# The Narrative Potential of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the unique way tabletop role-playing games generate stories for their players, and how creative writing instructors may use these methods to teach fiction writing techniques to beginning writers. The author explains his theory of incremental storytelling, a methodology by which role-playing games provide an ideal model for students to learn the craft of fiction writing in small, discrete bits that, in aggregate, create something much greater than their constituent parts. This progressive approach puts students in immediate contact with each others' writing throughout the entire creative process and opens space for critical discussions about the fictional characters and the shared world they create.

## Gaming the Creative Writing Classroom

College-level creative writing classes tend to be taught using the workshop method. In brief this typically means the instructor circulates a published short story or two that students read and critique, which is followed by students writing and submitting their own work. This student writing is distributed to the class and is likewise critiqued based on various elements of craft: character, plot, setting, POV, theme, and tone. Yet using this approach in my first years teaching, I found myself being frustrated by what I perceived as an overall lack of student engagement with the course material, including the readings, the written assignments, and especially a lack of interest in each other's work. Another serious roadblock was many students' overriding obsession to pin down a singular meaning of what a creative piece meant before it could be studied or even appreciated. I've since called this the "buried treasure approach to literature," which is a belief that authors bury deep meaning beneath layers of symbols and metaphors that an educated reader learns to dig up. Noted American poet Ron Silliman (2008) has made a similar observation in his blog, speculating that from K-12, students are taught "that language is to be mined for 'information' that can be later regurgitated in test formats," and thus novice writers take a similar meaning-heavy approach to their writing poetry or fiction at the expense of craft issues.

To counteract this I first experimented with Surrealist parlor games and OuLiPo constrained writing techniques to mitigate students' strong impulse to focus only on meaning. While such games focus attention on language use, they do little for teaching other elements of craft such as characterization and setting, and they still did not bring the class together as a writing community. I wanted to shift the goal of my creative writing classes away from literary production and toward a model that favored collaborative writing, digital production, and a more student-centered classroom. To those ends, I adopted a different type of game, one that captured my imagination as a teenager: the role-playing game (RPG).

## RPGs as Catalogs of Fictional Worlds

While it might be an unusual concept for teaching a fiction course, using RPGs to provide an engaging storyline is nothing new, especially among writers of genre fiction. George R. R. Martin, author of the wildly popular *Game of Thrones*, hosted a long-running superhero RPG campaign for other successful genre writers who used them as an impetus for the long-running *Wild Card* series, which currently includes over twenty books. In an interview, writer China Miéville (Gordon, 2003), author of multiple novels including the award-winning Bas-Lag trilogy set in and around the sprawling city of New Crobuzon, said that he credits RPG's "mania for cataloguing the fantastic" as an influence for the many maps, histories, and timelines he creates that give him a firm grasp on his fictional world, even if all of these details never make it into his novels. Miéville's comments speak directly to the appeal of RPGs for players with their virtually endless catalog of locations, characters, and items that can be combined and recombined in an infinite chain of stories.

*Catalog* is the operative word, with its connotations of skimming and selecting of desired items, each with its own unique properties and descriptions. RPG rulebooks dedicate whole chapters to different game categories, such as character creation, weapons and armor, map making, modes of transportation, spells, etc. and well-established games like *Dungeons & Dragons* publish multiple *volumes*, giving players a vast reservoir of information to draw from when shaping their games. And yet no single catalog entry is a story unto itself. While a magic sword may have an elaborate history in its description, its function in the game is not to be a story for its own sake but to provide a platform for original storytelling by the players. They are the pieces from which the RPG narrative is assembled.

This construction metaphor is echoed in Daniel Mackay's (2001) book *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*, where he says players use "fictive blocks" of "famous lines, quotable postures, and vivid traces from literary passages or film scenes" (p. 77) that are "restored as strips of imaginary behavior that constitute the role-playing performance from moment to moment" (p. 80). Players bring their own knowledge and memories to the games and customize them to their tastes by altering rules and adding new elements, and they are able to resist and recoup the consumerist nature of popular culture, Mackay writes,

Because the form of the game encourages the players to bring their affective selves, their subjective selves, to the table and to winnow the concepts and images of our environment through that subjectivity… [to] fill in the blanks of popular culture… through his own emotional involvement with the role… [which is] predicated upon interaction with other people. (p. 82)

Through role-playing, players gain agency over the pop culture tropes of genre fiction—as cataloged in novels, comics, films, and videogames—by having near-complete control over their characters and the game world, save whatever control they willingly cede to their immediate gaming group in return for deeper investment in the game.

