UNCERTAINTY IN ANALOG ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

BY EVAN TORNER

Design matters.[1] Few doubt it does. A game's design is an immanent force that acts on its players, so that their play might produce emergent effects. "When we design [role-playing games]," says Eirik Fatland, "we are playing basically with the building blocks of culture. Not just our fictional cultures; real cultures as well … [directing] human creativity toward a shared purpose."[2] Game mechanics incentivize, constrain and afford certain specific behaviors so that the objective of the game is fulfilled. Prompts for player action, the incorporation of previously hidden information, and introduction of statistical probabilities preoccupy most designers of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs).[3] In role-playing game studies, however, much of the conversation focuses on the "role" aspect of the activity: a

1. Ron Edwards. "System Does Matter." *The Forge*. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html.
2. Eirik Fatland. "Does Larp Design Matter?" *Nordic Larp Talks*. http://nordiclarptalks.org/does-larp-design-matter-eirik-fatland/.
3. For more on the subject of rules as the core element of meaning in RPGs, see Chris Bateman. "The Rules of Imagination." In *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom* Edited by Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox. Chicago: Open Court, 2012, pp. 225-238. See also: Rebecca Borgstrom. "Structure and Meaning in Role-Playing Game Design." In *Electronic Book Review,* February 1, 2008. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/borntobewyld.

player's identity in relation to the character, the lines between reality and fiction, and the rationale for engaging in certain kinds of play.[4] If designers are working with the "building blocks of culture," then why aren't we looking at how those building blocks produce certain types of play, as opposed to other types of play? This essay on uncertainty in analog RPGs examines core variables of RPG design that produce the very diverse sorts of play experiences one finds in the medium today.

Some context is in order. I recently wrote a short piece about transparency in RPGs to highlight it as an active design element.[5] In that article, I drew the distinction between *transparency of expectation* – or what the player can and cannot expect from a game, which lets players make informed decisions about play – and *transparency of information* – or what specific plot and game elements are revealed to the players over time. I concluded that increasing both transparencies confers increased agency on the player, but also increased responsibility over a game's final outcome. The more you know, the more you are obliged to act sensibly on what you know. If I already know that *Fiasco* (2008) is a neo-noir game about ordinary criminals who create terrible trouble for themselves, then I'm not to going to play my character to "win" against the scenario. If I already know that Fiona's character is a traitor, then I can use this information to play up my character's loyalty to hers. This argument was made under the assumption that there should be more transparency in our designs, opening up lines of communication and making play much more egalitarian. As we know from Yevgeny Zamyatin's

4. To cite several insightful works on the topic: Mike Pohjola. "Autonomous Identities — Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities." In *Beyond Role and Play*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004, pp. 81-96; Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2010; Todd Nicholas Fuist. "The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as a Cultural Tool." *Immersive Gameplay*. Edited Evan Torner and William J. White. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2012, pp. 108-126.
5. Evan Torner. "Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games." *WyrdCon Companion Book 2013.* Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. Los Angeles, CA: WyrdCon, 2013, pp. 14-17.

dystopian novel *We* (1920), however, transparency in the form of glass walls to spy on one's neighbors and absolute state surveillance could be seen as too much of a good thing. Surveillance activates our capacity to act, but it can also stifle us. This got me thinking: what should players of a game know already in advance, and what elements cannot (and/or should not) be knowable? The border between what can be considered known and what cannot is certainly a "building block of culture," as Fatland put it, and how we play with it can crucially influence the outcome of any game design.

UNCERTAINTY AND KNOWLEDGE

RPG design may, in fact, be creating different epistemologies that outline what knowledge is. An epistemology theorizes what can be considered a fact, belief, or opinion. RPG designers aspire to assist the fluid communication of facts, ideas and expectations during play, but must in turn abandon the notion that they can "control" the actual playing of the game in any given way. Countless RPGs still contain language such as "the rules are not the final word – you are,"[6] or "never let the rules get in the way of what makes narrative sense."[7] Whereas other epistemologies in, say, scientific inquiry or legal studies hypothesize, verify, codify laws, and interrogate previous laws, RPG design presumes up front that every aspect of play – including rules – is *relational to the group who plays the game*.

