growing up, so he kind of has a repulsion to it. He doesn't belittle others for their faith, but it's not for him.

**The joke shop walls are covered in various paraphernalia. Weird brochures from other towns, posters, old school prank toys. Name 3 of these that you remember.**

He'd likely remember seeing a poster for a new theater being opened up in the nearest "big city" and an advertisement for whatever show they were performing for opening night. On that note, while not a new idea, I'd imagine there would be some advertising for the new bigger and brighter fireworks being sold at the joke shop ala something that resembles a roman candle. And finally the classic whoopie cushion. Something about it's simple and nostalgia keeping it in Edward's mind. (Shared Google Document)

Liebeseller's questionnaire, by asking questions such as "Do you go to church?"

contextualizes her questions as if being sent to the actual PC; Fowler replies within the third

person, as does everyone except for Paul. When he answers the question, he has already begun to perform Hank. For instance, when Liebeseller asks “Do you go to church?” Paul/Hank’s reply is “Absolutely not. God died a long time ago. When I was young men worshiped war. Now money is their god. I have deep disdain for any who do profess a faith.” Whether they are directly performing their character, however, all players have begun to make observations – and agential cuts – around their players.

The (continuing) construction of their characters is also the (continuing) architecture of the world, and the small Pennsylvania town of Millvale, that the game takes place. Some of Liebeseller’s questions explicitly provide more information on the town. For instance, she asks that O’Ceallaigh draw a map of Reason’s campground (which he does through a Google Docs illustration). The questions also provide an opportunity to identify relationships between NPCs and other PCs; in the answers above, Fowler mentions that “Lillian Smith” is a frequent customer of his pharmacy. Liebeseller asks Hank what cigarettes Lillian smokes (“Lucky Strikes”). The questionnaire provides a form of play, outside the performative space of the campaign sessions, that has as much consequence to the play experience – and eventual translated narrative of that play – as observations made when all players are present at the table or screen. However, it is important to note that extra-table play is not universal to the TRPG experience and varies significantly. The play of a TRPG does require, at some point, for players to convene around a table or screen simultaneously; it is not required that they fill out questionnaires or talk to the Keeper (or Game Master) outside of those sessions – however, in my experience, this extra-performatively play is de rigeur for home campaigns.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> In my own games, which I run online through Roll20 and Discord, there is constant conversation outside of the game sessions. There is even a channel marked “in-character-roleplay” where players continue performing their character’s actions and recording their reactions to game events.

The answers to these questionnaires are available to all players. By providing the answers to all players, they become aware of information their characters would not be. In the play of a TRPG, providing “meta”-information such as this is contingent the need to share information for the purposes of running the performative sessions as well as the game master’s proclivities. Players often need to share information with other players about their character’s attributes to complete a group task for instance even if their PCs would have no idea about the relative strength, or sanity, of another PC within the game world. Gamemasters have their own philosophies on how providing meta-information will impact their specific campaign and on how this impacts a player’s identification with their character. During Session Zero, Liebeseller states that she has no problems with players sharing meta-knowledge, although the expectation is that when the players move into their performative roles, they will not take action based on knowledge their PCs do not have access to.<sup>126</sup>

At the beginning of the first session, Liebeseller explicitly situates the first observations of the game world and ludic diegesis within time, weather conditions, and its affective temperament. She reads from a prepared script meant to set the stage for the player’s performances:

The year is 1983. It is October 24th. The weather is chilly, but in the 50s during the day and mostly cloudy. Our characters have found themselves residents of the Borough of Millvale, a town that sits just across the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh, founded November 24, 1883, by the first Edwin Flaig. The town originally grew around industry, iron, stone works, Lumber mills, and breweries. Although the town was once very

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There are games that do not have this extra-session play, however. For instance, TRPG play at a game convention, such as Lake Geneva’s GaryCon or Indianapolis’ GenCon where the players are often strangers features no discussion of the game, its characters, or setting before or after the performative session around the table. Local game stores may host similar games (that are often sponsored by a game’s publisher, such as Wizards of the Coast “Adventure’s League” and Paizo’s “Pathfinder Society” games) where the players only contact with one another and their Game Master will be at the table.

<sup>126</sup> Liebeseller does title one of the documents in the shared online drive that the players have access to as “CoC Planning Players Beware.” This warning contextualizes this particular document as containing information that might spoil the mystery of their upcoming adventure.

prosperous, in 1983 it is in shambles. Many of the businesses are boarded up or left empty. Industries began its downward spiral in the 1960's and between 1960 and 1980 Millvale has lost almost a quarter of its residents, currently sitting at 4,056. Those left here are landed, impoverished, or have found themselves a profession that is indispensable to the town.

Millvale, like many boroughs and townships in the Northeast, has a storied history of strange occurrences. Ghosts wander the streets at night. Eyes in the dark glow in the trees as car lights hit them. And children go missing at rates perhaps larger than they really ought to be. If you hear your name called in the woods, walk slowly but diligently to the nearest road and do not look back to see what's stalking you. The important places in Millvale include Mal's Irish Pub, Deer Creek Camp just outside of town, the Church of the Shepard, the Millvale Press, and the DMV. (10:50-12:20)

Liebeseller utilizes the information she received from her questionnaires to locate each of the PCs within the world she presents to the players. Each character wakes up on the morning of October 24, 1983 performing the daily routines they identified in their questionnaire answers: Edward stretches and pours vodka into his coffee at dawn; Iris wakes up late from a late night of investigation; Reason begins the day with his customary bagel and cream cheese.

However, Howard's morning is a little different. During the night each of the characters received a nightmarish vision with either monstrous visitors or an uncanny thin figure wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Each character, upon waking must roll a "sanity check," using the percentile dice, to determine their reaction to their vision. This is the first moment where the observation of the TRPG experience shifts from performance to a mechanically-resolved moment of contingency. All characters must roll a certain number with percentile dice to avoid taking psychological damage. Paul fails his roll spectacularly – and then after a few more rolls to determine the exact impact of the shock to Hank's sense of reality – finds his character temporarily insane with an overwhelming sense of paranoia for the next nine hours inside the game world: welcome, Paul, to *Call of Cthulhu*.

These first moments allow Liebeseller to contextualize not only the aesthetic themes of the game but how Petersen's rule mechanics will support them. In addition, she begins to introduce elements of the game vital to a compelling TRPG experience: places to explore and foes to combat. After their encounters with the horrific visions, each PCs find themselves in front of a church, "The House of the Shepard," in the afternoon. Most of the town seems to be attending a sermon inside the church. Iris and Hank have been teleported here; Iris is still in her night clothes. The sermon inside the church is being delivered by a strange, tall man – who is similar, though not exactly the same – as the gaunt, thin vision that some of the PCs encountered within their dreams; he is also wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Liebeseller has introduced a possible antagonist for the group. Following the lead of Lovecraftian fiction, however, this new (non-player) character is mysterious and their exact intentions unknown. An aura of the otherworldly surrounds him and his sermon on the rapture is unsettling to the players. The PCs spend the next hour or so attempting to find out more about this enigmatic holy man. Each of the players performs this investigation in the manner they imagine their characters would.<sup>127</sup> Edward questions the new priest directly, Iris cases the church (taking pictures from her clue kit). Reason and Hank, however, play checkers until Hank can retire to his library (stocked with books about strange, otherworldly phenomena) for research.<sup>128</sup> The group is also introduced to the Flaig patriarch, Edwin Flaig, one of the wealthiest men in town, and his children as well as the affable, if incompetent mayor, Dayl McSmarmy.

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<sup>127</sup> One of the difficulties of any TPRG is determining motivations for the PCs to begin adventuring or exploring. In the case of the "Millvale Campaign," some players have overt reasons to explore. Iris is a PI; Hank's passion is in matters of the occult. Reason and Edward do not express any outward motivation although Liebeseller will eventually provide motivation (based on their concern for the town and campground) for getting to the bottom of Millvale's strange new events and personalities.

<sup>128</sup> *Spate's Catalog*, *Tobin's Spirit Guide*, the usual literature, perhaps.

Play of the TRPG produces narratives in the sense that all experiences produce narratives when agential observers translate them into meaning. The design of the TRPG experience, however, is usually designed around simulating the traditional, structuralist textual experience, such as the literary genre fictions, that inspire their thematic content. In this case, Liebeseller is consciously including the major elements expected in a literary narrative. The players have provided the antagonists, the group has collaborated to create a diegetic setting, and she is now filling in the details: antagonists & villains and their potential schemes to threaten Millvale. Liebeseller guides the player's experience as a means replicate the traditional narrative experience of exposition (the players have nightmares), the uncovering of a potential threat to the status quo (the "Shepard" and his strange new church), and the protagonists resistance to the threat (which begins in this first session through an investigating of how serious the threat may be). The players role-play their PCs as curious but not entirely aware of the full threat to their community and its reality. However, the players themselves are aware that there most certainly will be an existential threat to themselves and their community. Even a passing relationship to the game, or its Lovecraftian inspiration, offers the players the foreknowledge that any game of *Call of Cthulhu* is based on recreating an experience of increasing celestial impotence, creeping unease, and *dread*. The rules are the mechanical contract at TRPG play groups has agreed to abide by. The desire for this experience is what brings them to TRPG rules systems.