The fictive blocks and genre conventions Mackay describes exist across media, yet we still may critically analyze and make connections between them. Ian Bogost (2006) proposes a methodology whereby any medium can be understood as a configurative system of discrete, interlocking units of meaning-making called *unit operations*. Bogost describes unit operations as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (p. 3) as opposed to system operations, which are "totalizing structures that seek to explicate a phenomenon, behavior, or state in its entirety" (p. 6). To apply Bogost's theory to creative writing, students exhibiting a tendency to read a print text searching for a fixed immutable "meaning" could be said to be examining systems operations, looking for clues that would reveal the totalizing structure that serves to inform a correct interpretation of the work. Unit operations, however, isolate discrete moments of meaning-making in a text that invite the exploration of alternate configurations. Where systems suggest rigidity and determinism, units suggest fluidity and potentiality in narratives. Combined with Mackay's concept of fictive blocks, we can understand RPG genre settings not as a tired set of clichés but rather stored and highly configurable units of fictive meaning, drawn either from a catalog or from memory, which can be appended or altered based on the subjective interests of the player during the process of constructing a unique narrative.

Although using RPGs in writing classes might seem unorthodox, in fact fiction writers have long used isolated writing exercises as a way to hone their craft. In John Gardner's (1983) influential *Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, he suggests students work on small, discrete exercises that may grow into something else:

> I would begin, then, with something real—smaller than a short story, tale, yarn, sketch—and something primary, not secondary (not parody, for example, but the thing itself). I would begin with some one of those necessary parts of larger forms, some single element that, if brilliantly done, might naturally become the trigger of a larger work-some small exercise in technique, if you like, as long as it's remembered that we do not really mean it as an exercise but mean it as a possible beginning of some magnificent work of art. A one-page passage of description, for example; description keyed to some particular genre-since description in a short story does not work in the same way description works in the traditional tale. And I would make the chief concern of this small exercise the writer's discovery of the full meaning of fiction's elements. (p. 35)

Gardner speaks of the craft exercise that is not a throwaway gimmick but rather a seed than can germinate into something much grander. When put into the context of a large-scale collaborative writing project, no small exercise in technique would be wasted at all as the deftly crafted piece adds to a "magnificent work of art" where every contribution adds to a greater, more diverse catalog from which all contributing writers may draw.

## Incremental Storytelling: The Collaborative Creation of a Vast Fictional World

These different aspects of the catalog form the basis for my theory of teaching fiction writing using RPGs as models, a methodology I'm calling *incremental storytelling*. Rather than assuming all writers are prepared to write fiction that balances multiple craft issues simultaneously, incremental storytelling breaks these craft issues into discrete exercises that, over time and through collaborative effort, will aggregate into something much larger and complex than any individual could produce, and gives students a unique perspective on the elements of fiction writing. To cast it in different terms, incremental storytelling is a move from the macro element of story to the microelements of craft. As writers, we gain a better understanding of the city by first understanding a single house; we reach a better understanding of our characters by first detailing their individual traits; and we tell better stories

after experiencing characters' reactions to unforeseen challenges. This is the craft of fiction writing broken into units of meaning.

Thus the RPG provides an excellent structure for creating space for a digital, collaborative, student-centered writing project. Rather than using a store-bought RPG, an instructor can choose from several game mechanics—the basic stats and manner by which game conflicts are resolved (dice, cards, etc.)—and put the students to work creating the world incrementally using a wiki. Instead of the traditional workshop method of dissecting published stories for the study of characterization, setting, and plot, one can adopt a reverse strategy and begin instead with fragments; rather than struggling to pull student writers away with their obsession with a published story's meaning, you start with individually crafted objects that draw from a genre knowledge gathered across media, which then become the building blocks of the fictional world.

In the following sections I will briefly discuss how using RPGs and incremental storytelling can be used to teach three key elements of narrative—setting, character, and plot—and help beginning writers become more attuned to the micro elements of fiction writing.

## Setting

RPGs and fiction alike must be set in an explicit geographic location and historical period, whether on ancient Earth or in some distant galaxy far in the future. The setting and rules of the world dictate what will and will not be possible in the characters' unfolding narratives.

