

ANALOG GAME STUDIES

VOLUME 3

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Analog Game Studies

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Volume III

Emma Leigh Waldron, Aaron Trammell,
and Evan Torner

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FOREWORD

Academic journals transform over time, and some reach a watershed moment at which their impact noticeably increases. For *Analog Game Studies*, Volume III was that moment.

It solidified our journal as a publishing powerhouse: soliciting longer, deeper contributions from a wider body of contributors. Our bi-monthly issues tied their essays together with coherent and compelling overarching themes. There were exciting thematic issues covering affect, race, and role-playing sprinkled throughout the year. We even published our first book review, establishing a formula for later years.

We also witnessed the explosion of interest in board games heralded by the contributors of Volume III. Nearly half the essays in Volume III focus specifically on the importance of board games to our communities, identities, and everyday lives. As interest in board games unfolds along a mirror pathway to video game design, we are proud at *Analog Game Studies* to have fostered critical discussion regarding board games from the very start.

We're excited and proud to see the third volume of *Analog Game Studies* finally in print! It's been our privilege to think and play along with you.

-The Editors

Cards and Cardboard

Indigenous Board Game Design in *The Gift of Food*

ELIZABETH LAPENSÉE

If you look on a board game shelf, how many games will you see with actions based on collaboration, stewardship, generosity, and gratitude? Most likely, you'll find mechanics like attacking, stealing, and backstabbing. Indigenous communities looking to facilitate intergenerational gameplay are thus hard-pressed to find options that reinforce their teachings. In response, communities are developing their own games for passing on teachings in many forms. As espoused by game designer Brenda Romero, "the mechanic is the message".¹ And the messages in the board game *The Gift of Food* (2014)—inspired by collaborative game development with Indigenous communities working with the Northwest Indian College—produce culturally responsive gameplay, meaning gameplay that is drawn from and that uplifts the cultures involved.

The Gift of Food is an ideal example of how culturally responsive board games can function as important pathways for passing on

1. Brenda Romero "The Mechanic is the Message" 2008–Present

Indigenous ways of knowing, as learning and reinforcing community teachings is built into the game's mechanics.² *The Gift of Food* was developed by and for Pacific Northwest Native communities as a way of passing on cultural teachings about how and where to gather foods and medicines in different ecosystems and during different seasons. I was honored to be invited into the project as a designer and writer based on recommendations from members of the Northwest Indian Storytellers Association with whom I collaborated on the social impact game *Survivance* (2011).

Although *The Gift of Food* is currently only circulated within Pacific Northwest Native communities, the overarching design is being shared so that other Indigenous communities and game developer allies who involve Indigenous collaborators will consider making board games due to how successful *The Gift of Food* has been in bringing community knowledge to community members of various ages. I welcome adaptation of the overall design with attention to mechanics that support teachings in the hopes of other Indigenous communities revitalizing relational knowledge about land, water, food, and medicinal plants across generations. In this essay, I will outline these overarching aspects of the game's design process to show how board games can serve as important tools for passing on cultural teachings, especially within Indigenous communities.

2. *The Gift of Food* (September 2014) is a Pacific Northwest Native foods board game made in collaboration with the Northwest Indian College. The game is produced and written by Elise Krohn and designed by Elizabeth LaPensée with art by Roger Fernandes and graphic design by Annie Brulé. Abe Lloyd contributed as a writer while the editorial team included Elizabeth Campbell, Joyce LeCompte, Valerie Segrest, and Tracy Rector. Community members such as Shawna Zierdt contributed insights. With thanks to USDA's National Institute of Food & Agriculture, the Northwest Area Foundation, and the American Indian College Fund.



Original concept art for *The Gift of Food* by Roger Fernandes. Used with permission of the author.

GAMEPLAY

In this game, the design is paramount to creating a situation in which the player must retain knowledge to play the game successfully. For example, players pull scenario cards with background art that directly mirrors the game's board. They have to look closely or recall from memory to find the matching patterns of the land or water related to the food or medicine they are hoping to acquire. Thus, players begin to think about foods and medicinal plants in relation to the ecosystems that support them and activate Indigenous relational worldview—the understanding that all life is connected, which in turn creates a reciprocal relationship with place.³ Another

3. Gregory Cajete refers to relational worldview as “a lived and creative relationship with the natural world ... [an] intimate and creative participation [which] heightens awareness of the subtle qualities of a place.” Gregory Cajete. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Books, 1999, p. 20.

way in which the game design facilitates the transmission of cultural teachings is how players must occasionally read traditional and historical stories included in the guide book—a rule book that also includes stories, knowledge about eco-systems, foods, and medicines, and a language journal—as part of gameplay. At other times, stories must be recalled from memory, such as during Winter scenarios, in honor of recognizing Winter as the storytelling season. In this way, the design actively passes on the stories themselves as well as teachings around storytelling protocol.

Gameplay sessions observed during various phases of playtesting during iterative development showed players retained knowledge about foods, medicinal plants, and land, and activated teachings about cultural values including collaboration, stewardship, gratitude, and generosity. Our observations were based on seeing players make different or repeat choices when replaying the game and making comments about remembering knowledge from a previous play session.

Salmonberry Sprouts **SPRING**

It's early spring and the salmonberry bushes are sprouting tender shoots. These nutritious greens energize your body and prepare you for a new season. Peel off the outer skin and enjoy the tender inner stalk fresh or lightly cooked.

OPTIONS:

- A. Hang out in the salmonberry patch and enjoy eating fresh sprouts
- B. Choose another Family to bring along and show them how to harvest sprouts
- C. Head downstream where the sprouts look even more abundant

OUTCOMES: **Salmonberry Sprouts**

- A. Fresh sprouts are tart and refreshing.
+1 Greens to your Wellbeing
- B. You teach another Family how to pinch off sprouts, avoid the tender thorns, and peel back the skin.
+1 Greens to both Families' Wellbeing
- C. Oops, you trip and fall into a thorny salmonberry bush! Yarrow and rose are soothing to wounds.
Move 1 Medicine token from your Basket to your Wellbeing. If needed, ask another family for 1 Medicine.

Example of a Spring scenario card from The Gift of Food. CC BY Northwest Indian College.

Players also influence the gameplay experience by reinforcing or challenging its teachings. Humor on the part of players was an ongoing way in which teachings were emphasized. In one instance, we observed one player holding onto food gift tokens in their basket mat and not sharing or trading with other players. After the game was over, other players teased that they weren't going to share their real food during the community feast with that player because they hadn't been generous during the game. Thus, gameplay was seen as a way to safely act out personal choices. However, these decisions could impact how people in the community received individuals and reinforced teachings with them even after gameplay, often by using playful humor to remind players of their actions and how these did or did not align with the community's values.

In more elaborate instances of gameplay, players can self-determine teachings in *The Gift of Food*. Namely, Indigenous languages are reinforced in the back of the guide book by including blank pages for players to write in the food and medicine names in their own language. Thus, communities can adapt the game for language revitalization and continuance as a layer that interrelates with traditional knowledge. Overall, our hope as a development team is that communities will customize other board games based on *The Gift of Food* to meet their specific needs.

COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Before moving forward with describing this work that may inspire the design and development of board games that draw on Indigenous ways of knowing, it is important to establish that games with Indigenous content should ideally involve collaboration with and content contribution by Indigenous community members. The development process recognizes communities and developers as equal

contributors.⁴ Usually, I am invited by a community to develop a game, rather than me approaching a community first. Community members should be directly involved in the process of adapting their culture to a game, otherwise a game may include misrepresentation or appropriation. Games that represent fictional Indigenous communities could also benefit from involving Indigenous collaborators, but in some cases are thoughtful ally contributions. For example, the *Settlers of Catan* mod *First Nations of Catan*⁵ interestingly addresses the overwhelming lack of board games that recognize the historical and ongoing losses of land and life experienced by Indigenous communities. However, when representing real communities, game developers should not only involve Indigenous community members as consultants, but they should also have equally empowered roles such as in design, art, and writing. The board game *The Gift of Food* offers a model for such work in terms of both design and a genuinely collaborative development process.