If we follow a structuralist approach to narratology, we could consider the play of a TRPG as a form of what Russian formalists, such as Vladimir Propp and Shklovsky, refer to as the "fabula," how the elements of a story are told. In the TRPG format, the story is told through the player's enacting their agency within the game world. The players are active and unpredictable agents within the game world; however this does not change their fundamental

narrative purpose as protagonist/agents.<sup>129</sup> The syuzhet, the elements of the narrative themselves (what happens in the story versus how it is *told*), is (usually and historically) more intimately linked with the fabula within a TRPG.<sup>130</sup> The events of the narrative usually occur to the players in a linear fashion; unless a game revels in meta-game knowledge (which would be extraordinarily rare for early TRPG play), the players learn information at the same time – and from the same vantage point – as their characters. The implicit assumption of TRPGs is that the players identify with their characters; this identification can be encouraged through entangling their experiences with the unfolding narrative. The Keeper attempts to keep this entanglement intact while attempting to offer the players what Grouling Cover refers to as a “narrative experience” by utilizing traditional literary formalism construction (168). In this case, Liebeseller’s gradual introduction of diegetic elements, supporting characters, villains, and aesthetic details is intended to produce an affective entangled experience that resembles the literary experience of reading Lovecraft’s tales. In the *CoC* rulebook, Petersen encourages Keepers to follow Lovecraft’s literary blueprint:

Each scenario in *Call of Cthulhu* should be organized like the layers of an onion. As the characters uncover one layer, they should discover another. These layers should go on and on, until the players themselves decide they are getting too deep and stop their investigations. On the surface, the scenario should look like it is no more than a conventional “haunted house,” mystic cult, or even a hoax. As the investigators delve deeper into the mystery, hints and notes should be given showing the greater significance of this particular haunted house in the scheme of things. (65).

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<sup>129</sup> I would argue that there are as many literary authors who are just as surprised at what their fictional characters have done within the context of their personal imaginations as there are keepers and dungeon masters surprised by the unpredictable decisions of their players.

<sup>130</sup> *Call of Cthulhu*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Traveller*, the early TRPGs that we analyze in this dissertation, almost universally keep the two aligned. Time follows a linear format from the PC/protagonist’s perspective. However, there are some contemporary TRPGs, such as Jason Morningstar’s *Fiasco* (2009) or Ben Robbins’ *Microscope* (2011), in which the role-playing sessions do not happen in a linear fashion. *Microscope* is based on role-playing scenes, with different characters in each scene, that can occur years – or even hundreds of years – apart and those scenes can be played in any order. It is not surprising that the first TRPGs followed a formalist approach while modern texts revel in complicating structuralism.

In “Narrative Structure and Creative Tension in Call of Cthulhu,” Kenneth Hite argues that *CoC* adventures accomplish this by following a basic structure of investigation where the Keeper presents clues “that each lead to the next clue, like bread crumbs on a trail or beads-on-a-string” (35-36). While searching the church for clues, Iris and Hank discover sinister talons in a tree – one of the first “bread crumbs” or “beads” – meant to compel the investigation towards the next clue, ideally manifesting a ludic experience that mirrors a literary engagement with Lovecraft’s fiction.

One of the complications, however, is that unlike in a literary text, the ambitions and motivations of the player can antagonize the narrative structure. It is not the Keeper, nor individual players, who determine whether the structure of the game follows any structuralist pattern of the literary text, but rather their relationships. Any study even of the tabletop role-playing game is tasked with the challenge not of attempting to identify individual authors but rather keeping the focus on the relationship between them that emerges: and this approach requires not only attention to how the players interact within the diegetic world – as committed agents of producing the narrative experience – but also how they interact within their social frames. Both (stop me if you’ve heard this one before) remain entangled in the creation of one another: how the narrative of the game unfolds has dramatic affective impacts on the players and the social relationships of the players has dramatic affective impacts on how each manages their character within the world.

During the first session of the “Millvale Campaign,” there is a strange moment of creative friction between Liebeseller and Fowler. The scene offers a compelling insight into how the reality of this world is not always constructed through willing collaboration, but sometimes through moments of contention. Resolution is reached through consensus in TRPGs, but this can



also take place through competition although usually the game master/Keeper has the final say. In the opening scene of the game, Liebeseller describes a sermon being given by the mysterious Shepard. She mentions that Edward hears the congregation singing a hymn he has not heard before. Fowler, in his role as Edward, seems taken aback:

**Fowler/Edward**

Hold on...It is a hymn that I haven't heard before?

**Liebeseller/Keeper**

Yeah.

**Fowler/Edward**

False.

[Long Pause. All players broadcasting their image are smiling. (Fowler is not using a camera).]

**Liebeseller/Keeper**

Nope. That's not false. [Laughter]

**Fowler/Edward**

Then it's not a hymn.

[Pause. Players cease smiling.]

**O'Ceallaigh/Reason**

It's a her.

**Fowler/Edward**

This is Edward by the way. This is like Edward's inner monologue. It's fine, you can keep going on now but now the red flag has officially been hoisted.

**Liebeseller/Keeper**

Okay. All right. Cool. (1:20:29-1:21:05).

Liebeseller and Fowler did not know one another before the "Millvale Campaign" began. Their unfamiliarity with the frames of each other's social performances contributes to this awkward moment. The moment highlights potential tensions in a TRPG between a game master's construction of the diegetic reality and players' own ambitions for how it should be manifested. In most TRPGs, it is the Game Master whose final interpretation becomes the official canon. In

this case, Liebeseller reaffirms her interpretation as correct. O'Ceallaigh, who is friends with Fowler, attempts to defuse the awkward situation with a joke. In the end, Fowler does not press the issue but moves his player's interpretation from an objective observation of the game world's reality to a specific, subjective observation originating from his character; Liebeseller maintains her agency as final arbiter of the diegetic reality (for all players to recognize), Fowler maintains his agency as the master of his character, including not just controlling Edward's actions, but also in constructing his personal observation/interpretations of the shared game world reality.

Agency, itself, is often negotiated (and re-negotiated) between the gamemaster and players. Fine contextualizes these disagreements as minor conflicts, arguing that "Fantasy role-playing is not always placid; players and referees often argue and bicker about a logical point or technical nicety in the rules, as each attempts to dominate the other in a continuous struggle for influence" (106). However, in this case both sides are not interested in conflict (or "domination"), but rather seeking a mutually-acceptable reality that allows the game to proceed, socially and ludically.<sup>131</sup> Even in Mackay and Grouling Cover's consideration of their home campaigns, there is often mention of the extra-diegetic, social relationships among the players and how they impact their games. This is obviously a difference between the literary text (or cinematic), a reader does not have to be concerned with another reader interrupting, changing the story, or in this case, attempting to negate a specific observation entirely.

Once the consensual reality is re-established, Liebeseller continues providing clues that something is seriously awry in Millvale. O'Ceallaigh had requested, during Session Zero, that a

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<sup>131</sup> That is true in this case. I have played and run games where "influence" on the game's reality has become a point of contention. Again, the Keeper (or Game Master) maintains final control; they have the right to remove players from a game who refuse to abide by the rules, social and mechanical, of their specific game. I have never specifically asked a player to leave but I have not invited particular players back many times.

scene take place in a mundane place like a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) office. Liebeseller sets the first scene after the Church of the Shepard inside Millvale's DMV. At the DMV, with Reason attempting to get a permit to ride his scooter, an enormous, hellish sinkhole opens in the middle of the floor and sucks in a racist city clerk (strangely enough, Reason simply sidesteps the hole and still successfully renews his license with another clerk). Liebeseller continues to introduce more crumbs for the investigators to follow while heightening the mystery and uncanny tensions surrounding the small town. She also introduces the theme of racism by introducing details, such as the DMV worker's overt prejudice, to highlight Millvale's entanglement with xenophobia.

With these crumbs in place, the session ends after nearly three hours of play— although before it does, Jennifer requests that she make small changes to Iris' character attributes.<sup>132</sup> Now that she understands the mechanics of the game better, she realizes she would make different decisions on what skills she wants to emphasize for Iris. Liebeseller, again as the arbiter of engagements with Petersen's rules, agrees. This is another illustration of how the reality of the world, and the manifestation of its protagonists, exists in a state of constant, discursive, observation. Rules, characters, even the game world exist within fields of possibility – that can be observed, changed, and re-constructed, depending on the current exigency for crafting the most compelling ludic experience for the player group. In this case, too, play happens outside the performative spatial and temporal forum of the group session via table or screen.

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<sup>132</sup> The first performative session will be the shortest of the four sessions at 2:44:12. Session Zero, without any explicit performances of the PCs, was nearly identical at 2:43:21. Sessions 2-4 will all top three hours. The longest, the finale in session 4 will run 3:44:18. The first sessions are shorter as players get comfortable, both socially and as creative collaborators, with one another; The finale's length represents the exigency of closing the narrative arc of the campaign – it is the only session that cannot end without a firm resolution.

Play from TRPG sessions leave artifactual, material traces of their occurrence and legends for the future reconstructions of past observations. For instance, the character sheets that represent the player's PCs have changed from this session: many of the PCs have lower sanity scores, have acquired new equipment during the session, and in the case of Jennifer's Iris, even changed the foundational mechanics of their character's capacity. All of these changes are marked down on character sheets, the artifactual representation of the game's protagonists. It is also common for players to keep notes as well about the information that they discovered during their investigation and adventures. However, it is almost mandatory for the Keeper to do so. Liebeseller has been keeping notes on her PC during the session and transcribes them to a shared online drive. These material notes (even if virtual) record the current observation of the game world – in some ways, they represent what might be referred to as a save state in a computer game – ready for future engagements when its authors can reconvene.<sup>133</sup> Liebeseller explains her preparation process (for this game and the others she has run in the past):

My prep is usually done directly before game. 1-4 hours depending on my schedule and what needs prepping. In an ideal prep session, I go through the material, any notes that I have, and usually skim backgrounds if it's relevant. I make or update the digital maps, any paraphernalia/props, and make sure I have written down any NPC backgrounds I need. Sometimes I write play by plays or narrative beats they need to hit. The occasional

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<sup>133</sup> Because the *CoC* campaign was only five sessions long, about 10 Google documents sufficed to collate all of the information necessary for reconstituting the campaign for following sessions (and to remind players of what happened and who their PCs have met). Longer term campaigns often employ more comprehensive tools for keeping track of events, characters, locations, and all of the diegetic information entangled with the PC's adventures.