Writer and scholar Peter Turchi's (2004) *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* is an extended metaphor, comparing mapmaking with the creative writing process, a filling in of white space with content, whether with words and sentences or geographic details. Like Miéville, Turchi argues that rather than merely telling "what's there" in a story, writers must be able to imagine a full and vibrant world full of narrative potential, even if many of the details never make it to the page. Though few beginning writers may recognize it as such, choosing a setting is also an inherently political act. Turchi explains:

We chart our cities, so we chart ourselves. To chart the external world is to reveal ourselves—our priorities, our interests, our desires, our fears, our biases. We believe we're mapping our knowledge, but in fact we're mapping what we want—and what we want others—to believe. In this way, every map is a reflection of the individual or group that creates it. By "reading" a map, by studying it, we share, however temporarily those beliefs. (p. 146)

The presentation of the world, whether in maps or in prose, hinges on the authors inclusions and omissions of specific details; for example, by omitting Native American tribal areas (Turchi, 2004) and presenting Africa as a blank slate for the projection of European fantasies (McHale, 1987), European mapmakers indeed inscribed their culture's priorities, interests, desires, fears, and biases, a phenomenon replicated in the literature of European colonialism and American westward expansion. Such gross oversights took hundreds of years to be recognized and (marginally) redressed, yet when it comes to the mapping of fictional worlds, creative writing instructors are poised to intervene at the moment of production through what Mayers (2005) calls "craft criticism," or the analysis of the social, political and institutional context at play in the construction of an artistic work.

In the context of collaborative world building in an RPG-inspired creative writing course, instructors may note such omissions and ask the student writers to reflect upon and discuss these absences, and then correct them. Another strategy is to highlight the tensions that arise naturally from the clash of artistic perspectives in a room populated with students of different genders, races, social classes, and sexual orientations. In a traditional writing workshop such concerns may be mentally partitioned as something unique to a single writer or story, a special issue that must only be coped with by female or ethnic writers for example; however in collaborative world building, the various narrative units reside on the same plane. Writers must contend with the social concerns of others in their own creative work, something few beginning writers will have faced. The result is a catalog that suggests an uneven, messy world full of contradictions and curiosities—in other words, something much more resembling our real world than most neatly manicured fictional settings often seen in undergraduate creative writing classes.

RPG worlds are nothing if not vast and diverse. As Jennifer Growling Cover (2010) states in *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, expansive RPGs are designed not to tell stories, but to create space for stories, echoing Henry Jenkins' (2004) claim that game designers are less authors of stories and more providers of evocative spaces rich with narrative potential that allow players to perform or witness narrative events, and that literary genres of such as fantasy adventure are particularly invested in world-making and spatial storytelling. Thus the fictional worlds created for RPGs provide infinite space for the game narrative to grow and be shaped by the players. Players become story-builders as their interactions with the fictional world leave discernable traces on the

game space (Fernandez-Vara, 2012), itself a kind of authorship occurring in an ongoing, recursive process that increases the sense immersion in the fictional world for players and adds to their enjoyment of the game (Cover, 2010). More than just traversing a world, players in RPGs choose which storytelling invitations to accept and, in doing so, leave their own mark on the world.

The setting of most RPGs usually belongs to one of the popular literary or cinematic genres: fantasy, science fiction, horror, espionage, or superhero worlds (Mackay, 2001). Rather than this being a detriment it is in fact a benefit, as it opens a critical space discusses differences between our perceptions of reality and the "reality" of the shared fantasy world. In a collaboratively built fantasy or science fiction world, even mundane details must be agreed upon by the writers. Not only do these genres require writers to interrogate some of their unconscious assumptions when building a fictional world, these different genres allow player/writers to explore various timeless themes present in mythology, or explore relationships between humans and technology (Bowman, 2010).

As discussed earlier with respect to Mackay's fictive blocks, another benefit of using popular genres is the wealth of material across media from which students may sample. Unique features, details, and rules of fictional worlds can be drawn from literature, films, comic books, and games, media that most students will be more familiar with than work being published in contemporary literary journals.

The creation of this vast world takes happens incrementally through small, concise writing assignments. Even the metanarrative of the world, such as notable historical events as well as the general economic, social, and political systems (or lack thereof) that provide structure for the inhabitants of the world need to be grounded in specific, isolated details, events, and rules in order for them to be incorporated into game play. Though the world will continue to grow and shift during the course of play as players leave their unique traces upon it, the next step is to place actors on this intricately designed stage.