Collaborative development means deeply involving a community in determining their own representations in a game, from concept to distribution, and enabling collaborators to make meaningful contributions, such as art assets. The collaborative development process can influence a game in ways ranging from genre to art style to mechanics to dissemination. It can even mean completely revisiting a game concept from the platform up. *The Gift of Food* started conceptually as a video game, but when I spoke with Indigenous community members working with the Northwest Indian College, they pointed out that a digital game would be inaccessible in classrooms, community centers, and most homes. Board games are an accessible alternative to video games in

4. For more on this, see the author's IndieCade 2014 presentation, "Why Cultural Collaboration Matters". A recording of the talk is available at <https://vimeo.com/112193585>.

5. See Greg Loring-Albright, "The First Nations of Catan Practices of Critical Modification" in *Analog Game Studies Volume II*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2017.

communities that are often restricted by the digital divide,⁶ which creates a lack of access to Internet and technology. Thus, along with producer and writer Elise Krohn, I shifted my focus as the designer by journeying into developing a board game that would more genuinely meet the needs of communities involved with the Northwest Indian College.

The Gift of Food was designed iteratively during in a one-year development cycle filled with smaller cycles of paper prototyping, playtesting with community members, and revising or adding design and/or content. From the start, we involved Lower Elwha S’Klallam storyteller and artist Roger Fernandes as the lead artist. His style was influential in determining the aesthetic as well as even the design, since some of his previous work for the Northwest Indian College made me think of game icons and thus partly inspired the use of tokens as a game mechanic. There is always a reciprocal relationship when involving community members directly in content development—the developer offers a path to pass on teachings, while the community member offers those teachings. Every contribution should be equally valued and the people involved need to be recognized for their work.

As an aspect of collaborative game development, it is vital to honor the intellectual property rights of Indigenous communities. To date, *The Gift of Food* is only shared closely within local communities because it includes knowledge that was determined should be protected after the game prototype proved to so strongly pass on culturally sensitive knowledge. Specifically, the board reflects ecosystems with related insights about how to gather and hunt, as well as seasonal knowledge only carried by certain community

6. The digital divide greatly impacts Indigenous communities, displacing more than 90% of tribal communities from internet and technology access, which in turn influences societal concerns for these communities. See Katia Savchuk. “Massive Digital Divide for Native Americans is ‘A Travesty’” from 2011. <http://mediashift.org/2011/05/massive-digital-divide-for-native-americans-is-a-travesty132/>

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members. Although the board art represents a fictional village in order to protect the exact specifics of where to find food and medicine gifts, there is still a risk that people from outside of the community may use knowledge from the game to overtake foods and medicines, since these acts have happened historically and continue to occur to this day.⁷

GAME DESIGN

In *The Gift of Food*, which is aimed at players aged 10 and above, players represent a family in a Northwest Native community that is encouraged to collaborate and practice generosity, stewardship, and gratitude. Players learn about, gather, use, and share foods within the six ecosystems of the territory so that the community can flourish throughout the seasons. The game's name is inspired by the community's collective worldview about food—that food is a gift that also relates teachings, rather than simply something to be used.

Our foods are more than commodities; they are teachers and they weave together the social fabric of our community. The Salmon remind us of what it takes to be an advocate for the land. Every year they journey the ocean waters, eating, exercising and tonifying their bodies with the richness of the seas. Upon returning from their odyssey, they become nourishment for the land and everything that dwells on it. We witness this homecoming and ask ourselves how we pitiful human beings might be like the Salmon People. How can we be powerful medicine for our landscape, and humble ourselves enough to truly honor the gift of food?
– Valerie Segrest (Muckleshoot), *The Gift of Food Guide Book*

7. Christi Belcourt's beautiful book and plant card collection *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use* (2007) relates the loss of plant medicines due to overharvesting from non-Indigenous people. This is an ongoing issue all too common for many Indigenous communities. Non-Indigenous people, ranging from individuals to companies such as Coca-Cola, overtake plants or take from plants in such a way that causes damage that either weakens the medicine or entirely kills the plants. See Christi Belcourt, *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use: Study Prints & Resource Guide*. Translated by Rita Flamand and Laura Burnouf. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007.

Food Gifts are represented by Tokens moved from the board to the player's Basket Mat (described in more detail below). While the following list of example foods within the eight types of Food Gifts is not complete so as to protect community knowledge, it gives a strong idea of the diversity of foods represented in the game: Berries (e.g. Cranberries, Salmonberries, Wild Strawberries), Greens (e.g. Seaweed Nori, Nettle Shoots, Spruce Tips, Sprouts), Nuts (e.g. Hazelnuts, Acorns), Roots (e.g. Camas Bulbs, Wapato Tubers), Wild Game (e.g. Deer, Elk), Birds (e.g. Duck, Grouse), Fish (e.g. Salmon, Trout, Halibut), and Seafood (e.g. Clams, Mussels, Crab). Additionally, Medicine includes plants that help you to heal from injury or sickness. Since there were far too many foods to uniquely represent visually on Tokens, we collaborated with community members and the culture committee to determine how to name and organize food into groups through reciprocal discussions and iterative revisions.

Food Gift Tokens are found throughout the board in their related ecosystem. The six ecosystems include Camas Prairies, Mountain Huckleberry Meadows, Lowland Forests, Wetlands, Saltwater Beaches, and Rivers. Due to concern around representing a genuine Coast Salish territory that would then reveal true locations of food gifts that are important to protect, the board represents a fictional but realistic arrangement of ecosystems with a community.

Food Gifts are inseparable from their ecosystems. For example, Camas Bulbs are found in the Prairies. Prairies naturally formed in the Puget Sound region about 14,000 years ago as glaciers retreated. Many foods including edible roots and berries thrive in this open landscape. Open meadows are active to deer, elk, and other animals that graze on prairie plants. During a player's turn, which is informed by Scenario Cards, a player may come across an option that will give

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them a Stewardship Bonus that can be later traded for any Food Gift. In the Prairies, players can hold a burning to release nutrients into the soil and prevent trees from taking over, increasing the bounty of Camas Bulbs in the following season.



Tokens for (from left to right) Roots, Berries, and Salmon. CC BY Northwest Indian College.



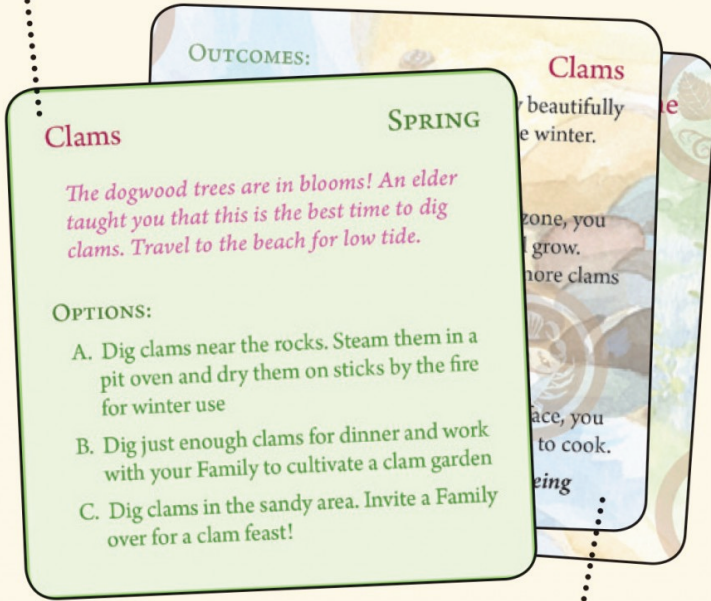
The game board represents six interconnected ecosystems. CC BY Northwest Indian College.