For my ongoing *D&D* campaign, we use a website, *Kanka*, dedicated to tracking all of the information that is necessary for being available to the players in a long-term campaign. One of our players, Lauber-DeLuca (see above), is the official scribe of the campaign and records a journal of each session. Any important events that occur, any important NPCs that the party meets, and any new locations discovered are all recorded within wiki categories on the site. At any moment, players can access the information, read what happened in past sessions, review important features of the world of *Apshai*, and make changes if they would like and get permission from the DM.

Even virtual, play of TRPGs creates both material & virtual ephemera and records of its existence. The play of these games can create compelling historical records of their observations.

monologue or description will be written. I really like having images to share, little secret messages, and things.

The records (and artifacts) are not part of the play of the session. They represent the material consequences and historical records of the group's collaborative creation; they are the wake created by the agential construction of new, subjective, realities that play has manifested. These artifacts, in a Lovecraftian fashion, represent material items produced and proof of the alternate realities the group has created (from beyond *our* time and space).

The second session of play begins with a recap, assisted by the virtual notes Liebeseller and the group have taken, of what happened in the first performative session. Because the second gathering takes place a week after the first, the group must be reminded of their previous observations of the game state. The universe of their campaign has been in a semi-strict holding pattern since then. However, changes to a TRPG world reality often happen without the entire group although almost always at the fiat of the game master. Jennifer has slightly altered the world by modifying Iris' capacities; however, it is Liebeseller who has made the most changes, or rather, imposed new observations of Millvale, even in the absence of the full group. Before the second session begins, Liebeseller creates new areas for the group to investigate and considered the consequences of the actions that the PCs took during the first session. The sense of verisimilitude and the immersive belief in the reality of the TRPG often relies on the game master's capacity to construct an environment that responds to – but also is not reliant on – the player characters directly; however, this too can be an opportunity for discursive construction based on what all of the players want. One of the players in the “Millvale Campaign,” however, specifically enjoys how TRPGs allow for intimate exploration of a literary space that can feel real to players. Paul writes that: “building stories in a communal way in someone else's world really changes how you see that world. So it [the campaign] really made me see his [Lovecraft's]

creation as a more living, breathing thing than it would otherwise had been for me.” It is possible in a TRPG that players *do* want the world to simply revolve around them and are uninterested in anything outside of their PC’s direct observations, although this was not true for the “Millvale Campaign” based on the interests and desires expressed by its players and Keeper.

The players become the primary observers of the TRPG text through its manifestation in performative play: the conch is in their hands when they are convened at the table or screen. The world of the TRPG and its construction is based on the subjective capacities, ambitions, interests, and capacities of all its players. The thematic environment of *Call of Cthulhu*, however, is one that is based on Lovecraft’s existential perspective of materialist fatalism. Petersen’s rules system was constructed to make the players eventually recognize their cosmic impotence. However, Liebeseller and her players could decide to subjugate the system if they wanted. Because I have asked them to play as closely within the aesthetic bounds of Petersen, Liebeseller guides the campaign’s aesthetic to *mostly* follow Petersen’s intentions.

It is important to note that while Petersen is entangled with the game, the players can subvert – in similar manners of how the players decided to introduce racism as a thematic element to provide a ludic opportunity for subverting Lovecraft’s own xenophobia – the rules systems. O’Ceallaigh claims that “Because we had control over the narrative as players/keeper, we were able to adjust the things that we were uncomfortable with and also not play into the explicit racism in a lot of his literature, especially racism that goes unchallenged.” This relationship does not disentangle these elements, however, it only changes the nature of the entanglement; they are still linked, but rather as complementary elements within a state of mutual *antagonism*. They are always aware of the other. If Liebeseller or her players decided to abandon the creeping dread the game is designed to impose, they would be aware that they have

traversed the boundaries of the game's expectation. They can bypass the boundaries but remain aware of their existence. Again, one of the most compelling characteristics of the TRPG text is the intrinsic and explicit invitation it offers to play with its formal structures: the game expects players to play *with* its boundaries as they simultaneously play *within* them. These boundaries are not static but they are present.

Once the players have reconstructed their observations from the first session, the performative play of the second begins and the group continues to follow more breadcrumb clues. In this second session, the wider threats to Millvale, and the existential horrors behind them, begin to take shape. The group continues their research into the strange visions they have been experiencing and investigate what seems to be an unusually large burn mark at Reason's campground. At the beginning of the session, Liebeseller shares a map of the campground to the players that provides a context for this exploration of diegetic space. Because *CoC* is based around the investigation of uncanny occurrences, the mechanics provide systems for the players to determine what their characters are discovering. Early in this session, the players roll dice to spot hidden objects and to collect clues.<sup>134</sup>

The game establishes a contingent reality, and a contingent engagement with that reality, through these dice rolls. For instance, players attempt to roll a percentile dice roll under their current "Spot Hidden" skill to determine if they discover obscured clues. When the group discovers an enormous tunnel under the burn marks, Hank accidentally falls in: a roll of a six-sided die determines how much physical damage he takes. Through these mechanically-produced

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<sup>134</sup> In this game, the players roll physical dice at their specific material locations; many modern TRPGs that use "Virtual Tabletops" (VTT) allow the computer to roll dice for them. Roll20, which is what I use for my *D&D* campaign, has a feature where the application will still display rolling dice though their determinate number is still produced by an algorithm. I always have this feature on because even though we are playing virtually, I retain strong nostalgic associations with the images and sounds of tumbling dice.

contingent outcomes (employed within the majority of modern TRPGs), the reality of the world can be altered through random chance in addition to the collaborative authorship of the players.<sup>135</sup> Abiding by these dice rolls is part of the contract players agree to when playing a TRPG. However, the dice rolls are not the final adjudicator of their application; the Keeper/game master can overrule the dice at any time or players can suggest to the game master that they should be over-ruled depending on the situation. Dice rolls must also be interpreted based on that context: rolling a successful “Spot Hidden” check will only determine a hidden clue if the Keeper had decided there was one available to find. However, this can also be changed. If a Keeper/game master decides that, because a roll was successful, there *should be* a hidden object there, they may place one that was not initially intended. The game master could do this for a number of reasons: to reward a player’s strong play, to reward a player’s lucky roll, to impact the current experience of the game. The context of the game can always be changed based on the experience the Keeper wants to compel in the game’s players. There is a trope in modern TRPG play called “The Rule of Cool:” the concept of the rule is that if an event in a game might slightly break or bend the official rules (or initial intentions of the Keeper/game master) but offers a more compelling experience than strict adherence to the rules would create, often embodied within the randomness of dice rolls to determine contingent outcomes, then the rules should be broken (what’s “cool” for the group is more important than a formalist interpretation of the game system).

If TRPG realities are observed in similar fashion as our material realities, this concept is a significant divergence between the two. The contingent outcomes of the TRPG can determine a reality, suggest a possibility, or even be discarded depending on the consensus of the players; the

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<sup>135</sup> For examples of modern TRPGs that do not use dice for determining contingent outcomes, see Chapter 4.



true agents at the TRPG table or screen are always the people playing it. Our lives are rarely governed by any rule, or divine agent directing us, concerned with making them as *compelling* as possible.<sup>136</sup> However, as human subjectivities, manifested through countless relationships, we still maintain a similar agency with existential contingency: the dice rolls of our lives subject us to unpredictability, but we can still impose our own interpretations, engagement with, and even a subjective relationship and capacity for translating them. The events of our lives, like the narrative in the TRPG, only have meaning through their interpretation. Like the rules, players (inside and outside of mythic universes) can play with the system and its boundaries, and how they are understood, while also being bound by them.

In the “Millvale Campaign,” the rolls of the dice help the group begin to piece together clues, while also simultaneously, producing attrition (Hank’s ankle swells up and many player’s sanity levels continue to plummet) for their continued voyage into the game world’s reality. While exploring, Iris has to make an “Idea” roll. The consequences of this roll are that she sees a horrific vision of Millvale’s future: the landscape is on fire, the town’s buildings are collapsing, and a malevolent force holds thrall over its ruins. During the vision, a voice recites a poem that deepens the mystery: it speaks of the lost, alien city of Carcosa and makes references for how to summon it. Although Iris only hears the first stanza in Session 2, the rest of the party will hear the rest of the poem, through visions and nightmares, of the entire poem during the campaign. The entire poem is Robert W. Chambers’ “Cassilda’s Song” from his short story collection, *The King in Yellow* (1895)<sup>137</sup>:

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<sup>136</sup> At least for us. If Will Wright’s game catalog has taught us anything, it is that viewing simulated human systems on a macro-level can be quite compelling. If we are in a simulation, the simulation player’s concerns are with making the system compelling, not the tiny procedural units which manifest it.

<sup>137</sup> *The King in Yellow* begins with an epigraph in French: “Ne raillons pas les fous; leur folie dure plus longtemps que la nôtre.... Voila toute la différence.” This is translated as “Do not make fun of fools, their madness lasts longer

Along the shore the cloud waves break,  
The twin suns sink behind the lake,  
The shadows lengthen  
In Carcosa.

Strange is the night where black stars rise,  
And strange moons circle through the skies  
But stranger still is  
Lost Carcosa.