## Characters

Well-rounded, interesting characters are crucial for the success of fiction and RPGs alike. For Gardner (1983), the fiction writer's chief goal is to "make up convincing human beings and create for them basic situations and actions by means of which they come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader" (p. 14-15). Flannery O'Connor (1969) encouraged novice writers to devote ample time to their characters, who should naturally drive the story's plot:

> In most good stories it is the character's personality that creates the action of the story. In most [workshop stories], I feel that the writer has thought up some action and then scrounged up a character to perform it. You will usually be more successful if you start the other way around. If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know what before you begin. In fact, it may be better if you don't know what before you begin. You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't probably nobody else will. (p. 105-6)

For Gardner and O'Connor, the act of reading and writing fiction should be one of exploration and discovery on part of the reader, writer, and even the fictional characters themselves. The question for students writing fiction ceases to be "what do I want my story to mean?" but rather "who is my protagonist and what are his or her unique qualities?" This is precisely the same question facing a player starting a new RPG campaign.

In terms of shaping a narrative from an RPG, character creation is a moment where players have most control over the game (Cover, 2010). Players create their characters incrementally, determining their traits and abilities based on the game rules, which often use a system of numerical representation. For example, characters in *Dungeons & Dragons* have statistical categories such as strength, wisdom, and dexterity and the scores range from 3-18 based on the rolling of three, six-sided dice the player rolled for each category when generating the character. Other games, such as those that use White Wolf's *World of Darkness* d10 system, require players to distribute a fixed number of "dots" across multiple categories, with the dots representing how many dice will be rolled when players attempt certain actions. Both systems give players a tremendous amount of flexibility when designing their characters, and RPG systems are careful to ensure characters have strengths and weaknesses. The GM refers to these statistics when resolving challenges in a game; for example, a character's agility score may be used to see if a character can scale a drainpipe to a rooftop, or their charisma score may come into play if the character is attempting to fast talk his or her way out of a tight situation.

Players often use archetypal figures when developing the statistics of their RPG characters (Bowman, 2010) such as the warrior possessing more brawn than brain, or the thief who prefers stealth to physical confrontations. The

former character type would typically have high scores for strength and combat skills, while the latter type would have a higher speed and dexterity. As the player determines each trait, a mental picture of the character becomes clearer. Even if the player has a firm concept of the archetype they wish to work with—warrior or thief for example—this generalized idea becomes specific and unique through incremental adjustments made by the player.

However, as Mackay (2001) notes, these "numerical quantifications of abilities…only quantify elements that are secondary to the story, leaving the primary elements of theme, meaning, and character development unbounded by the rules" (p. 47). Thus players almost always create personal histories, often quite elaborate ones, to further flesh out their characters: where they come from, their family situation, their beliefs and attitudes, how they acquired their skills, their short-term and long-term goals, habits, pet peeves, etc. These details are crucial since the character is point of contact between the player and the fictional world; in other words, how the player crafts the character will strongly determine how the character will interact with the fictional world—what roads she will travel, how she will interact with others, what situations will she choose to get involved with, and which she will pass by (Mackay, 2001). A lawful character may choose to join up with a band setting out to disband a thieves' guild; the unscrupulous character may try to warn the guild in hopes of procuring a reward. The player must have a keen sense of who his character is in order to have an enjoyable role-playing campaign.

The questions players address during the character creation phase strongly resemble creative writing exercises meant to help fiction writers develop realistic characters. In *What If?: Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*, Bernays and Painter (2010) have two chapters and seventeen exercises geared toward helping fiction writers learn more about their characters. "Fictional characters don't come equipped with clues," they write. "You, as writer, must supply them. The more specific your make these clues, the more immediate your character will be" (p. 31). The exercises require writers to list traits such as their characters obsessions, politics, ambitions, as well as give them concrete details such as their careers as well as more intangible qualities such as their motivations and wants. They add:

Beginning writers often don't know more than a character's age or gender—and frequently neglect an essential piece of information that would have greatly informed or shaped their story. You needn't include these details in the story, but their presence in your mind will be "felt" by the reader. (p. 39)

Bernays and Painter quote authors such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Graham Greene to emphasize the importance of writers knowing as much about their characters as possible since such details may be important for the story being written. Deeply knowing their characters is even more pertinent for players of RPGs, who will have limited control over the direction of the game narrative and thus cannot predict when such details will need to be summoned. While a fiction writer can add new wrinkles to a character's personality over multiple rewrites, during a live-action RPG session the player has no such luxury. Absent details equate to missed narrative opportunities in the game world, so players often write copious notes about their characters' attitudes, beliefs, idiosyncrasies, and personal histories.