The player's village site is along the river—a pathway that connects families to different ecosystems and distant villages. Fish such as salmon and eulachon migrate from their ancestral streams down the river to the sea and return to spawn, while others reside in the river year-round. Specialized fishing techniques and permanent structures including weirs, nets, and traps increase a player's chances of catching fish and also help with monitoring and maintaining fish runs. The estuary where the river meets the sea is a critical habitat for young salmon, herring, and other animals such as ducks and seal. The

connections between land and all forms of life are thus represented by the game mechanics and the teachings reinforced through gameplay.

There are three modes of gameplay—Full Circle, Potlatch, and Seasonal. Players can choose which mode is best depending on how much time they have to play or if they want to focus on a particular season or experience. In Full Circle Mode, players start with Spring and then play through Summer, Autumn, and Winter. At the end of Winter, players exchange Stewardship Bonus Tokens for Food Gift or Medicine Tokens. The player with the greatest diversity of Food Gifts in their Wellbeing wins. If tied, the player with the greatest total number of Tokens in their Basket wins. In Potlatch Mode, players play through Spring, Summer, and Autumn and stop before Winter for a Potlatch Celebration. At the end of Autumn, players exchange Stewardship Bonus Tokens for Food Gift or Medicine Tokens. The player with the greatest diversity of Food Gifts to contribute to the Potlatch from their Basket wins. Finally, in Seasonal Mode, players only play through Spring, or both Spring and Summer. At the end of the game, players exchange Stewardship Bonus Tokens for Food Gift or Medicine Tokens. The player with the greatest diversity of Food Gifts in their Wellbeing wins. If tied, the player with the greatest diversity of Tokens in their Basket wins. In each gameplay mode, the emphasis is on the diversity of your Food Gifts rather than the total amount, thus promoting the value of balanced wellbeing over simply taking in ways that would impact the availability of Food Gifts in future seasons.

FRONT OF SCENARIO CARD - Draw with this side face up.

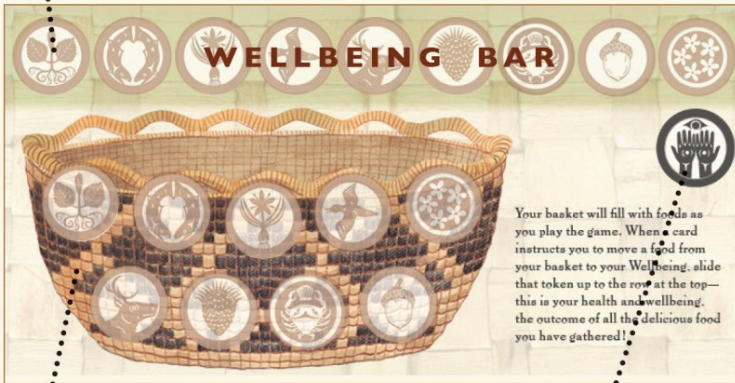


BACK OF SCENARIO CARD

Seasonal scenario cards shuffled for randomness determine a player's possible options leading to unique outcomes for each turn. CC BY Northwest Indian College.

Wellbeing Bar – Place Food Gifts and Medicines

here to represent what you have used to maintain your wellbeing. When you use something from your Basket, it goes here.



Your basket will fill with foods as you play the game. When a card instructs you to move a food from your basket to your Wellbeing, slide that token up to the row at the top—this is your health and wellbeing, the outcome of all the delicious food you have gathered!

Basket – Place Food Gifts and Medicines

here in your gathering Basket, to use when directed to, and to determine the winner.

Stewardship Bonus – Place

Stewardship tokens here to use when you need them.

Each player keeps track of foods and medicines in a basket mat. CC BY Northwest Indian College.

Each player takes a turn in a clockwise order after either one player is identified as the elder of the group or someone volunteers. Scenario Cards are seasonal situations in stacks of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. Each player picks one randomly shuffled seasonal Scenario Card each turn until all cards are used. The player reads the scenario and options out loud, then chooses one option and flips the Scenario Card over to experience the outcome. Scenarios

involve actions including but not limited to hunting, gathering, fishing, making nets, braving storms, telling stories, and contributing to community feasts. Each Scenario has three possible outcomes. Players may gain or lose Food Gifts or Medicine, contribute Food Gifts or Medicine to other families, trade with other families, or gain a Stewardship Bonus, which is then moved to or from the Basket Mat.

The Basket Mat includes a basket for stored Food Gifts and Medicines, a Wellbeing bar where Food Gift Tokens and Medicine Tokens represent what has been used to maintain your wellbeing, and a Stewardship Bonus slot where Stewardship Tokens are stacked until they are used to trade for Food Gifts or Medicines based on your needs. Stewardship Bonus Tokens represent ways that you care for the land and promote the abundance and diversity of native foods. They are awarded to you based on your actions during Scenarios. At the end of the game, you exchange your Stewardship Bonus Tokens for any Food Gift Tokens. The player with the most Stewardship Bonus Tokens gets to choose Tokens first. Thus, while gameplay is determined by choices made during Scenarios, there is also the possibility of a random element where players can shift the game by diversifying their Food Gifts on their Basket Mat before the winner is determined.

FUTURE WORK

The Gift of Food offers a strong model for the design and development process of an Indigenous board game intended to pass on community teachings. Although this board game specifically focuses on foods, medicines, land, and water, there are many other possibilities to be expressed. For example, Cree game designer Janelle Pewapsconias developed an Indigenous version of *Game of Life* that is currently

being used in youth workshops. Board games are exciting spaces that bring players together across generations, and emerging companies such as Neeched Up Games⁸ and Native Teaching Aids⁹ promise to expand options for Indigenous players as well as welcome non-Indigenous players to experience unique gameplay developed by Indigenous designers. As Indigenous communities look for ways to revitalize and pass on teachings, board games made with a genuinely collaborative development process with Indigenous creatives and community partners prove to be an active intergenerational space for expressing Indigenous ways of knowing.

8. Neeched Up Games is an analog game company based in Canada led by Cree developer Janelle Pewapsconias. She designed a board game similar to the Game of Life for Indigenous communities. See more about her work at <http://nechedupgames.com/>.

9. Native Teaching Aids is a language learning tools development company based in the United States owned by ally developer Rebecca Goff. She collaborates with Indigenous communities to develop tabletop games with an emphasis on history and language learning. See their variety of games at <http://www.nativeteachingaids.com/games/>.

The Problematic Pleasures of Efficiency in Goa and Navigador

NANCY FOASBERG

As the hobby board game industry has grown, especially in the last five years, analog games have received much more attention both in mainstream media and in scholarship. Along with accolades for the beauty and the cleverness of these games, the increased attention has also brought criticism of their often troubling themes. This essay will engage with criticisms that have arisen around prevalent themes in Eurogames in particular.¹ Eurogames as a genre are characterized by thin themes and elegant mechanics, typically focusing on economic development and competition for resources rather than direct conflict.² Although many games scholars, such as Greg Costikyan,³ go so far as to argue that theming in Eurogames is therefore entirely separate from gameplay, this essay argues that

1. See William Robinson. "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames." in *Analog Game Studies Volume I*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016.

2. The BoardGameGeek Wiki defines Eurogames in contrast to "Ameritrash" games: the former themeless, strategic, and nonviolent, and the latter heavy in conflict, theme, and randomness.