Songs that the Hyades shall sing,  
Where flap the tatters of the King,  
Must die unheard in  
Dim Carcosa.

Song of my soul, my voice is dead;  
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed  
Shall dry and die in  
Lost Carcosa.

Liebeseller's introduction of this fantastic poem into the game reinforces the thematic elements of the game; it's an elegy of a lost city soaked in blood that remains on the peripheries of human consciousness. Liebeseller distinctly uses it for an affective response of dread and mystery and also to reference additional texts which inspire *CoC*. The introduction of "Cassilda's Song" illustrates the depth of the entanglements that any text emerges from – and further complicates the notion of that authorship can ever be singular. Lovecraft was a fan of Chambers' fantasy and horror tales. His own subjective imagination was entangled with Chambers'. Lovecraft would base one of the most horrific entities in his Cthulhu mythos, Hastur, or The King in Yellow, or The Unspeakable One, on Chambers' work. However, Chambers' interpretation of Hastur was based on an even *earlier* poem by Ambrose Bierce's 1893 "Häita the Shepherd." Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythology is an *observation* of all these mythical entanglements, a momentary observation of all the stories, tales, and wild speculations that

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than ours...That makes all the difference." This seems apropos to the TRPG which is a temporary flight of shared madness. It implies the mad are those who can no longer cease observing/constructing alternate realities in order to (re)join the collaboration of our shared reality.

manifested in his own imagination and through his writing. Like a Great Old One, our eternal myths constantly re-emerge through our public (sub)conscious, through any media, from antiquarian poem through turn of the century pulp story to the modern *game*. Liebeseller's introduction of the poem and (spoiler alert!) forthcoming introduction of Hastur into Millvale itself is an explicit representation of the entanglement of our weird and uncanny mythologies. Just like the heroes who attempt to keep them at bay, every monster emerges from the relationships that manifest them in our collective nightmares. Like shadows, they border our imaginations, only to be observed momentarily before dissolving back into the horrific possibilities of future nightmares.

Plunging deeper into their own nightmare scenario, "Millvale Campaign" players explore a hidden tunnel underground that eventually ascends into the cellar of the new church, The House of the Shepard. The journey through the tunnel reveals random and sundry clues, such as toxic acid on the walls, that maleficent creatures are introducing their own material realities and violating the town's. Each player performs their PC's capacity to contribute to their ongoing investigation: Edward attempts to use his pharmacist skills to determine the nature of the acid; Iris' private investigator background prompts her to take photographs of unusual dossiers in the church's basement; Reason's familiarity with navigating allows the group to determine where the tunnel is leading; Hank, when sensing danger in the church cellar, applies his knowledge of the occult to summon a "Night-Gaunt" to protect the group. Shortly after summoning this monster, Reason is attacked (outside of the church) by a "Byakhee," that maims his shoulder. Both of these monsters Petersen directly lifted from Lovecraft's works "The Festival" (1923) and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943), respectively.<sup>138</sup> The Night-Gaunt is also a product of

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<sup>138</sup> One of the challenges that Petersen cites in creating the rules for CoC was translating Lovecraft's bestiary of monsters into blocks of numeric statistics (85). For instance, Petersen had to decide the strength rating of the

previous aesthetic entanglement. Lovecraft cites Gustave Doré's illustrations as providing visual inspirations for the creatures that he encountered often in his nightmares (*H.P. Lovecraft Wiki*).<sup>139</sup> Our mythic entanglements manifest our subjectivities (and eventually our culture's).

At this point, the group (after having received more stanzas from the Chambers' poem) acknowledges that evil forces are threatening their small town. The second session of play ends with the group waking up, wounded but resolute, to discover that somehow during the night, a week of game world time has passed. It will be November 1 when the third session begins, and the group begins their voyage to face whatever unspeakable horrors threaten Millvale.

### **Sessions 3-4**

In the third session of play, the campaign builds toward its climax. The group begins their investigations confused by the changed reality of their town: the names of certain residents have changed and locations, such as the local Irish pub, have new names. In addition, they discover that Janice, the crow that Iris befriended, can now *talk*. These tears in the normal reality of the town centers around an ancient tree near the middle of town, a tree that has horrific historical and mythical associations for the town's residences. The group starts their investigations at the tree. Around the tree are two graveyards. One is for wealthier residents of the town, including the town's wealthiest family, the Flaigs. Next to it is a "Potter's field," where the town's unclaimed dead lie.

In one compelling moment during play, Liebeseller realizes that not all the players may be familiar with the term "Potter's field." She remarks, "I just realized I was talking about

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Night-Gaunt and how to translate its chance to attack a victim with claw and fang into a dice roll percentage.

<sup>139</sup> My sincere appreciation is given to the H.P. Lovecraft wiki for identifying these layers of entanglement.

Potter's fields as if everyone knows these things but as anthropologist that's very common" (1:13:57). In this moment, Liebeseller illustrates how her identity as Keeper is entangled with her academic entity; the reality of Millvale is a more anthropologically-accurate one because of the additional identities and capacities she brings to its construction. Another example is that Millvale's racist past, embodied in the ancient tree that was used for lynchings during the Civil Rights era, is in Liebeseller's contextualization of it as a sundown town: a town where minorities are not welcome after dark. This reflects the sad racial histories of many Northeastern towns and is another historically-accurate and disturbing trait of Millvale. It is a trait that adds both a historical verisimilitude to Millvale but also another disturbing element of the town's gothic past that can haunt its current residences. Not all the monsters in Millvale originated in outer space. These are observations of the town that Liebeseller's agential capacity as a subjective observer makes possible: the town emerges from relationships of Liebeseller's own knowledge, critical capacity, and ethics. As the group continues to explore the town, and the dark artifacts of its history, players continue to entangle their own subjectivities with their PCs. Their identification with their PCs grows stronger and they are able to augment the thematic, diegetic elements that Liebeseller has provided.

In particular, Paul, immerses himself in his performative frame of the occult writer, Hank. When the group discovers that some of the graves have been disturbed, Hank remarks, "About 10 of these were empty, they weren't before..." (54:58) while letting his voice trail off. Hank accepts the archetypal genre role of the paranormal expert, wary of the full powers of darkness that others are ignorant of and is reminiscent of a Peter Cushing performance as the vampire-hunting Doctor Van Helsing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hammer films. This performance is embedded not only within his dialog, but the way he delivers Hank's dialog through his body

language (even within Discord's tiny video frame). Paul rocks back and forth and his manner of speech speeds up. Mackay refers to the TRPG as a form of performance art; in this instance, Paul embodies that specific *observation* of TRPG play.

However, the mechanics of the game are entangled with his performance: after failing another sanity check, the rules dictate that Hank is suffering from acute paranoia; Petersen's rules dictate that Hank's cool, scientific Van Helsing must become slightly unhinged. Paul plays along, explaining how Hank is now questioning everyone and everything. His fear of the powers at play is now augmented by a fear that those powers have possessed everyone around him. His Cushing-cool Van Helsing begins to resemble something closer to Tom Waits' Renfield in Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992).

The rules of the game impact Paul's performance but also the way he must observe the diegetic reality through the now-compromised lens of Hank's paranoia. At 1:28:39 of the session, Hank, agitated at the powers he perceives are aligned against him asks the group: "I assume you are with me on this, *right?*" When Jennifer, performing Iris, attempts to answer Hank's query her Discord mic is muted. The group can see her talk but no words are heard. Paul decides to play this momentary technical lapse as if it is actually happening to *Hank*. Agitated, he shouts, "I can't hear you, what are you saying!" Paul has explicitly interwoven the performative frames of his character and his social frame in the "real" world. Immersed in his character, for a moment, Hank's paranoia becomes his own although the smiles exchanged between him and his wife reveal their cognizance of this somewhat absurd intersection of their material and imaginary realities.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> This is not the first time that it happens during play. In Session 2, Hank is addressing Iris and refers to her as "honey." For a second, Paul confuses his marital relationship with Jennifer with Hank's platonic friendship with Iris. This pauses the game for several seconds as the group laughs at the intersection of the two different realities (2:56:08).

The other characters continue their performances: Reason talks in his simple southern drawl; Iris provides sparse but biting dialog as a street-tough PI; Edward pushes the action along as the well-meaning townie hopelessly out of this depth. Each of these roles are performed to the capacity of their agents and actors through their significant of these alternate identities from their “real world” personas: O’Ceallaigh is a humanities scholar originally from the northeast; Jennifer is a welcoming writing instructor and program assistant; Fowler may share small town residence with Edward but not his PC’s reckless and dangerous provocative manner. Fowler explains that Edward “couldn’t be further from me...I had no idea what to do with his characterization, so I think I just defaulted on [him] being an inverse to me.” TRPG play provides opportunities to explore disparate identities bound only by the capacity and desire of its players; however, the implicit agreement between players is that they provide some function towards creating the desired ludic experience. Fowler’s performance of Edward’s reckless provocations, including attempting a makeshift spell that backfires, is an illustration of this: Fowler wants to motivate the action of the story through motivating one of its main protagonists.

Liebeseller presents a world, themes, and supporting characters analogous to their counterparts in a traditional literary text. Each of her players, likewise, performs a role as the protagonist/heroes necessary to catalyze the action and conflicts of a story. The collaborative ambitions of the Keeper and the players is to construct what Grouling Cover presents as a

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Of course, the concept that players would not be able to tell their identities apart from their character’s is what fueled much of the “Satanic Panic” regarding *Dungeons & Dragons* play in the early 1980s. Parents, churches, and concerned community groups, unable to comprehend this new genre of game, claimed that its adherents could not tell these identities apart – and that the fate of their characters, not only subjectively but materially, was entangled with their players. This is why Koontz, the youngest player in my *D&D* campaign, was not allowed to play TRPGs as a child.