Hypotheses become impossible without sufficient fixed variables, and even the laws/rules themselves become entirely relative to the group in question. Playtesting is an attempt at paring down variables to see a game in action, but this presents an always-compromised view of a game's general arc. If design matters so much, why do designers often disavow the design itself? Perhaps it is to acknowledge that the simple and relational

6. Monte Cook. *Numenera*. Seattle, WA: Monte Cook Games, 2013. p. 320.
7. Leonard Balsera, et al. *Fate Core*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2013, p.185.

delineation of diegetic truths – what some call "fictional positioning"[8] – remains the most powerful tool in the RPG medium. Most of what a designer does is determine the aspects that are to be known and transparent in a given game, and how the unknown or hidden aspects reveal themselves to the players. The rest is up to the improvisational skills of a given group.

Talk of transparency and knowledge begs the broader question of the use of *uncertainty* in RPGs. To design any game within a culture means controlling different aspects of a game's socially experienced uncertainty. As George Elias, Richard Garfield and Robert Gutschera write: "[If] we had to pick one ingredient that was necessary (although not sufficient) for something to be a game, uncertainty in outcome would probably be it."[9] Because of that concept's inherent "slipperiness,"[10] however, few game designers discuss uncertainty beyond the level of card/dice probabilities and the use of secrets/hidden information.

If what we call "culture" is based on knowledge, ignorance, and practices that delineate the known from the unknown, then a designer's deliberate use of uncertainty becomes a decisively cultural act. What varieties of uncertainty are required in different types of role-playing experiences, and how does RPG design attend to the different levels of uncertainty at work? If you think about it, analog RPGs in which "anything may be attempted"[11] contain such variegated and nuanced levels of uncertainty that maybe Werner Karl Heisenberg would have considered them worthy of study. At a gaming convention, for example, organizers often have no idea who will be sitting with them at a given role-playing game table. When rolling dice, players don't know if their character will succeed or fail.

8. Vincent Baker. "Where were we...?" *anyway*. November 12, 2012. http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/689.
9. George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield, and K. Robert Gutschera. *Characteristics of Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, p. 137.
10. Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, p. 139.
11. See also Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World*. Stanford, CA: Unreason Press, 2012.

Costumes in live-action RPGs may tear or fall apart. Sick players may find themselves in moods that affect their actions in the story. If after 2 hours of fiddling about, the players (and characters) still can't solve the Riddle of the Sphinx, and the end of the session looms near, how should the situation be handled? Uncertainty is baked into the role-playing medium. In some instances, we savor it – in others, we despise it.

It should come as no surprise that Greg Costikyan, a former RPG designer (*Paranoia* (1984), *Star Wars: The Role-Playing Game* (1987)), has written a book-length essay entitled *Uncertainty in Games* (MIT, 2013).[12] The book helps us to address questions about uncertainty, drawing on a set of perspectives which span the field of game design. See, we currently have a movement in game studies called "platform studies,"[13] which isolates and examines how different platforms directly impact the aesthetic experiences created via their "software" (the games themselves). The movement has been able to use differentiation among platforms to draw wider conclusions about the possibilities of human cultural expression in an age of media saturation. On the other hand, Costikyan succeeds at performing a classic cross-platform analysis of the games he cites, focusing on universally shared characteristics across all games. *Uncertainty in Games* presents a concise argument about game design with numerous examples drawn from a host of different games: board, tabletop RPG, mobile app, console, etc. So maybe it is a Procrustean act to re-assert platform specificity using his elegant model but, heck, I want to take a closer look at analog role-playing games: tabletop, live-action and freeform.