3. Costikyan writes that in Eurogames, "[a]ctual gameplay is divorced from the theme, [and] the theme is a mere marketing appendage on what is at heart an abstract strategy game." Greg Costikyan. "Boardgame Aesthetics." *Tabletop: Analog Game Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011.

certain themes recur in Eurogames because they align with certain economic mechanics, and that this pairing of themes and mechanics is politically problematic. Thus, despite the lack of overtly violent themes, Eurogame mechanics often draw on deeply violent histories. As Will Robinson notes, the thematic abstraction typical to Eurogames based on colonial themes is problematic because the Indigenous Other is abstracted out so as to erase the violence of European expansion. Moreover, this problematic theming is facilitated by the Eurogame emphasis on ostensibly non-violent economic mechanics rather than militaristic ones.⁴ While others have critiqued the politics of erasure in popular Eurogames such as *Catan* (1995)⁵ and *Vasco da Gama* (2009)⁶, this essay will further explore how the pleasures of economic mechanics produce games with themes that are necessarily historically problematic. Although this is a trend that can be observed in *many* contemporary games, this essay will focus on two specifically: *Goa* (2009) and *Navegador* (2010).

Many Eurogames—including those critiqued here—are mathematically beautiful, strategically rich, and socially engaging. However, they are frequently set in a colonial past which is approached uncritically. These historical settings allow the games to appear to offer the possibility of beginning an economy from scratch. Games like *Puerto Rico* (2002), *Age of Empires III: The Age of Discovery* (2007), *Macao* (2009), *Vasco da Gama* (2009), *Amerigo* (2013), *Francis Drake* (2013), *Mombasa* (2015), *Goa* and *Navegador* invoke a past in which the players, as European merchants and explorers, can freely exploit resources in exotic locales. These games focus heavily on the players' opportunities to behave efficiently and productively,

4. "[T]he historical recounting of European expansionism is glorified in economic terms, rather than problematized in militaristic ones." (Robinson 2016).

5. See Greg Loring-Albright. "The First Nations of Catan Practices of Critical Modification" in *Analog Game Studies Volume II*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2017.

6. Robinson 2016

building economies where there were none before. They model fascinating economic interactions among the players while removing or ignoring complicating factors like previous ownership of the land and resources being exploited.

Erasure of problematic historical elements is extremely common in board games. The popular board game *Catan* has been critiqued for this issue by designers and scholars alike. French game designer Bruno Faidutti has noted that the “quaint themes” of Eurogames often involve glossing over historical horrors, and critiques the absence of any natives of *Catan* in the game.⁷ Similarly, games scholar Greg Loring-Albright reads the game as a retelling of the American frontier myth, an ideology that encouraged nineteenth-century American expansionism while erasing native claims to the land. Finally, postcolonial scholar Lorenzo Veracini analyzes how *Catan* fantasizes an empty, but productive, landscape to be filled by settlers. It is:

terra nullius, finally a “new” land that is empty as it should be, different from the new lands that real settlers usually encounter, which are actually filled with prior claims by indigenous peoples.⁸

However, the building of this myth of *terra nullius* does not only rely on fictional (or at least geographically non-specific) landscapes like *Catan*. Many Eurogames perpetuate this myth through specific references to real places and people. They use abstraction to transform actual lands, former colonies, into *terra nullius*. Even the harsh colonial empires of earlier centuries can be transformed into a peaceful competition among colonizers, with not a native—or a slave—to be seen.

7. Bruno Faidutti. “Postcolonial *Catan*.” in *Analog Game Studies Volume II*, Edited by Evan Torner, Emma Leigh-Waldron, and Aaron Trammell. Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2017.

8. Lorenzo Veracini. “Settlers of *Catan*.” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3.3 (2013). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/18380743.2013.761941>.

While abstracting out historical violence and erasing its victims, Eurogames tend to celebrate the productivity of colonialism, a portrayal that allows players to indulge in the pleasures of efficient management and the acquisition of wealth while also quietly supporting the colonialist ideologies of lands outside Europe as *terra nullius*. For a closer look at how this works, I will analyze two representative examples, both focusing on the Portuguese empire: *Goa* and *Navegador*. The Portuguese empire is a particularly popular theme in Eurogames. Portugal's empire, although historically obtained through conquest and supported by slavery, thematically provides many opportunities for building a new economy and an environment in which limited resources make sense. *Goa* makes players into managers who must work as efficiently as possible to produce valuable goods where nothing would exist without their intervention. *Navegador* emphasizes "exploration" and the seizure of land, and demonstrates how this creates wealth in the homeland. Players who seek out games like *Goa* and *Navegador* (and *Macao* and *Vasco da Gama* and *Mombasa*) enjoy them because they grant a high degree of control over the development of the economy, reward efficiency, and require players to deeply understand the values of the resources they can access. However, as this article will show, the pleasures of these games are very closely tied to their colonial fantasies.

GOA: PROVINCIAL MANAGEMENT

Goa, along with games like *Puerto Rico* and *Macao*, presents an exotic foreign province as *terra nullius* and invites players to make the most of it. The focus is on production and efficiency; both profit and glory (as expressed in victory points) are goals for the player. Although *Goa* is very abstract, its rulebook and mechanisms do draw on some of the

history of Portuguese colonization of India. Its choices about what to abstract reflect colonial ideologies of productivity, putting players in a position to rationally and productively exploit available resources.

In *Goa*, the players are cast as Portuguese merchants after the military conquest of Goa. Although the rulebook's explanation of the theme emphasizes the Portuguese cooperation and competition with "strong Muslim princes" and "Indian leaders," neither a Muslim prince nor an Indian leader is anywhere to be found in the game. Rather, making use of natural resources is the domain of the Portuguese. The economy of the game is based on both actions and auctions; both of these are controlled by the players.

Players produce various types of spices and send them home to Portugal. To do this, players must acquire land, either by founding colonies in distant parts of India or, more often, in the auction that begins each round. Curiously, the land is identified for auction by a fellow Portuguese merchant, who is also the one who receives money from the sale. From a mechanical standpoint, this is a beautiful auction, because the auctioneers must choose desirable tiles, because deciding what to bid is difficult, and because it creates a fascinating closed economy in which every transaction affects the whole. Thematically, however, it is not totally clear why the players (who represent merchants) are authorized to auction land to each other, but it is notable that Portuguese ownership is assumed. Rather, everything proceeds as if this were indeed *terra nullius*. Indeed, when the land first appears it is (always) already a plantation; other potential uses for this land simply do not exist.



An auction in Goa. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

Plantations are also already loaded with spices when players first acquire them, although players must subsequently refill them by using their own strictly limited actions, the game's equivalent to work. Historically, however, sufficient labor supply was a difficult problem, solved by slavery and other forced labor.⁹ But this problematic history is erased in the world of the game, where the production of spices is purely the consequence of the players' – that is, the colonizers'—efforts, contingent on the careful budgeting of their actions and resources. The pleasure of *Goa* is in its difficulty; players feel that they are working very hard, and each of their choices is very important. Slave labor is erased while the labor of elite merchants is celebrated. This narrative is oddly consonant with the propaganda

9. Stephanie Hassell. "Inquisition Records from Goa as Sources for the Study of Slavery in the Eastern Domains of the Portuguese Empire." *History in Africa* 42 (2015): pp. 397–418.

of the Portuguese empire itself, which promoted narratives of the “peaceful and celebratory conquest” of “Golden Goa.”¹⁰

The game rewards productive colonialism with greater efficiency of actions. Players are also responsible for sending the spices they produce back to Portugal; this grants them victory points, but it also makes other actions more effective. As the game continues, players can thus plan more impressive and rewarding actions. Although *Goa* never becomes easy, players who are doing well in the game can experience a narrative arc of ever-increasing productivity and success.