Though most scientific studies have refuted this claim, these moments do illustrate that the embodiment of performances is not entirely removed from its generating subjectivity.

“narrative experience” (168). The players of the “Millvale Campaign” exercise their agency as performances in the hope they can (re)create an experience that can be interpreted, after the session is complete, as analogous to the literary ones which inspired it. The players, their subjectivities, and creative capacity emerge from their relationships with the fictions they are entangled among. Their observations of these entanglements is what manifests TRPG play. The players of the “Millvale Campaign” exercise their agency not to simply create the “narrative experience” but to create one they can recognize from earlier engagements with previous forms of genre fiction. In the lexicon of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, the play of TRPG is another form of “remediation”: the players seek to recontextualize the literary experience of pulp fiction within (what they perceive as) the more intimate mode of engagement through play. The question that games – and their contemporary popularity – provoke is whether this form of engagement actually *is* more intimate; is play a more successful form of intersubjectivity than the forms of mediation which inspired their genre form(s)?

TRPG performance, however, is not conducted only as the means to producing a narrative. Any subjective experience (collapsed through their subjective observations) not only can be interpreted as a narrative but if its observers desire meaning from it, must be. All experiences can become narrative experiences if agents observe them: the observation not only fixes the experience within a continuum of interpretation, it fixes the observer as a manifestation of those observations. Goffman argues that it is the observations of the “everyday performances” of our lives that facilitate personal actualization (17-75). When we watch how we live (and play), we understand who are as subjectivities (and players). Within the game space, we observe player characters performance through the lens as exploring alternate possibilities for these identities; we vicariously experience the thrill of subverting and transgressing established social and



physical realities through the subversive act of playing with and antagonizing the boundaries we accept within and beyond them (and often under the disingenuous caveat that these transgressions are only *a game*).

In this session, the group continues to explore their entangled antagonism with Lovecraft's existential perspective and literary mythology. The group discovers, through following the breadcrumbs of clues the Liebeseller has provided to their conclusion, that members of the town, including the powerful, and powerfully racist Flaig family, are attempting to summon Hastur, The Unspeakable One. Hank's library has taught them that this ancient entity is summoned as a harbinger for summoning his land of origin, Carcosa, a devourer of cities. It becomes clear to everyone that the only way to save Millvale is to stop the summoning ritual. It is also clear that the evil forces being summoned may be too powerful to stop – at least without heavy sacrifice. Hank sums up not only the challenge lying ahead of the group, but also gives voice to the game's entanglement with Lovecraft's objective fatalism when he states that: "If we fail it won't matter, and if we succeed we'll probably die doing it anyway" (2:56:35). The third session comes to a close with the group preparing for a violent confrontation with the Flaigs and resigned to their potentially dark fates. The fates of those PCs are in the hands of the players and their application of their ludic agency. They have based the boundaries of their agency, from which the PCs dangle, on a consensual contract of entanglements with: Lovecraft's bleak fiction, Petersen's equally nihilistic rules system, and their own ambition to explore the Cthulhu mythology collaboratively.

One of the ways that the group discovers that Hastur, the Unspeakable One, is behind the strange occurrences in town is through analyzing photographs that Iris took near the town's ancient tree. There are spectral figures in the pictures that were not present when the pictures

were taken, including several images of a horrific, tentacled monstrosity Hank identifies as Hastur. Liebeseller provides electronic images meant to represent Iris' photographs in the group's shared Discord text channel.<sup>141</sup> The unsettling images are meant to impact both frames and identities the players are moving within and between. For the players, these images augment the game's disturbing affective and horrific aesthetic elements. For the player characters, these images are supposed to be real artifacts produced within their world and illustrate not an affective or aesthetic threat but rather an existential one.

The intrusion of these artifacts, ontologically, from their world into ours is another compelling avenue to consider. Although they have been generated in the player's physical reality, their material reality exists within the player's imaginary one. The photos exist, simultaneously, within two dimensions. From the perspective of the PCs, the players are the ones who live within (and observe and construct) an alternate reality. Iris' photographs are a link between the two, but an artifact whose semiotic signs are radically different in each world: they are an illustration, a representative sign of another world in our physical world, however, within the diegetic world, they are material representations of real, uncanny, threatening entities. Entanglement ensures that changes within one world will affect the other: the defeat or victory over Hastur by the PCs will impact the player's affective and aesthetic experience. The defeat or victory through the strategic play of the players are a matter of life and death for the player characters.

The fourth and final session of the "Millvale Campaign" collapses these possibilities, through a traditional narrative (though ludic) denouement, into a specific reality, for the

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<sup>141</sup> The pictures Liebeseller chooses to represent Iris' photos are taken from an image search on the Internet. Although their artists remain unidentified, they also become entangled authors within the game and campaign through their influence on their visual interpretations of the world in the players' imaginations.

entangled agents within and without the game. It has consequences for the player and the played.<sup>142</sup> In this final session, Liebeseller relies on two classic literary tropes to build the game to a satisfying climax: the first, is by encouraging a final conflict with the story's villain(s). The group confronts Hastur, the in the form of the human "Shepard," before confronting the entire Flaig family around a large summoning circle meant to bring ancient Carcosa into modern Millvale. At the beginning of the session, O'Ceallaigh gives a recap of the previous session and explains that "this might be the last recap we are able to give. That's where we're at" (2:10). It is interesting that O'Ceallaigh gives the recap as if it was coming from Reason; he employs the first-person literary narrator in this moment (begging the question: who is Reason recapping these experiences for?). Paul remarks off-the-cuff that "It's like you can *see* the future" (2:19).

The length of the game campaign is based on the exigency of its animating purpose.<sup>143</sup> The length of Iris, Edward, Hank, and Reason's adventures have been bound by a reality beyond Millvale; they must be marched to their finale and have no agency to avoid it. In most games, the animating purpose is the manifestation of an enjoyable, compelling experience of play; that purpose does serve this game but only secondarily. The game was explicitly constructed for this dissertation and limited to four sessions. Liebeseller constructs the clues she has provided in this session, and earlier sessions, to terminate with the climax in this final one. Paul's comment playfully mocks the fact that the verisimilitude of the story is entangled with the synchronous

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<sup>142</sup> If you are interested in seeing what happens in the final sequence of the "Millvale Campaign" through the spectacle of its actual play this would be a good place to stop reading and watch the recording. Consider this your spoiler warning. It is your agential choice on how to observe, and at what speed, the resolution of this compelling mini-campaign.

<sup>143</sup> For those scoring at home, in this final session, many of the players stop role-playing in the first person and talk about their PCs in the third person. It is a curious action and presents the question of why players choose closer identification with their PCs and when they need distance from them. It may be possible that in a session where the consequences, of death, insanity, and existential exile, are so high, the players needed some removal from their PCs fates.

exigencies of a bounded campaign: Reason cannot see the future but seems to be aware that this observation of his story must come to an end...in about four (non-diegetic) game hours.

The PCs head to the Church to confront Shepard. The players acquiesce to Hank's paranoia that is driving him to a determination that the Shepard and the Flaigs must be terminated with extreme prejudice. His passion – and his demonstrated familiarity with the occult – persuade the group to follow him, though Iris cautions that “We’re trusting our planning here to a man who is clearly unhinged right now” (28:26). Hank continues to suffer paranoia, but the other players role-play justify their characters decision to follow Hank by role-playing their PC's subjectivity and perspective. They do this even as *players* who are fully aware this not likely the best course of action for their PC's survival chances. One of the contracts of play is that players remain true to the verisimilitude of the antagonists of the story; the consensual collaboration required to manifest the game world relies on this consistent cooperation. A violation of these precepts would be a violation of the world's reality. The “Millvale Campaign” group agrees to face whatever danger is ahead of them and that danger is significant. The Shepard is revealed to be Hastur and proves to be immune to Hank's shotgun shells. The group is unable to defeat this ancient monster from Beyond. However, Hastur demonstrates no direct animosity or wrath towards the group (despite receiving the shotgun blasts from Hank and its new Church being burned down by Reason and Edward) but rather the Flaig family who has unwillingly summoned him.

Throughout this encounter with Hastur, Liebeseller employs another trope from literature, and the traditional Gothic tale: the emergence of a character, family, or town's deeply-hidden secrets to complicate a narrative reality. Gothic fiction includes elements, identified by George Haggerty, that are particularly meant to disturb a reader's sensibilities while challenging their

notions of established order and reality (1-15). One classic element of the gothic tale is the re-emergence of deeply buried (often familial) secrets – that will upset an established reality. In this case, each of the players had identified – during the character creation process – compelling secret histories about their character. In this final session, Liebeseller brings each into play. She relies on tropes from literary tradition to continue to build an experience in the performative space of the TRPG session to remediate engagements with literary horror texts.<sup>144</sup> Genres, like their authors, impart their entangled influences on the “Millvale Campaign.” For instance, Iris is visited by the spectre of a victim from an unresolved case and Edward’s grandfather appears in the Church’s study. The group is able to resist these complications and stay focused on saving Millvale with one significant exception.