Bowman (2010) also argues that RPGs "force players to begin to think about their character as a layered, multi-faceted being" at the moment of character creation that allows players to identify with someone "other" than themselves:

> Just as when reading a book or watching a film, role-players must inhabit a different head space and identify with someone "other" than themselves. RPGs push this identification a step further, allowing that "other person" to evolve as the player's own creation, rather than a conceptualization by an author foisted upon the passive reader of a book. (ch. 3, sec. 2)

This point strongly supports using incremental storytelling to teach the craft of developing fully realized characters to beginning writers. When writers in traditional workshops study a published story they may indeed learn to identify with the main characters but this is a second-hand analysis that occludes the fact that authors usually need multiple rewrites to sufficiently develop the character. The traditional approach often proves helpful for those writers who already have a deep understanding of their fictional characters, but it does little for those writers who only have a hazy notion of who their characters even are. Using the detailed character creation process of a sophisticated RPG, players have a vested interest in working through these details, and then they learn more about identifying with fictional characters when they inhabit the same "head space" through role-playing. Because players do not control the entire narrative, they may also focus more on their player characters, thinking deeply about how they would react to the situations and circumstances they did not expect. Free from the burden of plot, players instead focus on how their characters perceive events, reflect on their personal histories, and evolve over time.

## Plot

The creation of a role-playing narrative is a collaborative effort by necessity. Before any RPG session can begin, four components are required: a fictional world for the action to take place, at least one (though usually more) player-character (PC) with some set of motivations, a set of rules to determine the successes and failures of attempted actions, and a GM who manages the interactions between player-characters and the fictional world. The ensuing story develops through the GM describing the fictional world, listening to how the player-characters react to the situations, and determining the outcome, which may or may not require an appeal to the game mechanic such as dice rolls. The story is a result of fluid interaction between players and the GM.

This litany of choices models how beginning fiction writers should think about the multitude of options open to their characters when writing stories. Rather than dragging their characters to some predetermined outcome, beginning writers will benefit from considering the open-endedness of any given situation in the RPG. In addition, as Cover (2010) notes, dice rolls contribute to whether a character can proceed down their chosen path, and the storyline is always negotiated by the other players, each of whom can pursue different choices and consequences. Whereas a beginning writer can struggle with fully developing one character much less two or three, the collaborative nature of the RPG reduces this pressure as each players develop his or her own character. Players frequently debate how each other's characters would act and even challenge their decisions, with players commonly asking each other, "Would your character really do that?" (Cover, 2010). Because the game cannot proceed until decisions have been made and challenges resolved, there is a subtle social pressure to produce a mutually agreed-upon narrative that can prevent players from making absurd choices, which would spoil the session for all (Mackay, 2010). Conflicts between characters at key moments also provide good fodder for writing, as players may channel their frustrations and disappointments into their fiction.

## Conclusion

Teachers of creative writing have much to gain by structuring fiction writing courses around an RPG, having students build a vast fictional world complete with people, places and thing through the process I call incremental storytelling. This methodology puts students in immediate contact with each others' writing throughout the entire creative process and opens space for critical discussions about the fictional characters and the shared world they create. Furthermore, this methodology undercuts students' impulse to have plot and meaning dictate their writing. A player of an RPG cannot decide on a rags-to-riches plot arc and make it so. Just as in life, a player may choose to pursue a goal for the character, but ultimately he or she has limited control in achieving it. Stories derived from role-playing campaigns are more likely to deal with a character's frustrations, sense of loss, and changing expectations, as opposed to workshop stories where beginning writers often put trivial challenges, if any challenges at all, before their protagonists. Playing an RPG through the eyes of a intricately detailed character as she makes decisions, scores unlikely victories, and suffers disappointing setbacks becomes a process of discovery about both the character and the world as the plot unfolds in unexpected ways through play. This process of discovery is exactly what traditional fiction writers Gardner and O'Connor state is at the core of good fiction. In short, the RPG provides students and instructors a rich model for producing complex and compelling narratives featuring interesting characters and immersive worlds.

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