Is Goa, then, portrayed as *terra nullius*? The procedures of the game certainly suggest not only that its resources are there to be claimed, but that it is only colonizers who can productively use the land. As Historian Andrew Fitzmaurice shows, the concept of *terra nullius* hinges on productive use of resources. According to one of the principles established at a conference of imperial powers in 1884-5, “sovereignty could not be claimed by flag raising or other ceremonies but only through the effective exploitation of the land.”¹¹ Such effective exploitation is precisely the subject matter of *Goa*. The land is only good for producing spices, which in turn serve only for exportation to Portugal. Presumably, nothing interesting could happen here without the intervention of Portuguese merchants.

10. José Celso de Castro Alves. “Rupture and Continuity in Colonial Discourses: The Racialized Representation of Portuguese Goa in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.” *Portuguese Studies* 16 (2000): pp. 148-161.

11. Andrew Fitzmaurice. “The Genealogy of Terra Nullius.” *Australian Historical Studies* 38.129 (2007), p. 10.



Plantations in Goa. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

By emphasizing the management aspects of colonialism, *Goa* promotes the Orientalist idea that native populations are not capable of fully exploiting the resources to which they may have access, and that it is up to European settlers to help these countries reach their full potential, this presumably consisting in the maximum economic benefit to Europe.¹² It is the players (as European settlers) who can and must exploit resources by appropriating land and spice. By putting players in the position of colonizers, whose work is seen to consist of careful and difficult management, the mechanics of games like *Goa* portray themes of colonialism sympathetically.

12. As Edward Said has established, Orientalism is a perspective that constructs "the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (pp. 206-207), while imagining Europeans as "(in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion" (p. 49). Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

NAVEGADOR: EXPLORING THE WORLD

Where *Goa* is about managing a province, *Navegador* is about expanding the empire and profiting from it in the homeland. In *Navegador*, players are elites in the Portuguese empire and can send out ships to colonize other lands. This colonial perspective is shared by many other games, such as *Age of Empires III* and *Vasco da Gama*. However, *Navegador* is much less abstract than many games in its genre; it gestures toward history in many small particulars, touching on the development of technology, the economy that resulted from colonialism, and the role of the church. But it, too, skirts the most troubling aspects of the colonial economy. The economy and the point system of the game reward players for their role in establishing Portuguese political and economic dominance across the globe, but negative effects of colonialism are obscured.

In *Navegador*, players explore a world full of resources but devoid of inhabitants. The game begins with most regions of the world “unexplored,” and not available until at least one player has entered them. Players who do this are rewarded with valuable navigation tokens and money, but also must lose one of their ships. The rules explain that the ship is “lost in the unknown waters,” implying that the greatest dangers to these explorers are natural ones. Although illustrations on the board depict the people of these regions in traditional dress, the only mechanism in the game that indicates their presence is that players must lose an additional ship when they sail to Nagasaki, presumably in reference to Japan’s national seclusion policies during the seventeenth century.¹³

13. Lane Eams. “Tokugawa Period.” *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. Volume 5. Edited by Karen Christensen and David Levinson. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2002, pp. 505–508.



Colonies in *Navegador*. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

The exploration mechanic in the game is in service of colonialism because it exposes the cost of the colonies, allowing any player to enter a region and buy a colony. As in *Goa*, colonization meets no resistance and is not difficult; in fact, it is the easiest way to establish a strong economy at the beginning of the game. The colonies are of three types: sugar, gold, and spice. It is important to note, however, that the history of sugar and gold is bound up inextricably with the history of slavery. In fact, the Atlantic slave trade arose largely in order to support sugar plantations, and the gold coming back from Africa was often accompanied by slaves.¹⁴ However, the historical role of slavery is not modeled in *Navegador*, although many other aspects of the relevant economics are at least hinted at. For instance, Portugal

14. Claudius Fergus. "Why an Atlantic Slave Trade?" *The Journal of Caribbean History* 42.1 (2008): pp. 1-21.

was not a destination for spices so much as a hub through which they were distributed into the global economy.¹⁵ While this certainly is not simulated in detail, the market that drives the economy of the game strongly suggests the resale of goods imported into Portugal. Even the religious politics of colonialism are incorporated into the game's mechanics, with a slightly cynical tone. This can be seen in the game's mechanic where churches make workers cheaper. These workers are located in the "Lisboa" area of the board and facilitate many other aspects of the game. This mechanism can be read to imply that religious enthusiasm encourages workers to work more cheaply,¹⁶ which fits historically because the Church embraced both colonialism and slavery, even offering forgiveness of sins in exchange for participating.¹⁷

Thus, although *Navegador* is a streamlined Eurogame and does not attempt to offer a detailed simulation of the establishment of the Portuguese empire, it is engaged with the history it portrays, portraying some historical elements while ignoring others. Given these many small touches, the omission of slavery and indigenous resistance is notable. *Navegador* offers what Robinson criticized in the game *Vasco da Gama*: a "clean and unproblematic interpretation of the Portuguese empire."¹⁸ It is interested in the history of colonialism exclusively from the colonizers' point of view. It invokes historical figures like Francis Xavier, Alfonso de Albuquerque, and Vasco da Gama, but does not engage with anything that happened in the colonies aside from the production of wealth. Rather, the establishment of empire is shown to be an orderly, predictable, and above all, profitable enterprise. Players establish an empire based

15. Stefan Haliowski Smith. "Profits Sprout Like Tropical Plants": A Fresh Look at What Went Wrong with the Eurasian Spice Trade, c. 1500-1800." *Journal of Global History* 3 (2008): pp. 389-418.

16. I read this as a critical stance on the religious ideology of the game's setting, although it could also be read as a critique of the merchants' propensity for taking advantage of the religious.

17. Fergus, p. 15.

18. Robinson 2016

solely on their decisions about what kinds of goods will be the most valuable, and consequently enjoy the profit and the ability to do more and more. The production process itself (along with its messy political implications) are not allowed to intrude upon the joys of establishing an economy. This makes the game work smoothly, but it also makes colonialism appear inevitable even as players participate in it.



The market in Navegador. Photo by Doug Faust and used with permission of the author.

GAMES AS TEXTS: CAN WE DO BETTER?

As this article has explored, the themes of games are important, and an appreciation of elegant mechanics should not obscure the more problematic aspects of the stories that games tell. As games scholar Ian Bogost argues, games “are an expressive medium. They represent

how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them.”¹⁹ Games like *Goa* and *Navegador* represent systems of colonialism—both mechanically and thematically—and when they and others in their genre invite players to profit unproblematically from the systems of colonialism, they celebrate that history.

Abstraction does not have to support colonialism. Games scholar Devin Wilson shows that, in some cases, abstraction allows players room to imagine a less oppressive in-game world.²⁰ Game reviewer and scholar Scott Nicholson makes a similar point about *Agricola* (2007), in which the nondescript worker tokens allow players to imagine their family members however they would like, rather than implementing compulsory heterosexuality.²¹ Context is key, however. To imagine an animal sanctuary in fifteenth century France or a same-gender couple on a farm in seventeenth century Germany is not the same as to imagine that Africa and Asia are empty and available for Portuguese exploitation. Abstraction can function as a creative space or a harmful erasure.

Game designers make decisions about what to abstract; they are not compelled to use abstraction to celebrate colonial ideologies. Loring-Albright’s modification of *Settlers of Catan* represents the existence of indigenous people without further complicating the game.²² Other games, such as *Endeavor* (2009) and *New Amsterdam* (2012) have colonial themes, but acknowledge their effects on indigenous and enslaved people. *Lewis & Clark* (2013), while certainly not free of problematic ideologies, portrays Native

19. Ian Bogost. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2007, p. vii. Bogost has videogames specifically in mind, but board games also invite players to work with systems—and the systems in board games are often much more explicit.