THE MANY VARIETIES OF UNCERTAINTY

Costikyan presumes that most games have multiple sources of

12. This book is part of the excellent new Playful Thinking series at MIT Press, edited by Jesper Juul, Geoffrey Long and William Uricchio.
13. For more information about platform studies, see http://www.platformstudies.com/.

uncertainty, and that the best-designed games are those that channel these uncertainties toward the fulfillment of the game's objectives. This point is important, in that adjustment of given uncertainties in games affect what both the designers and players can expect from play, and how knowledge of and about the game might be co-constructed. If "fun is the desired exploration of uncertainty," as Alexandre Mandryka recently posited,[14] then new forms of knowledge – and new epistemologies – await us in these explorations as well. We can now see how uncertainty might be used a tool to ask the straightforward question: how does this particular RPG work? This essay uses his language of procedurality to describe disparate RPGs in compatible terms. This method allows me to describe the tensions inherent in RPGs that highlight their most game-like features.

Costikyan identifies eleven forms of uncertainty, each centering on a specific question. Bear with me – we'll need these terms later: performative uncertainty ("Will I be able to physically execute this maneuver?"), solver's uncertainty ("Can I solve the puzzle here?"), player unpredictability ("How is my play experience contingent on the actions of others?"), randomness ("What will fortune give me?"), analytic complexity ("What decision will I make, given this complex decision tree?"), hidden information("What information is being deliberately withheld?"), narrative anticipation("What's going to happen next?"), development anticipation ("What new additions/releases will the publisher make?"), schedule uncertainty("When will I next be able to return to this game?"), uncertainty of perception("How can I filter out certain data to perceive the important data?") and semiotic uncertainty("What will my playing this game mean?").

Most games dovetail two different primary forms of uncertainty to generate tension. For example, Dimitry Davidoff's ever-

14. Alexandre Mandryka. "Fun and uncertainty." *Gamasutra*. January 29, 2014. http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/AlexandreMandryka/20140129/209620/Fun_and_uncertainty.php.

popular party game *Werewolf* (1986), also known as *Mafia* (1986), uses *player unpredictability* and *hidden information* to drive the game forward. We as players aren't really interested whether or not we're capable of playing the game (*performative uncertainty*) or whether or not Davidoff will introduce a new variant of the game while we're playing it (*development anticipation*), but we are super-invested in A) anticipating other players' behavior and B) judiciously hiding or figuring out who's killing all the innocent civilians. Without both sets of activities, Werewolf would be a rather boring game.

Games often *appear* to hold one form of uncertainty in high regard, but will then reveal through play the dovetailed forms of uncertainty that actually drive the game. The old Sierra *King's Quest* (1984-1998) adventure games for the PC were ostensibly about "the story" (narrative anticipation), but actually leaned heavily on *solver's uncertainty* (i.e., using the right objects in the right way at the right time) and *uncertainty of perception* (i.e., locating hidden objects in the game's artwork).[15] Such a move led to the adventure genre's eventual decline[16] and rebirth through the "hidden object" genre.[17] The *Settlers of Catan* (1995) board game is ostensibly concerned with a player's strategy for winning (*analytic complexity*), whereas actual gameplay reveals an overt focus on *randomness* (how the dice determine availability of

15. Such critiques of the *Sierra* adventure games are commonplace and perhaps point toward the decline of the genre's marketability. But, as Costikyan once pointed out with regard to adventure game *Grim Fandango* (1998), "without the puzzles, it's no longer a game" (p. 16). Although I don't exactly subscribe to his opinion in this instance, Costikyan's point that games come into their own when they present us with moments of decision-making and struggle certainly justifies this decision choice for the genre. (Greg Costikyan. "I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games." *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Edited by Frans Mäyrä. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002, p. 16.)
16. For more information about the rise and fall of adventure games, see http://www.digitalgamemuseum.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-adventure-games/.
17. For more information about hidden object games, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puzzle_video_game#Hidden_object_game.

resources) and *player uncertainty* (how much players are willing to trade for the resources in play).

Analog role-playing games prove interesting as an uncertainty-generating platform because they often have extremely mutable game-states, based on the players interaction with the system and their interpretations thereof. One of the objectives of The Forge,[18] a now-defunct RPG design forum, was to get designers to clarify how exactly their rules were producing such game-states, moving beyond the uncertainty a given game promised to its players – usually some combination of narrative anticipation, randomness, narrative anticipation, and player uncertainty – and the uncertainties the game actually delivered to its players.[19] This tension between promise and product belongs to most role-playing games, but few designers couch it in broader terms (e.g., uncertainty) beyond the narrow confines of their conception of "system" (e.g., the use of dice, cards, stats, narration, etc.) I now turn to rules texts and my own experiences with the games in question to discuss how the design deploys various forms of uncertainty.