The most narratively affective and consequential visit is the appearance of Hank’s dead wife, Bridget. Her mysterious death in a 1955 boating accident has haunted Hank ever since and led to an obsession with the occult. She appears at the Church and tells Hank if he allows Carcosa to re-emerge, they can be together again; Hanks wrath and paranoia dissipate and he, reluctantly, agrees to help. At this point, each member of the party entreats Hank to reconsider. These entreaties represent a compelling moment of play: each player performs their character attempting to establish an intimate link with Hank (performed by Paul) through his conscience, history, and growing affection for their group. This moment, friends attempting to persuade a friend to save their town and let go of the memory of his true love, is clearly affecting for the players as well as their characters. In the video recording, players seem to merge with their PC performance. Fine argues that “Players must identify with their characters in order for the game

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<sup>144</sup> It could be argued that remediation, as Bolter & Grusin define it, is an analog of entanglement; their argument proceeds from an assumption of time as linear. Past media becomes remediated through forms of the new. Entanglement considers both as simultaneous. There is no past or future media, but rather the concept of media as an entity that bears different forms based on specific observations.

to be a success. Put differently, players must invest their characters with meaning” (214). It almost becomes hard to discern who is more affected by Hank/Paul’s possible betrayal: the PCs or the players. Considering their pleas, he makes a hidden bargain with his dead wife – another Gothic mystery to be uncovered at the game’s conclusion.

The group turns their attention to the Flaig family initiating the final rites of summoning of Carcosa in a nearby field. The final sequence of events is a bloody montage of violence against the racist Flaigs: Reason and Iris attack with firearms, Reason wields his grandfather’s bloodletting knife, and Hank employs his truck as a battering ram. In many TRPGs (including *CoC*), combat requires rolls of the dice to determine the contingent outcomes of attacks hitting their target and the damage those attacks do. As she mediates these rolls, Liebeseller remarks: “This is the most I actually use rules and only because we’re doing this for a dissertation” (2:47:53). Liebeseller is explicitly acknowledging the influence of observers on the game. The rules for determining contingency in this game are not only based on Petersen’s mechanics, but on another existential exigency for the game: its entanglement with this dissertation. The decisions about whether Reason’s attacks hit or miss is influenced by Liebeseller’s own interpretation of how I think the game should be run based on the data I need for this chapter.

The exigency of this dissertation is based on the academic requirements of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and that exigency is based on the cultural expectations of the contributions of PhD academic research and embedded within the social habitus of expectations for media scholarship. To wit: the institutions that surround the material world and context for Liebeseller’s campaign directly influence the world of Millvale and the fate of its player characters. The consequences of my interpretation of their narrative – the artifact you hold that is my dissertation – has direct influences on its author, the institutions he represents as an

academic, and the agents and relationships responsible for his emergence and academic ethos. Reason, Iris, Edward, and Hank are entangled with me; the observations of any reader of this dissertation collapses us into a specific reality, with each level of interpretation (affective, aesthetic, or even as evaluation of academic merits) imposing significant consequences for each agent. These relationships are inevitable as we choose to accept our agency within all the worlds within which we read, write, play, and engage.

As the Flaigs fall, Iris, Reason, and Edward all attempt to stop the ritual by destroying the summoning runes buried in the ground. As they do this, each is forced to make a sanity roll – and each fails. These sanity rolls, unlike the minor ones throughout the game that slowly drained their sanity reserves, are much more potent and consequential. The characters succeed in disrupting the ceremony and send Carcosa plummeting back through the eons of ancient myth. However, through their defeat of the Flaigs and obliteration of the runes, all three PCs are driven permanently “insane” by the experience of directly viewing Carcosa. Rolling on another *CoC* table, it is determined these three PCs have all suffered permanent amnesia. Reason, Edward, and Iris have no recollection of who they are, why they are here, and what has happened (though the corpses and smoking ruins around them bear mute testimony to some horrific event).

Howard’s fate is different. Depending on the subjectivity of this narrative’s interpretative observer, the resolution of Hank’s tale is either tragic or triumphant. After the Flaigs are dead, and Carcosa banished, Hastur appears in his natural form. He tells the group that he will purge all evil from Millvale – a final rejoinder against the town’s racist past – and offers to kill Hank so he can rejoin his wife in the afterlife. Hank acquiesces and accepts Hastur’s embrace. The main part of the campaign concludes with one character deceased and the others insane. This is the standard resolution for a *Call of Cthulhu* game, because it is the standard resolution of

Lovecraft's tales; protagonists may gain some small victory against the forces of powerful, alien evils, but it is usually a pyrrhic, or temporary, one.

In this instance, however, the group's conscious and critical antagonisms of Lovecraft's perspective, both his racism and nihilism, bear fruit in the short epilogue that the players briefly roleplay before finally concluding the campaign. Hastur, no enemy to the players, wreaks a horrible vengeance for his undesired summoning and binding on the xenophobic members of Millvale. One of the town's newest African American residents becomes its mayor. Reason and Iris attempt to discover what has happened and begin the process of building their own narrative of what has happened in town. Piecing together the shreds of evidence, and assisted by Hank's library, they understand that they were part of something horrific and revelatory for Millvale's future. They also recognize that the absent Hank had a big part in stopping something terrible from happening (although they will never be sure of what *exactly*). They turn his barn and collection of arcane tomes into a public occult library for the town.

As the players, within their social frames, reflect on the game's denouement, they recognize this antagonism. O'Ceallaigh mentions that it is a "poetic ending" for the PCs. This is a stark contrast with most Lovecraft stories that aggressively resist the concept of any force, poetic or orderly, force guiding the universe. Jennifer agrees with O'Ceallaigh: "A *Cthulhu* game can't wrap up with a happy bow on it. Some people are still alive and there's still the potential to reconnect and figure out what happened and it is a very poetic and cool ending, I think." Paul replies: "It's much happier than most *Cthulhu* games" and O'Ceallaigh agrees: "It's probably the happiest ending you could get with a *Cthulhu* game" (3:39:29-3:40:32) The group expresses their recognition of the boundaries of the *CoC* system they agreed to play: players have to die or go insane but also of their own, agential, antagonism of the itinerant conclusions that can be drawn



from the game's resolution. The group has allowed Hank to be re-united with his wife; Reason, Iris, and Edward have begun to reconstruct a more just and inclusive version of Millvale. Even Hastur, an Unspeakable entity from Beyond, showed mercy. There is, as always, the capacity for our subjective agency within our entangled relationships. While it may be seductive to ask where Lovecraft or Petersen ended and Reason and Hank began, it is more appropriate to consider them within the context of the game all of them needed one another to emerge and manifest as players and authors. There is no Hank without Lovecraft; there is no Lovecraft without Hank.

One of the things that becomes clear while conducting a close reading of the social, performative, and narrative frames of TRPG play is how one text cannot be comprehensively analyzed in a single chapter.<sup>145</sup> The fields of possibility for consideration are legion, as long as that consideration acknowledges not the role of primary authorship but rather what emerges from the agents entangled in play and how relationships, rather than singular agents, are the primary authors of the TRPG text (and any text). Any consideration must rely on identifying which relationship is being *observed* in order to construct each moment of play within the TRPG game. As the authorship of the TRPG is not fixed neither is its play: in one moment, it may be a form of performance art, as Mackay identifies, in another, it moves into a mode of narrative experience, as Grouling Cover claims. It is the observation, based on the exigency and needs of its players, that determine what the TRPG is during play. The agency of their observations collapse the TRPG from a multitude of possible experiences into a specific form required for a specific moment. In the next moment, the exigency of the experience may necessitate a different mode.

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<sup>145</sup> This is true of any text. The entanglement of narrative, performance, and social intersections within the TRPG text, however, requires perspectives from disciplines (such as the humanities and anthropology) that are often considered separate fields. Games (TRPGs, board, video, etc.) continue to complicate these distinctions, illustrating that explorations from one field are entangled with potential revelations in others. We should talk more to each other.

This fluidity of possibility is distinctly analogous to the authorship of the TRPG. The primary author of the TRPG, whether it is an affective, aesthetic, inspirational or mechanical authorship becomes the one which is required for a specific moment of play. The players exert their agency to bring that constructive frame, to bring a specific author, into the play – they are the ultimate arbiters of the experience: the agential realists who fashion a mode of intersubjective engagement that suits their desires and needs.

The players, however, are not just observers. They are also the *observed*. They are transformed through their entanglement with the TRPG text and the other authors who exist within the non-linear continuum of TRPG construction. Players are needed for a session at the table, for the specific moment of manifestation through explicit play around a table or screen, but the other authors of the TRPG (Chambers, Lovecraft, Peterson, etc.) can shift their observational gaze away from players toward the other authors entangled with its procedural units or its genre inspirations in a similar manner. The players do not exist within a vacuum but within a continuum; every author within it can choose to observe every author as exigency, motivation, and agency require it. Authors & texts become entangled while exposing the illusion of linear time through this process.

It is difficult, as games scholars and play enthusiasts, to not become enamored with TRPG play or one specific game (or text): the form and mode are compelling to watch even from the vantage point of an outside observer. However, TRPG play is still made up a series of moments, a sequence of collapsing possibilities into one performance, one ludic exploration, and one narrative. One game or session is one possibility among infinite others; it is the process of all of their entanglement(s) which is truly compelling. Miguel Sicart reminds us that “Games don’t matter. Like in the old fable, we are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the

moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon” (2). Play is possibility; it is the entanglements of possibility, authorship, and agency which make the game and TRPG text possible. Any approach, analysis, or consideration of TRPG play must recognize that what the scholar observes around the table or screen is merely the temporary collapse of authorial, narrative, and performative possibility into a specific experience required for a specific moment. Moments are illusory and ephemeral; to understand TRPG play, it is more revelatory to stop staring at each collapse of possibilities and to start playing with them instead.