20. Devin Wilson. “The Eurogame as Heterotopia.” *Analog Game Studies* 2.7 (2015). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-eurogame-as-heterotopia/>.

21. Scott Nicholson. “Agricola.” *Board Games with Scott*. August 19, 2008. <http://www.boardgameswithscott.com/?p=87>.

22. Loring-Albright 2017

Americans as central to the expedition, and even includes specific individuals.

By erasing the colonized from our representations of colonialism, games perpetuate a narrative that prioritizes the wealth of the powerful and the pleasures of building an empire that creates that wealth, while ignoring the violence through which it is acquired. It is only possible to consider these games as nonviolent because their violence is hidden, and its victims erased, in pursuit of an empty *terra nullius*. As it stands, the economic themes of efficiency and productivity often go hand-in-hand with militaristic realities of slavery, violence, and oppression, and are implemented in a carelessly laudatory way.

No Game's Land

The Space Between Competition and Collaboration

DAVID PHELPS, TOM FENNEWALD, EMILY SHEEPY,
AND ELLEN JAMESON

Think over the various analog games that you have played during the course of your life. Once you have called to mind a range of games, ask yourself: what was the closest moment I ever came to experiencing the choice of a *genuine sacrifice* within a game itself?¹

In-game sacrifice here does not mean sacrificing engagement with the game itself— “Should I play this game or do something different with my time?”—nor being prompted to sacrifice something based on considerations outside of the game— “Should I play below my skill level to allow my friends or loved ones to have a positive experience playing the game?” Rather, it means that the game itself positioned the player, through its mechanics and/or narrative, to make a genuine sacrifice of oneself that would be brutally consequential for one's gameplay.

[In most games], you are never torn between helping others and helping yourself.

1. “Genuine sacrifice” is defined as making a decision between the greater of two good outcomes, requiring the sacrifice of one for the other.

Outside of role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and larp where the narrative itself is to some extent player-generated, we struggled to identify card and board games that position players to make such a sacrifice.² Indeed, what comes to mind are examples of games in which we are busy racing towards a goal or brawling against our opponents, or engaging in social activity. Rarely, if ever, are we faced with an in-game dilemma of two competing goods, one of which we must sacrifice (at a costly loss) to the other.

Yet such decisions dominate our own lives. In caring for our friends, we know that sacrifices of one good for another are powerful and momentous experiences that color how we feel, shape how we act, and transform who we become. Further, we see genuine sacrifices occurring in MMORPGs and larps where players have to make difficult choices about who to send into battle, how to distribute the rewards of battles amongst multiple players, and if the storyline calls for it, what friendships or allies to put on the line. So why are there no board games that tap into this fundamental aspect of human life?

In the following essay, we detail the creation and empirical research behind an original board game that positions players to make genuine sacrifices from start to finish. But, first, we will re-tell an old story that illustrates the journey we took, including the many instructive wrong turns, that led to the creation of what we now call *Troubled Lands* (2015), and its kid-friendly version, *Difference* (2015).

A TROUBLED CHOICE

A long time ago, there lived an empress who faced an important decision: who will take the helm of her army after the unexpected passing of a general most wise and beloved. Fortunately, she had six promising candidates (the

2. Certain games like Disney's *Kingdom Death: Monster* (2015) evince a trend in this direction.

lieutenants of each division), but unfortunately she needed to act before word spread across the land about her vulnerable and leaderless army.

Yet, the empress could not decide. Which of these six lieutenants would fight as bravely and strongly as their predecessor? And outside of an actual battlefield how could she know? With the court advisors' help, she devised a game of war: a simulated battle in the style of a free-for-all brawl. Each candidate showed strength and bravery, fighting well to the very end.

Impressed by her candidates, but unable to decide amongst them, the empress devised a new simulation. If all the lieutenants could compete well, could they also collaborate well—gain each other's trust, communicate orders clearly, and work as a team? To test this, the empress pitted the six lieutenants against a legion of their own army. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the lieutenants quickly generated strategies to combine their strength, cover each other's backs, and endure in the battle. They each lasted longer together than if they had fought alone.

Once again, the empress could not decide. Each candidate competed and collaborated well. What additional skills could she test? Her thoughts were interrupted by news from a messenger—an army from afar was journeying to pay the empress's kingdom an unwelcome visit. Immediately, her court advisors pressed her to pick one of the six lieutenants, any of them, even at random lest the army remain leaderless indefinitely. The empress argued in turn that if she picked one at random, not only would she overlook the most fit candidate to lead her army, but the other lieutenants would grow resentful against her and against the newly appointed general, causing division amongst her army. "Retire the other lieutenants into comfortable positions outside of the army," the court advisors retorted. Then we repeat this dilemma *ad infinitum*, the empress exclaimed. At that moment, she suddenly realized that the ability to negotiate through messy real-life dilemmas without clear-cut solutions and making choices in the face of the

contingencies, ambiguities, and vicissitudes of life was vital to their success. And so, the empress devised a new test.

Let us pause at this point in our story to review the limits of competitive and collaborative games for engaging players in experiences of genuine sacrifice. Competitive games position players to work against one another to achieve some goal, whereas collaborative games position players to work together to achieve some goal. Neither of these situations—pure fighting or pure teamwork where the whole team wins or loses—demand of players to make genuine sacrifices along the way. Games, however, that simulate messy real-world dilemmas where players have to work across difference, confront conflict, and face chance may just lead to negotiations and sacrifices. Questions of whether these sacrifices are genuine or not, and if they can be prompted by simply combining competitive and collaborative play into a single game, are explored in the next act of our story.

The empress's new test would pit the candidates against each other—two groups of three—to see which of the candidates would be willing to make a genuine sacrifice as they served their group. The empress's court advisors, however, cautioned against using a simulation to test genuine sacrifice. After all, they argued, how can a sacrifice be genuine if the candidates know it is the very skill being tested? And further, how can a sacrifice be genuine if there is no felt loss for making the sacrifice. The empress attempted to solve these problems by not telling the candidates that she was testing their negotiation and sacrifice skills, and by adding the consequence that the losing team will no longer be eligible to be the next general. The court advisors were relieved to hear the empress finally devise a way to narrow the candidate pool, but they remained doubtful that any sacrifices that occurred in the game would be genuine ones.

The empress divided the lieutenants into two teams of three and pitted

the teams against one another announcing that this was a test of competition and collaboration, and only the winning team would continue forward as candidates to win the prized role of the general. The winning team worked well together—in key moments, its members willingly sacrificed themselves to get the edge on their opponents and help the team win overall.

Yet, the empress was unimpressed by these acts of self-sacrifice. By helping their team to win, and thus helping themselves to advance to the next round of the competition, what did the players actually put on the line? What loss was suffered? The empress still desired to see how each lieutenant would act in a situation where their sacrifice would cost them something that mattered deeply to them—such as their own life. But without the luxury to observe their actions in a real battle she was perplexed at how to test for this. Yet, unwilling to randomly select one, she decided to look for their skills in another place—their psychology.

The empress placed the remaining three into a series of free-for-all battles. She was curious to see how any one of the fighters would go about choosing which of the other two to target. To her surprise she found that two of the three tended to gang up on the third (not every time, but subtly, perceptibly she noticed a trend). Was there something about the third individual that she had missed—was he weaker than the other two and hence an easy target? Or, perhaps stronger than the other two so that they needed to team up in order to ensure that he would be beaten? And how had she missed this?