Dungeons & Dragons

The role-playing game everyone thinks of when one says "role-playing game," *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974; 2014) promises "story" (*narrative anticipation*) as well as a reliable set of rules to arbitrate outcomes (*randomness*) in that story. To quote the recently published D&D basic rules: "The *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying [sic] game is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery. … Unlike a game of make-believe, D&D gives structure to the stories, a way of determining the consequences of the adventurers' action. Players roll dice to resolve whether their

18. For more information about The Forge, see http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php.
19. See Ron Edwards' "System Does Matter" (http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html) and "The Nuked Apple Cart" (http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/12/).

attacks hit or miss or whether their adventurers can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull off some other dangerous task. Anything is possible, but the dice make some outcomes more probable than others."[20] In fact, rather than primarily focusing *on narrative anticipation* or *randomness*, editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* usually rely on *analytic complexity* to help players skew randomness in order to properly address *the hidden information* and *solver's uncertainty* in store for their player-characters.

In simpler terms: the D&D rules emphasize the myriad skills, tools and abilities the player-characters have at their disposal to confront the dungeonmaster's calculated threats and puzzles sitting behind the DM's screen. There are known unknowns that one plans for, but also unknown unknowns. There is also some development anticipation, as new editions and modules for the game affect long-term campaign play. Player-characters arm themselves against uncertainty itself. Nevertheless, the *development anticipation* of D&D is actually the most existential form of uncertainty because it's precisely the aspect of the game over which the player has the *least* control.

Fiasco

Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2008) is a game that simulates the disastrous consequences of small-time capers, à la the cinema of Joel and Ethan Coen. The cover states that it is a game about characters with "powerful ambitions and poor impulse control," suggesting that – wherever the narrative may go – it will surely be a fiasco. Since the players already know this going in, *narrative anticipation* is somewhat substituted with *semiotic uncertainty*: we know the situation will go south, but how and what will it mean? The game itself, however, primarily functions on *player*

20. Mike Mearls, Jeremy Crawford, et al. D&D *Basic Rules*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2014, p. 2.

uncertainty and *narrative anticipation*, with just enough randomness thrown in (along with the barest minimum of analytic complexity via the playsets)[21] so that the players feel like there is some input from "outside" the table. This has the effect of giving a group of random players immediate creative seeds that they felt like they chose (via the playset), and then puts them in a position in which they're mostly just sorting out the story among themselves. The randomness and analytic complexity are just alibis for gamers to engage seriously with each other as their own randomizing elements. *Dungeons & Dragons*, by contrast, deploys narrative anticipation and randomness as an alibi to engage seriously with its idiosyncratic system of character tweaks upon creation and leveling up. Development anticipation plays a small role in *Fiasco*, insofar as new playsets are released by both the publisher and fan communities on a semi-regular basis. Yet the existence of new playsets has no retroactive effect on the core rules of the game or other playsets, leaving such uncertainty on the outer edge of the design.

Amber

Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (1986, 1990) promises fiction similar to that of Roger Zelazny's *Chronicles of Amber* book series: a bitter family of gods and goddesses squabbling over the substance of reality itself. One might argue that this diceless system contains the least uncertainty of the games discussed, for uncertainty is often associated with the randomness contained within dice probability charts. Costikyan's taxonomy reveals this to be mere cultural bias, however. The game promises narrative anticipation but actually delivers one of the most finely honed marriages between player uncertainty and hidden information in gaming. Players create their characters by bidding points against the other characters, creating surprising antagonisms among the

21. Playsets are pre-determined lists of story elements from which *Fiasco* players assemble those specific elements that will be found in their particular session of the game.

player-characters that emerge. No one knows how a player will commit their points, and characters then exist for the rest of the campaign in power relationships only with each other. Player-characters are encouraged to hatch secret plots against each other to advance their own agendas.[22] Though the game rewards you for creating your character's backstory or drawing his/her/their picture, it casts this delicate creation into the thorny intrigues of both the gamemaster and your fellow player-characters. Dice and the randomness they bring with them thus create a kind of comfortable alibi for consequences within a game; remove them, and you have only the fickleness and caprices of other human beings to which you can attribute game and story outcomes.[23] Compared to *Fiasco* or *Dungeons & Dragons*, hidden information and player unpredictability encourage Poker-like bluff-and-risk play cycles without cards or dice.