## **Conclusion: In Search of the Unknown** (*Quantum & Cultural Consequences*)

“In F[antasy]R[ole]P[lay] gaming rules and outcomes do not have the inevitability that they possess in most formal games; rather, both features are negotiated, and rules are adjusted by the referee and his group. As a result fantasy role-playing games are in some ways more like life, and less like games.” – Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy*

“Nobody ever mentions the weather.  
Can make or break your day.  
Nobody ever seems to remember.  
Life is a game we play...” – Oasis

**Every engagement with a text creates a new world.** How we understand each of these worlds – their possibilities, their capacities, their agency – depends not only on how we interpret our passages through them, but how we understand the concept of a world itself. As I conclude this dissertation, I am compelled by the number of new entanglements my project has provoked and how I am irrevocably changed by them. I am also compelled by my own growing recognition, as one agent constructed by the countless systems and relationships entangled with me, of the paradox between the capacity of our personal agency and the nebulousness of individual manifestation; it becomes more challenging to parse any separation between agents and the relationships necessary to invent them. The experience of this project has become as immersive, and in some ways, as uncanny, as the experience of performing an alternate identity within the alternate universe of a tabletop role-playing game: this conclusion attempts to translate that experience into what I learned as part of a narrative that does not belong to me, but rather the entanglements that have created me. In the preface to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad writes that “it is not so much that I have written this book, as that it has written me” (ix-x). It is true for this dissertation as well and my most important argument is for the recognition of the primacy of relationships for agential manifestation. This dissertation, its argument, insights,

and observations, emerges not from the speciousness of “me,” but rather the playful interactions of all the authorial observations entangled within its pages. This dissertation offers a possible epistemological approach towards a media genre, the tabletop role-playing game, growing in popularity and ubiquity within our contemporary cultures, that resonates with ontological consequences. It is an approach that argues for the importance of considering experiments in intersubjective mediation as the practice of collaboratively constructing of shared realities.

Every chapter in the dissertation is a specific observation of the TRPG: through emergence, inspiration, and practice. In the first chapter, I present the basic theoretical perspective of this dissertation. I introduce the philosophy and assumptions for our examination of the TRPG as textual practice, engagement, and play through the concept of agential realism. Barad, and her entanglement with Niels Bohr, provide a basis for examining the TRPG text through an analytical lens that contextualizes our realities as a multiple and simultaneous process of collective, consensual collaboration. Contemporary scientific research, from the quantum realm (Barad) to the psychological (Hoffman) and biological (Lanza), is raising new questions about the complicity of human consciousness and agency within the construction of reality. These modern scientific approaches, finally catching up to the speculative fiction of the 1970s and 80s, complicate materialist assumptions of an objective reality.

One of the core tenets of agential realism is the concept that our realities, material, political, and cultural are constructed through the application of agency within them. Agential realism asks us to acknowledge the consequences of our observations of our world; every decision that we make on what to observe and what we do not observe, on how we define and interpret our experiences & world, on what we decide to include in our subjective constructions

and what we exclude from the translations of our experiences is the ultimate process of manifesting every reality that we dwell within.

Another core tenet of agential realism is that this process, the authorship of the realities from which we emerge, itself emerges through a process of nearly infinite relationships – rather than through individual locus points of creation. We are hopelessly entangled with the other agents that occupy the nebulous and dynamic areas of possibility that surround us. We possess an agency to construct, change, and adapt the universe around us but that agency also relies on the relationships and entanglements that we choose and that have chosen us. We must disambiguate ourselves from the notions of individual power and recognize that, no matter what our egos insist upon, we are part of a collective. The aim of agential realism is to recognize the power of making that collaborative construction one that is also conscious & consensual. How can we construct creative relationships where human agents acknowledge and accept a responsibility for manifesting worlds that meet the material, cultural, social and personal needs of its inhabitants? How do we consider media's capacity for illustrating the entanglements of our relationships and our agency to configure and construct them?

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the concept of utopias is always fraught; utopias are inevitably subjective. The sociocultural and political polarization of modern American society, being driven by the rise of the digital networks that fracture agential communication into virtual silos, proceeds from the illusion of *self*-actualization. Actualization is the process of managing and cultivating relationships. However, ethical scholarship into the nature of our relationships, institutional, political, cultural, and the personally intimate, requires approaches based on the examination of forums that exist within, and not in antagonism with, the entangled subjectivities that manifest them. Our particular moment in contemporary American culture, one where

sociopolitical fractures driven by the individual capital & material acquisitions of wealth based on the illusion of self-actualization and self-affirmation, generates real threats and also the means to manufacture their constant reproduction. Threats, affective & cultural, the very real and the very fabricated, multiply in the vacuum of a recognition of the multitude of ineluctable and inevitable relationships that bind us to one another. From the modern cultural war to the threat of environmental collapse, we view our problems as the work of specific villains rather than the consequences of our modern entanglements. How do we let go of the concept of building personal utopias but consider our agential capacity for building equitable worlds of opportunity & possibility?

It is well past time that humanity consider borrowing a practice from the TRPG: a Session Zero where, instead of multiple agents fighting to construct disparate and separate “utopias,” entangled agents establish the boundaries, construct the affective themes, and build the sociocultural contracts to manifest a world where to experience it is the opportunity to play within it. We can acknowledge our agency to compel the individual characters & performances that allow us to actualize relationships that construct ethical realities and identities. How do we construct the most ethical spaces for that collaboration? The tabletop role-playing game is an explicit model of that potential process. It is an examination of a game where the compelling experiences it provokes are based on the explicit construction of realities manifested from conscious, consensual practices of creative collaboration. It is a process that requires each player to recognize the consequences of their applied agency towards the manifestation of a mutually-compelling game world. It is a process that requires each player to recognize that the construction of reality is a group process that involves the navigation of intersubjective and social frames for its accomplishment.

Perhaps, and most importantly, it is a process where the group must agree on the form of experience the group wants to create: if the group is playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, are they attempting to catalyze an experience of medieval adventure & fantasy? If so, each player constructs the components of that reality – from their characters to the fundamental architecture of the world’s physics – to compel that affective feeling and thematic experience. If the group decides to play *Traveller*, the players build societies, civilizations, and technologies designed to produce a speculative experience of journeying through the stars. If *Call of Cthulhu* is the game players choose, all the elements they include in their game are constructed around reinforcing the powerlessness of humanity in an uncaring, malevolent universe. In each of these cases, no matter the genre, fiction, or form of the game, the playing group consciously meets to establish a reality meant to compel those particular experiences. Gygax always resisted the notion that TRPGs, or even the practice of role-playing, was a form of art. He once quipped: “Send anyone claiming that their RPG activity is an art form my way, and I’ll gladly stick a pin in their head and deflate it just to have the satisfaction of the popping sound that makes. One might play a game artfully, but that makes neither the game nor its play art.” Perhaps he was right in that TRPGs are not a form of art, in the way that we often define artistic creation as a form of subjective representation; TRPG play resembles more closely the process of a conscious observation of reality, a collaborative process of its authorship, and a creative process for its emergence. It is a social practice of acknowledging the agential capacity for constructing worlds and their realities.

The second chapter of this dissertation is an examination of the emergence of the technologies that established TRPG play as a “socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency” and practice (Malaby, “Beyond Play” 96). My second chapter illuminates how the ludic technologies of the TRPG are not novel, but rather the consequence of the relationships that



made them possible (and inevitable). This chapter reinforces the concept that technologies, whether they are material tools or the rules of a game, are the consequences of exigency, requirement, and relationships. In this case, a desire to simulate the alternate realities of our mythologies became entangled with the wargaming subculture's growing capacity for simulating conflicts. Gaming conventions, gaming newsletters, and the social discourse around gaming tables enabled the relationships among these "idiocultures" to construct game systems that could recreate literary worlds within a playable game (Fine). The relationship between Arneson's ludic innovations and Gygax's entrepreneurial ambitions compelled *Dungeons & Dragons* to be published in 1974 and begin a process of its entanglement within our popular consciousness.

Every observation of the TRPG text temporarily binds it within a specific moment and like any historical record depends on the subjectivity of its historian/observer. Early commercial TRPGs like the ones analyzed in this dissertation are based on early 20<sup>th</sup> Century pulp fiction; contemporary TRPGs allow players to play within the worlds of nearly every popular fiction genre possible and beyond them. These new TRPGs emerge from the legacy of TRPG play that emerged as an accessible, social practice in the 1970s.

As the second chapter focuses on the emergence of the mechanical elements of the TRPG, and the genesis of their physical models of simulation, the third chapter focuses on the literary texts that inspired their aesthetic and affective models. This chapter is an examination of how imaginations become entangled with the alternate realities and possibilities of our narrative mythologies. The authorship of the TRPG text is not bound to one designer, author, or player; all share complicity in its emergence. This chapter observes the list of texts that Gygax included in "Appendix N" from the 1979 *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* that he recognized as directly influential for his new game. This list represents Gygax's observation of the narrative tales that

shaped his imaginative subjectivity and provided the archetypes and models for the game he co-designed with Arneson. It is, of course, neither comprehensive nor an objective road map of Gygas's imagination (it is a curated list of greatest hits), but one legend, among many, that demonstrates the power of literary fiction – and the allure of *pulp* “paraliterature” – to become embedded within our ontological perspectives (and dreams). Most of the texts that appear within “Appendix N” belong to a tradition of sharing fantastic stories that reaches back to the oral narratives from human prehistory; from Tolkien to Vance, neither exist without the cave drawings, European mythologies, or Norse Eddas, that enthrall humanity's sense of wonder, possibility, and adventure. “Appendix N” is a momentary observation, from the observation of one specific emergent agent, Gary Gygas, of the history of speculative mythology; it is not bound by time or space. Gygas's engagement with each, in one specific moment of time, leads to the manifestation of a game that hopes to rekindle, renew, and recreate their mythologies in one of the most novel technologies of the era – and one that continues to grow – the game (or “cybertext” if you prefer). Our experiments with intersubjective mediation all spring from a desire to be able to connect with one another; the design of *Dungeons & Dragons* belongs firmly in that legacy. It is Gygas's attempt at connecting with the authors who shaped his imagination and gave him fields of wondrous possibility to play among.