Or were the two just being friendly towards one another for reasons outside of the test? Familial associations? Old friends? Mutual admiration? Some social pressure? To find out, the empress devised a variant to the simulation: she introduced inequality. Every battle, one of the three would be positioned as being able to fight by only hopping on one leg. They would each take turns playing the position of a wounded fighter. (It is in this way

that she also learned that her remaining candidates were patient, steadfast, and, indeed, intent on being promoted).

Would this variant effect who was targeted? Would the two continue to target the third regardless of whether he was strong or wounded that round? Again, to her surprise, the two who had previously worked together not only ganged up on the third they appeared to sacrifice themselves to help one another. This signaled to the empress that the two held some bond outside of the test itself—that their sacrifices were a matter of friendliness or polity, not undergone for genuine reasons tied to the battle itself. After these psychology studies, the empress was no closer to finding her general. Worse, her advisors were fettered. They could see smoke in the distance signaling that the hostile army was approaching. With no leader for their own army, the court advisors committed to their final resort—empty reassurance.

“Surely,” they consoled the empress who appeared slumped in her throne, “your army will outlast any army that comes our way because all the other empresses in your position in all the other kingdoms are not nearly as thoughtful, judicious or steadfast as you. Each other empress—.” “What did you say” the empress interrupted, and then up on her feet, “I know how to test for genuine sacrifice.”

If the first part of the story taught us that pure competition and pure collaboration are not arenas that breed genuine sacrifices, then the second part has taught us that combining the two—fighting and teamwork—produces pseudo-sacrifices: sacrifices that carry no experiential weight of loss, or are carried on for reasons outside of the game itself.

If the common conventions of analog games—competitive, collaborative, or semi-collaborative (such as *Shadows over Camelot* (2005) and other variants with traitors and hidden goals, such that all can lose but only some players can win)—do not elicit the kinds

of genuine sacrifices we are interested in, then where can we turn? In creating *Troubled Lands*, the designers turned to the situations themselves that fostered the content of interest: messy real-life political negotiations. They then studied the components of these situations and translated the following ones into game mechanics:

Multiple, competing yet reasonable stakeholder interests,

Structural inequities that differentially advantage and disadvantage stakeholders,

Uncertainty of what level of trust to grant each stakeholder,

Personal morals about how far one is willing to go or not go in a negotiation

Dilemmas between competing values that are both deemed good.

Each of these elements—from a plurality of stakeholder interests, to pre-existing inequities, to fluctuations of trust, to the pull of personal morals, to dilemmas of competing values—seem to provide a situation that is ripe for rich negotiation and genuine sacrifice. Indeed, we can imagine how a number of conventional analog games could be transformed if they integrated any or all of these mechanics, from *Diplomacy* (1959) to *Settlers of Catan* (1995) to *Pandemic* (2008).

Yet, even with these mechanics in place, the designers of *Troubled Lands* found that as long as the goal of the game positioned players to act purely competitively (one winner) or collaboratively (all players win or lose together) the affective experience of a genuine sacrifice still failed to occur.³ Research documenting players' gameplay⁴ revealed that even when prompted to negotiate in situations of conflicting interests, structural inequities, uncertain relationships, personal morals, and competing values, players' negotiations sounded

3. Thomas J. Fennewald and Brent Kievit-Kylar. "Integrating Climate Change Mechanics into a Common Pool Resource Game." *Simulation & Gaming*, (December 2012): 1-25; Tom Fennewald and Brent Kievit-Kylar. "Beyond Collaboration and Competition: Independent Player Goals in Serious Games" *Games and Learning Society*. (2012).

4. Tom Fennewald. "Analyzing Game Discourse Using Moral Foundations Theory." (2015) Paper given at the Digital Gaming Research Association (DiGRA) in Lüneburg, Germany.

much more like friendly competition and playful banter (in the competitive variant), or more like math discussions about how to evenly distribute points (in the collaborative variant). The designers eventually found a solution that went beyond both competitive and collaborative goals. This solution, which makes up the third variant they tested, was fraught with rich negotiations and genuine sacrifice.

“We had everything we needed—competition, cooperation, inequity—but we lacked one thing: the empress in the same position as me,” explained the empress. The court advisors were puzzled and a bit worried. The time for decision had come—they could not wait even a half day longer—yet the empress was not making sense. Had all this testing and training made her a bit unwell? “Our final battle,” she announced, “will again be comprised of two groups of three. The remaining candidates in one group. The losing candidates in the other. Each group will consist of the strong player, the wounded player (hopping), and the severely wounded player (hopping and one-handed).” One court advisor broke out laughing—a terrified hopeless sound that he did not bother to conceal. The empress continued, “The strong, wounded, and severely wounded will battle until one remains. But, the one who remains is not necessarily the winner. A player wins if they simply outperform their same position in the other group. Performance is based on how quickly you eliminate other players as well as how long you live. There will be three rounds, so that each player has a turn to play each of the three positions. At the end of the three rounds we will declare who the next general is.”

Yet, the empress knew that the declared general would not necessarily be the one who outperformed those in his same position in the other group the most often. The declared winner would be the one who in managing this dynamic came to appreciate and make genuine sacrifices. She was delighted to see that the genuine dilemmas came into play immediately.

The weakest player in both groups made a bid to team up with the second-most weakest player reasoning that the two would survive longer against the strong player. The strong player simultaneously proposed for either of the weaklings to join him by his side, "whoever wants to live longer join me" in an attempt to prevent the two from teaming up. This put the second-most weakest player in quite the dilemma—team up with the weakest or the strongest? Then the weakest player placed the strongest player in a dilemma by pleading, "please let me live a while before you defeat me so that I may at least outlive the weakest player on the other team. I cannot outperform him without your help." The strongest player replied, "But helping you could cause me to lose to my counterpart, if my counterpart defeats the other two more quickly than I do." "We've been negotiating long enough that you might have already lost. Sacrifice yourself and let me defeat you. That will surely make me outperform my wounded counterpart." "Would you make the same sacrifice to me when you play the role of the strongest position?" And now the most wounded person was in a dilemma over whether to make future promises and more crucially, whether or not to keep these promises.

Each round the candidates placed each other into new dilemmas. Eventually, one of the candidates made the genuine sacrifice that the empress was testing for—playing the role of the strong he let the two weaker players live long enough to outperform the weaker players on the other team. He knew this was not good for himself, but he could not bring himself to let the rest of his army down, when he could help everyone else win. Afterwards, appearing before the court officials, he could not explain precisely why he had done it. It certainly was not for reasons outside of the game (the value of a bond), nor because he thought it would help him win the game (that the other players would reciprocate a sacrifice in future rounds). He simply saw a way to help his army succeed while he happened to be in a privileged

position (the strongest of the three) to make that decision. And so, a new general was found.

The empress succeeded in designing a test for genuine sacrifice by designing a game that prompted messy negotiation while at the same time positioning players to compete against counterparts participating in mirror battles. This is the design move that *Troubled Lands* ultimately made. This move works well because it incorporates a key ingredient to real-world messy negotiation situations: non-zero-sum win conditions in which all, some, or none of a given group of negotiators may win. We call this goal type “independent” because players succeed or fail independently of whether individuals in their group succeed or fail. Let us first take the time to look at *Troubled Lands* and its game play, and then how independent goals are incorporated.⁵

Designed by Tom Fennewald and Brent Kievit-Kylar to model real-world messy negotiation situations, *Troubled Lands* is played with multiple groups of three players. Within each group of three, players adopt three distinct roles: a rancher, a farmer, and a lumberjack. Each group of three sits at a separate table and no interaction occurs between tables. Instead of playing against – or with – the others in their group, players engage in a tournament in which each player aims to be in the top 50% of players for their given role from amongst all of the tables. Thus at any given table, all, some, one, or none of the players might win.