Dread

Speaking of games of discomfort, Epidiah Ravachol's horror RPG *Dread* (2005) famously uses a *Jenga* (1983) tower to help pace the characters' slow descent into the abyss. Horror draws on fear of the unknown (*hidden information*) and the question "What's going to happen?" (*narrative anticipation*), but the game itself actually pivots on *performative uncertainty*: the players' ability to pull Jenga blocks from the tower without making it collapse. If you make the tower collapse, your character dies. Nevertheless, the character questionnaires that players must initially complete provide some measure of player unpredictability – not even the gamemaster can predict the players' responses – while the act of knocking over the tower

22. This state of affairs made *Amber* one of the ultimate players-passing-notes-to-the-GM games of the 1990s. Next to White Wolf products, of course.
23. For more on the general power of alibi such as dice within a game context, see Cindy Poremba. "Critical Potential On The Brink Of The Magic Circle." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Situated Play Conference*. Edited by Akira Baba. Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2007, pp. 772–778.

provides a kill-switch to all the uncertainty: you get to sacrifice your character to determine vital narrative details. This has the effect of binding the physical act of confronting the tower with narrative anticipation, binding both emotional uncertainties into a kind of feedback loop. Although diceless like *Amber*, hidden information takes a backseat to these two other uncertainties, which then drive play akin to a video game: if you complete the physical challenge, you get to see more story.

Costikyan's method provides us with insight into game design decisions and player incentives with minimal discussion of genre, artistic intent or other tried-and-true taxonomies. There are issues with this, of course. Genre tropes play a much-underrated role in the formation of the unwritten social contracts that drive the fiction. Agreeing that our characters are going on three awkward dates – as in Emily Care Boss' *Breaking the Ice* (2006)[24] – may do more to establish expectations of play than anticipation of individual player actions. Artistic intent allows us to interface a hypothetical authorial goal with the outcomes of the game. Nathan Paoletta's carry says it focuses "more on dealing with [how soldiers behave in war] than on celebrating violence or exploring tactical and strategic choices,"[25] and indeed we as players can then specifically deploy the rules toward that shared purpose. Categorizing players and creative agendas (i.e., GNS)[26] gives us the tools discern overarching patterns in individuals and systems alike. But with a rubric of uncertainty, we just might find a common language that underwrites all RPGs and, with it, the underlying principles that make them work in a social context.

24. Emily Care Boss. *Breaking the Ice*. Black and Green Games, 2006. http://www.blackgreengames.com/bti.html.
25. Nathan Paoletta. *carry: a game about war*. ndp design, 2006.
26. Creative agendas, as defined by the Big Model Wiki, are "the players' aesthetic priorities and their effect on anything that happen [sic] at the table that has any impact on the shared fiction." They emerged as a concept in order to explain the different kinds of enjoyment experienced at a role-playing table, especially with regard to the inter-player friction differing agendas create. http://big-model.info/wiki/Creative_Agenda.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND UNCERTAINTY IN RPGS

How do RPGs test the boundaries of our knowledge? We can address this fundamental uncertainty about our own capacity to know with the elements of uncertainty we find in the role-playing systems we play and design. After all, role-playing games reflect the cultural and political milieu of the periods that produced them.