The design of his game, *D&D*, is an intersubjective experiment meant to make that connection as *intimate* as possible; not just to read but to play among those worlds. That desire is shared by the thousands of readers & players who played his game and renewed the legends and mythologies observed within “Appendix N.” Through the practice of their play, players reconfigured how we understand & translate those timeless tales and their authors. Through play, their aesthetics and themes become embedded within our collective imagination while installing

their perspectives among the realities we construct. “Appendix N” is one, limited observation of a legacy of myths, legends, and narratives that surround and interpellate us. It is the necessary observation for Gygax, Arneson and their players to design and play a game that ensures those myths and their authors are immortal and everywhere.

The fourth chapter is an analysis of the mechanical systems, the “procedural units” of TRPGs, that animate the simulated worlds based on their genre fiction influences (Bogost). In this chapter, we examine the impact that each agential cut – what mechanics to include in a universe, which need to be emphasized, and which can be left out – on the rhetorical arguments that ludic systems make. Marc Miller’s design of *Traveller* in 1977 offers insights into his own subjective interest in heroic & military science fiction but also the way that he believes that genre can be interpreted and translated: what does it mean to emphasize the importance of combat, conflict, and militarization among the stars in a science fiction game? What does the player understand about the possibilities of star-faring exploration when that exploration is so dangerous, realistic, and bound by the capital motivation of accruing the favor of wealthy patrons? However, what do the mechanics of *Traveller* animate in ourselves when they allow us to witness and explore the grandeur of star systems in any direction we can imagine; what is the affect of the almost limitless possibilities that Miller’s complex star-creation systems compel in our sense of wonder? What does each rule reveal about the contemporary world whose perspectives it is entangled among?

Time is an illusion and the TRPG breaks it. Every possibility that Miller provides and every limitation he places on its player characters is a diffracted look at the potentialities of human involvement with the systems in our “real world.” Through this examination, we discover even more clearly the entanglement of systems and institutions that interpellate and construct us;

how the mechanics of a game are analogs to the “social habitus” around the players who roll their dice (Bourdieu). The science fiction genre offers a speculative lens of possibility; its translation into a literary tale or a table-top role-playing game requires a subjective observation (and collapse) of those possibilities that also define its author or designer (and their subjective presence).

The final chapter of this dissertation provides a close reading of a campaign of Sandy Petersen’s *Call of Cthulhu*. In this chapter, we consider the TRPG text’s emergence through play. The TRPG was designed to compel a particular experience through a process of collective authorship around a table (or screen). The direct study of TRPG play presents an argument for interdisciplinary approaches to practice in the same way that each player at the table or screen navigates multiple performative frames during a game. TRPG study does not require an anthropologist to study the navigation of those frames, it does not take an English scholar to parse the emergent narratives or an engineer to deconstruct the game mechanics: rather, a conscious recognition that each alterior perspective offers momentary observations bound by human limitations. Current TRPG scholarship, especially the work of Zagal and Deterding, has recognized the dangers of attempting to define the TRPG elephant through blindly isolating its characteristics. TRPG play interdisciplinary entanglements: anthropology’s recognition of the subjective interpretation of cultural realities mirrors the quantum physicist’s studies of the impact of observer’s interpretation on material phenomena – and yet the relationship between the two is not often cultivated; they exist in separate epistemological disciplines. Typologies and quantifications are valuable when they are recognized as agential cuts that collapse possibility into accessible units of study but do not represent the whole potentiality of a practice or form.

In this chapter, we study the “Millvale Campaign” run by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Serious Play collective. We examine how its “Keeper of Arcane Lore,” anthropology PhD candidate Laya Liebeseller, presents a world based on the aesthetics of a literary mythology, constructed according to her understandings of worlds as a scholar of play & culture, and socially from her personal experiences recognizing how people relate to one another – both in (fictional) Millvale and (actual) Milwaukee. Her players accept the challenge of navigating the world and horrific mysteries she presents and then transform it through the actions and agency of their player characters into a compelling “narrative experience” (Grouling Cover). This chapter showcases the different performative frames players navigates through a game, and how, when, and why each author of the TRPG text (including Lovecraft, Petersen, and the game players) emerges to construct the game world, vivify its conflicts, and interpret its narrative. In this chapter, we acknowledge the imposition of different subjectivities, dynamically and simultaneously, during play; we acknowledge the fluidity of authorship and performance in the emergence of the game. We also consider what makes the TRPG so compelling to its players and the exigency for players to provide the observations that makes its game, play, and realities possible.

This dissertation focuses on the first wave of TRPGs, released between 1974-1981, to examine the relationships from which they initially emerged, and to think about how their practice has shaped our understanding and acknowledgment of agential capacities. Even within the modern popularity of TRPGs, their explicit play usually resides within ludic subcultures; however, the major concepts of their practice, the lexicons of their systems, and even the processes of their play are entangled with modern society. They produce stories that we make meaning through and promote mechanical philosophies we recreate in our institutional systems.

## **The Consequences of Role-Playing**

What are the consequences of the TRPG and even more importantly, what opportunities does the practice of their play represent? In recent years, the modern concept of “gamification...the most recent and visible instantiation of the interpenetration of games and everyday life”, in our social lives has received significant traction in scholarship (Walz and Deterding 6-7). Certainly, modern media has become saturated with the concepts, terms, and processes we traditionally associate with games. This is not unsurprising considering how games have become so popular in contemporary society – the rise of leisure time and the availability of digital platforms, such as mobile phones, have made them ubiquitous. Their lexicons are entangled within the performance, practice, and emergence of our everyday lives. We level up our banking accounts; web advertisements feature interactive elements meant to engage us with their brand; fitness and activity planners organize our schedules into quests and trackable journeys, we contextualize our lives moving across a board towards an endgame of profit and happiness.

From the personal level, the consequences of these games exert a great deal of influence on the way we develop the tactics to navigate our lives and how we subjectively interpret their meaning (and success or failure). On the macro level, the ubiquity of gameplay is transforming the strategies that our financial, cultural, and social institutions attempt to impose upon us. The consequences of this entanglement, of the gameplay with the modern subjectivity, has had radical consequences for contemporary culture – for better and worse. In modern American society, we see millions of Americans escaping into the virtual worlds of video games to escape (towards freedom?) the game-like competitions of identity and extremist rhetoric that reinforce

social and political polarization. We are witnessing the emergence of artificial intelligence bots threatening to remove human agency from our creative fields – and replace them with mechanical art produced by unfeeling simulacrum. Algorithms and code, the mechanical systems of our games, and their systems for producing contingent outcomes infiltrate the institutions that manifest our shared, social habitus. It is not surprising that we have begun to see our own lives as games: if we are to emerge from the present moment, not as objects but as agents, we must accept the responsibility for how they are played. We must accept that each decision of how we play it has ethical, cultural, social, and intimately personal consequences through their myriad entanglements.

As I write this, I am getting ready to pack my belongings and head to GaryCon, a gaming convention held annually at the birthplace of *D&D*: Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The convention is run by Luke Gygax, one of Gary Gygax's children, and began as a tribute to his father and the legacy he left through his games. This year the slogan of GaryCon is "Celebrating a Life Well Played!" The separation between our game realities and life realities dissipates as the illusion of its boundaries becomes clearer: we are who we perform and play. The TRPG text is a genre of practice, among a continuum of intersubjective experimentations, that continues the lesson if we pay attention.

The study of the TRPG is an analysis of the performances, frames, narratives, and mythologies that allow us to emerge as subjectivities and relate to one another. We must approach the TRPG, its text and practice, as emerging from a series of entangled relationships and with a recognition that each study (or approach) offers one observation among many possible interpretations. Scholarship on the TRPG often focuses on their mechanics and systems. It is a mistake to focus on the technologies (that lack consciousness or ethics) rather than the

practice; technologies and modes are capable of compelling certain experiences and modes of play but we must keep our observations focused on the entanglement of technology & practice.

Our modern world is becoming increasingly mediated through digitally-connected machines governed by amoral and unconscious algorithms not capable of ethically responding to the dynamic human subjectivities they were created to be extensions of – and not their masters. The TRPG compels a mode of practice that is not only explicit in its illustration of constructing reality through conscious, consensual collaboration – but also an illustration of a mode of *resistance* to our emerging android overlords. The TRPG text is made up of mechanical systems, but all of them can be discursively reconstituted; The TRPG text is inspired by a legacy of literary narratives, but it allows them to be reconfigured; the TRPG text requires social frames, performances and narrative translation but all are collaboratively authored and subjectively interpreted – within the human (and not beyond or “post” it).

Engagements with TRPG texts rely on a compelling entanglement of dynamic human subjectivities that inter-relate to one another, intuit each other, (ideally) from each according to ability and to each according to need. In the final analysis, TRPG play is perhaps less like collective authorship and more like a dance. It is a dance that catalyzes cooperation, but also conflict; it catalyzes creation but also agential cutting; it is the exploration of boundaries and freedoms, an intersubjective negotiation towards experiences and adventures worth celebrating and sharing. The TRPG text does not make this possible; it is the playful experimentations and innovations within its novel systems and that compel a practice that can. The practice of play is the practice of agency. The worlds & realities we dwell within are the consequences of applying that agency and a reminder that there are so many we can choose from: our greatest aspiration should be to observe a *world* that is well played.



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