RPGs help player groups agree upon specific, suggested fictions that then generate pleasurable – and painful – emotion and cognition.[27] Though the role-player her/himself will ultimately experience the medium as "first-person audience,"[28] the role-playing group will nevertheless consent to certain rules and norms that will guide their behavior and their shared, negotiated fiction. If we're all playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, for example, chances are that, before we even have entered the fiction of the game, we have already (tacitly) consented to the game's races and their modifiers, to the idea that a character with a Strength stat of 13 has a certain probability of being able to lift 200 lbs, and that the dungeonmaster will get to frame the opening scene, which will likely be in a town or tavern. Of course, all players possess the capacity to say "no." Within the significant arbitrating power of the listeners' consent lies the real game or, as *Apocalypse*

27. The presumption that role-playing games exist only for "entertainment," as the industry often claims, denies us the ability to seriously engage with the symbols and meanings that these games otherwise generate, and leave us with little or no apparatus to interpret the political, social, emotional and cognitive surplus also emergent from many RPGs. On this point, see: Markus Montola. *On the Edge of the Magic Circle*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere, 2012.
28. First-person audience means that a player will be the only one who can properly understand and process their own experience as both player and character. For more on first-person audience, see: Torill Mortensen. "Playing with Players: Potential Methodologies for MUDS." *Game Studies* 2.1 (2002). http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/mortensen/.; J. Tuomas Harviainen. "Kaprow's Scions." In *Playground Worlds*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Jyväskylä, Finland: Ropecon, 2008, pp. 216-231; Christopher Sandberg. "Genesi: Larp Art, Basic Theories." In *Beyond Role and Play*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki: Ropecon, 2004, pp. 265-288.

World (2010) designer Vincent Baker once put it, "all role-playing systems apportion [credibility,] and that's all they do."[29]

Role-playing game systems are thus caught up in some of the same paradoxes that plague the concept of certainty itself. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein asserts,[30] *to be certain you know* is actually to *doubt* if a proposition is true and to *verify* its veracity anew. Yet our current language and culture surrounding the concept of "intelligence" proscribes our ability to admit ignorance. In other words, we frequently have to express certainty about a fact before we have verified it, or before we even have the language to accurately describe what the situation is. To be certain means to have doubted – with the necessary precursor statement "I thought I knew, but…" – and then sought out the "truth" for oneself.[31] But certainty is a scarce resource within modern society,[32] such that we often cannot even find a viable test for our own knowledge.[33] If we look at Wikipedia for truth,[34] for example, we find only crowdsourced knowledge to which many previous people have consented. We accept its propositions not because we are ignorant or uncritical, but because it takes too much time and energy to verify their veracity beyond a point.[35]

In essence, the search for even a provisional truth relies on a healthy sense of skepticism combined with a – perhaps falsely

29. Vincent Baker. "Vincent's Standard Rant: Power, Credibility and Assent." *The Forge*. October 4, 2002. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=3701.
30. Ludwig Wittgenstein. "On Certainty." Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1969-1975. http://web.archive.org/web/20051210213153/http://budni.by.ru/oncertainty.html.
31. Wittgenstein, Thesis 12.
32. See Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New Delhi: Sage, 1992.
33. Wittgenstein, Thesis 110.
34. Simonite, Tom. "The Decline of Wikipedia." *MIT Technology Review*. October 22, 2013. http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/520446/the-decline-of-wikipedia/.
35. Wittgenstein goes so far as to frame doubt itself as a kind of *mini-game* in which we (falsely) presume specific facts are certain so we can reach out to affirm veracity of other facts: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt itself presupposes certainty." Wittgenstein, Thesis 115.

optimistic – general consensus on which to stand, a "presupposed certainty" that lets us explore the borders of the uncertain. Costikyan argues that we have culturally fashioned "a series of elaborate constructs that subject us to uncertainty – but in a fictive and nonthreatening way" which we call "games."[36] We craft artificial systems to experience emergent effects; we want to know what to expect, but not what will necessarily happen to us. Games themselves play with certainty, which means they tinker with the very mechanisms we use to form knowledge, and they even assist us with the transmission of cultural knowledge within a group.[37] Role-playing games offer a somewhat narrower set of tools to nevertheless toy with our construction of knowledge, with their potential in this respect only beginning to be explored within the last two decades of RPG development. And with the absence of a solid win-condition,[38] the satisfying outcome of an RPG hinges on a group of players adequately exploring – and being affected by – the uncertainty inherent in the game.

But by no means, as Ian Bogost argues,[39] are games value-neutral in the kinds of uncertainty and fictions they generate. All games mediate the values and cultures that produced them. Like other media, can also be used for structuring and spinning information toward certain desires and interests. As a film, for example, *Triumph of the Will* (1936) aesthetically persuaded its audience that the National Socialists in Germany constituted a unified political and military entity, as opposed to a number of bitterly divided power factions. As television programming, MTV music videos in the 1980s-1990s successfully convinced a generation

36. Greg Costikyan. *Uncertainty in Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013, p. 2.
37. Costikyan, pp. 3-7.
38. At least, as Costikyan argues: In *Dungeons and Dragons,* "no outcome is necessary, and quantification is irrelevant to the outcome." Costikyan, p. 12.
39. With regard to simulation games, for example, Bogost writes: "What simulation games create are biased, nonobjective modes of expression that cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity and ideology." Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 99.

of young people that a television network understood their style and interests better than they did. As portable video footage, the plethora of home-video documents of the Twin Towers attacks on September 11, 2001 helped instantiate a sense of overwhelming subjective, personal loss on the international level. So too can the medium of role-playing games, with their primacy of the fictive, reflect distinct cultural forces.

The rise of *Dungeons & Dragons* and its grid-based dungeon maps mirrors the early proliferation of computing and the hyper-quantification of society beginning in the 1970s. To succeed in Dungeons & Dragons is to conquer the algorithm, to arrest the forces of randomness. The urban settings of the White Wolf *World of Darkness* (1991) games or R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990) highlight early 1990s fears about gang violence in post-industrial America and the disillusionment surrounding Baby Boomers selling out to corrupt finance capital. Success in these RPGs requires mastery over player uncertainty (by way of manipulating your peers) as well as the analytic complexity of the streets and their various dangers. Affect-laden knowledges from certain cultures and moments structure what kinds of games we create, and vice versa.

FRAMING IDEOLOGY

Epistemology and ideological framings thereof become apparent in various games across the variegated 40-year history of the role-playing hobby. *Dungeons & Dragons*, produced by logics of the Cold War,[40] projects the unknown into subterranean spaces, which we then begin to "know" by mathematically mapping them, killing enemies within them, and processing these enemies' resources (i.e., their loot). Even character experience – supposedly their knowledge acquired from acting in the world – is derived from loot obtained in the early versions of *Dungeons &*

40. Aaron Trammell. "From Where Do Dungeons Come?" *Analog Game Studies* 1.1 (2014). http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/from-where-do-dungeons-come/.

Dragons. The game's contours reflect a Vietnam War-era desire for Manichean good-vs.-evil categories, while also encouraging all the cold instrumentality of modern warfare: fighters will only use their highest-damaging weapon in conflicts, player-characters are encouraged to specialize in their specific dungeon-crawling capabilities, and enemies/traps ambush them like in the bush, giving no quarter. *D&D* player-characters are both heroes and vicious killers. Uncertainty centers not on *who* is being killed or *how it feels*, but how to kill it and what re-saleable treasures it might leave behind. The incentive systems of the game and the way it structures knowledge frame it as such.

Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying*, however, was developed in the late 1980s, a period in which the savings-and-loan collapse in the States resonated with the general economic dissolution of the Soviet Union and the concurrent rise of China. As a game with no randomizers such as dice or cards, *Amber* centers knowledge on player uncertainty and the tricky political exigencies of a game world comprised of literally infinite worlds. If we even remotely accept the notion that there were such things as First, Second and Third Worlds (which is debatable, of course), then a game about scheming artistocrats with massive powers perhaps reflects the uncertainty about which "World" would wind up on top, whose vision for society was more viable, and what new enemies would their superpower tactics produce. The removal of randomizers beyond gamemaster fiat forces absolute player-character responsibility for one's actions, meaning that all consequences will likely hurt on a personal level. Characters act as global powers, but their pain is all local.

Speaking of "the local," Morningstar's *Fiasco* from 2009 prompts player-characters to pursue petty, painfully local goals (e.g., "To get even with the scum who are dealing drugs in your town") and then act on impulse, cognitively dissociating the player's persona from the character's. In an environment of performative online identities and a general collapse of generational optimism about

the future, *Fiasco* permits players to troll each other in the fiction without much retribution, and leaves them the option of seeing any meaning in the game or just throw up their hands and echo the CIA Superior (J.K. Simmons) at the end of *Burn After Reading* (2008): "I'm f***ed if I know what we did." Player knowledge is used to drive dramatic irony, as character ignorance produces the greatest sense of narrative anticipation. The *randomness* that can be found in the three moments of the game when the dice are rolled (The Setup, the Tilt, and the Aftermath) only assists this narrative anticipation: the player-characters who have had neither great or terrible luck throughout will not likely be able to push their player's agenda at the Tilt and will likely end up the worst off at the Aftermath. As under neo-liberal logics, there is no meritocracy, only glory to those who can attract the right kind of attention.

Epidiah Ravachol's *Dread*, that rare RPG that relies on performative uncertainty to determine narrative outcomes, treats knowledge the way many *films noirs* do: as directly correlating with danger and death. To know is to pull blocks successfully from the *Jenga* tower, and to pull blocks from the *Jenga* tower is to push one unlucky character toward death. The further one seeks to know what is going on and how to stop the imminent threat, the closer imminent death (in the Jenga tower's collapse) appears. The Enlightenment project "*Sapere aude/Dare to know*!" suddenly becomes a liability as one seeks to escape the killer's knife-blade or the horde of encroaching zombies. Narration itself gets mapped onto the characters' bodies: it doesn't matter where they happen to be (as opposed to *D&D*), or what political games they are playing with each other (as opposed to *Amber*, *Cyberpunk 2020*, or the White Wolf RPGs) – the next decision could get them killed. Whereas Morningstar's game demands *irony*, Ravachol's game demands *intensity*, a physiological response to ephemera mentioned. So just as media consumers in the 2000s increased their savvy-ness about genre

convention and appreciation of narrative failure (*Fiasco*), they also sought virtual, immersive systems that would refuse to trivialize the fictional secondary worlds at stake (*Dread*).

Another concurrent example, Frederik Jensen's *Montsegur 1244* (2009) hybridizes the ironic and immersive modes of uncertainty. The game takes place at the time of the Cathar Rebellion in 1244 AD, during which numerous Cathar heretics were given the choice of renouncing their faith or burning at the stake. The story itself remains largely foreclosed: your characters will lose their collective struggle and take their individual fates into their own hands. One cannot become too attached to one's character (even involuntarily) because of the remote setting and forced decision trees at the end. Nevertheless, the characters' background stories and the actual scenes of the game compel players to emotionally commit to the outcome, with the full knowledge of the events and their moral weight applying pressure to the situation. The uncertainties, as with *Fiasco*, take place at the site of the player making meaning of their experience. In addition, gameplay itself focuses on small details like "a metallic taste of blood" or "a choking smoke brings forth tears" that allow players to interrupt other players' narration, forming the basis of player uncertainty that rewards inter-player cohesion (so that you do not get your right to fictional positioning suddenly taken away from you.) The gestalt is a game that illustrates both our society's exacting historical knowledge, as well as its contested narration and interpretation. We cannot "know" the Cathars; only experience (as a *first-person audience*) their emotions during their fateful decisions. We are prompted to experience human empathy at the level of 6 billion people, a massive scale never previously required. If we can use our cognitive knowledge of the Cathars to produce emotional "knowledge" in ourselves, then the system is (again) a process responding to an era's concerns.

This essay promotes role-players to take a philosophical view of

the systems designed to create certain fictions, given that these systems are fundamentally playing with the building blocks of knowledge construction itself within a specific cultural framework. Co-creation of imaginary worlds is not an equivocal process, but intensely negotiated between different parties and subjectivities, all against a backdrop of social anxieties and cultural norms. The language of uncertainty gives us an opportunity to compare the different unknowns each role-playing game generates with the kinds of player-character knowledge required to resolve these unknowns in play. Role-playing games rarely have win conditions, but they do provide us with a platform to study how we arrive at the truth, and which truths interest us in the first place.