For readers familiar with the card games *Bridge* or *Barbu* (also *Barbuda*), this scoring mechanism may sound familiar in the form of Bridge tournaments and Duplicate Barbu. In these games, players sitting at different tables are given duplicate hands (e.g., every player sitting on the North side of the table has the same starting hand),

5. For an overview of *Troubled Lands*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIchwB6xJJl>

and scoring is based on how well you outperform all the players at different tables who have duplicate hands to yours. Yet these games do not delve deeply into the human experience of making a genuine sacrifice, because the players at your table are locked into a zero-sum competition. Indeed, aside from your partner, you are never readily compelled to help other players; you are never torn between helping others and helping yourself.

The key to *Troubled Lands* is that the players at your table are not your opponents. To the contrary, you all share common resources and you all have good reason to cooperate with one another, but you also have good reason to look out for your best interest—and hence players are often caught needing to decide if, how, and when to cooperate (or not) with the others at their table. Emotionally, this can be difficult as players are making a genuine choice between helping others in need and increasing their own chances of success. This decision-making process about helping self or group is made even more interesting and difficult because one of the players, the lumberjack, is completely dependent upon harvesting forests for points, yet in the game a certain number of forests must be kept, lest the entire group suffer in the wake of environmental damage. With limited space to plant the desired resources such as forests, pastures, and fields and extreme inequity between players, some roles are better able to plant resources and score points than others. Indeed, within this inequity and complexity even defining what a fair move is can be difficult within the negotiations of players.

Having to share a common space and yet winning or losing independently of others results in players making difficult choices about when, how, and why to cooperate or not. Through their choices, players can often appear to engage in collaborative play, in competitive play, and oftentimes both within the same game. The

range of affect is also powerful: sometimes one group will feel as though they have achieved world peace through compromise and another will lament the inevitable breakdown of any negotiation. The game can also be emotionally taxing: conversation during rounds is often long, as players debate what to do next, who has responsibility to do what, and who should be allowed to score points next. In essence, the experience turns out to be quite political. Occasionally, players will only act with aggression, but this is not the norm. On the other extreme, some players will act so collaboratively that they allow other players to win as they sacrifice their own chance to be the best farmer, or rancher, or lumberjack across all the tables. However, usually players opt for some middle ground between complete competition and collaboration. The in-game negotiation of this middle ground, this no game's land, makes *Troubled Lands* a game rich with affective experience for players.

Players are not often used to compromising between competition and collaboration and/or negotiating across their own and across other players' moral motivations as they make these difficult choices for themselves. All of this, again, leads to vivid affective experiences for players. In our research on the independent condition, in which a discourse analysis of player conversation was conducted, a diverse range of moral motivations were thematized by players. Using Jonathan Haidt's work⁶ to identify moral motivations of the players, we found the following moral claims at play in players negotiations: claims of *caring*, where one player assists another player because they are sympathetic to them losing; *fairness*, where players try to establish an even exchange, defined by the players both in terms of equal scoring potential and equal opportunity to act; *liberty*, where players justify actions of self-interest on the grounds that they are not directly

6. Jonathan Haidt. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

harming other players; and *sanctity*, where players call for action to preserve the state of the commons (the forest) for emotional and/or aesthetic reasons.

In particular, we witnessed some fascinating statements. For example, a lumberjack said, “I’ll lose so that you guys can win” – which he said he did because he felt strong empathy for the other players, an example of care. We also saw another lumberjack player with opposite, self-interested motivations: “So If I keep taking trees, you can watch it fall,” to which other players replied (while laughing) “Yeah! Please, please don’t take trees!” Other players discussed affinity to the forests in the game that is akin to Haidt’s description of sanctity: “... it was like this whole game we were trying to keep things green and then these last two rounds we were, I felt like we were doing something really bad because we don’t want to hurt the earth.”

We also found that players discussed strong emotive inner struggles regarding how to balance their multiple competing values—such as protecting the beauty of the game space and helping others to score points. Players likened these personal dilemmas in the game to real life dilemmas in which they must choose between multiple competing goals.

Now that we have begun exploring No Game’s Land, we are drawn to the many attributes of games that support a range of affective experiences beyond those offered to us by competitive and collaborative games. These attributes include both the simulation of messy negotiations (which we modeled through competing interests, inequitable abilities, and uncertain relationships) and the win condition that is tied to non-zero sum logic. Our exploration continues in David Phelps’ version of *Troubled Lands* for kids, called *Difference*—an easy-to-learn, quick-to-play, negotiation game that

positions students as young as 10-years old to have to confront genuine dilemmas as they negotiate across difference. We have found that because these games position students to negotiate across moral claims and to engage in genuine sacrifices that they provide an active and engaging entry point into philosophical classroom discussions on inequity and social justice issues. In other words, No Game's Land is a rich and affective domain of play and we encourage fellow game designers to journey through this area in their own unique designs.

The Allure of Struggle and Failure in Cooperative Board Games

DOUG MAYNARD AND JOANNA HERRON

In his monograph *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul argues that while failing in gameplay is necessary to produce a fulfilling experience, “it is always potentially painful or at least unpleasant.”¹ According to Juul, because modern video games are designed to be winnable, failure highlights the insufficient ability in the player— it produces discomfort but also motivation to close the challenge-skill gap. Becoming better at the game through repeated play then results in the pleasure of escaping defeat. As Bonnie Ruberg notes,² Juul and others in game studies assume that fun is what players are after, and though losing isn’t fun, it is at least helpful in leading to the fun of eventual victory. This “paradox of failure” as Juul calls it appears to extend well beyond the sphere of gaming. For example, entrepreneurs and designers are encouraged to “fail faster” in order

1. Jesper Juul. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013, p. 9.

2. Bonnie Ruberg, “No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt.” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2.2 (2015).

to reap the lessons learned that will propel one to ultimate success.³ Buried within this advice is a pair of assumptions – first, that achievement is the point of it all, and second, that failure’s only value lies in what it can teach us about how to win. Juul argued that while he analyzed emotions in single-player and competitive multiplayer digital games, his analysis should apply to other play contexts. But we challenge the universality of this apparent paradox, both within and beyond the world of games. For example, writing about America’s views on failure, journalist Eric Weiner writes “We love a good failure story as long as it ends in success... In these stories, failure serves merely to sweeten the taste of success.”⁴ But other cultures do not necessarily feel similarly – according to Weiner, creativity flourishes in Iceland because of the admiration its people have for artistic expression, regardless of whether the product is deemed successful or not. It’s the attempt, the trying that matters. Just as failure cannot be understood through the lens of a single culture, we argue that an account of failure in gameplay is incomplete without considering how it feels to lose in diverse contexts. Although it is important to consider the individual experience of failure as Juul has, we aim to reconsider what might be uncovered by considering collaborative gaming experiences—we address this gap by uncovering the social and emotional space that failing *together* creates.

Cooperative board games have emerged in the last decade as a particularly popular and successful segment of the hobby tabletop game industry, especially since the release of Matt Leacock’s *Pandemic* (2007), in which players attempt to save humanity from four rampant viruses.⁵ In cooperative board games, players work together against

3. For example, Ryan Babineaux and John Krumboltz. *Fail Fast, Fail Often: How Losing Can Help You Win*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2013.

4. Eric Weiner. *The Geography of Happiness: One Grump’s Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. New York: Twelve, 2008, p. 162.

5. Matt Leacock. “Tabletop Titles Featuring Cooperative Play Up 400% Since 2009” <http://www.leacock.com/blog/2016/1/29/growth-of-cooperative-games>

the game itself, typically discussing strategy and tactics with each other but playing their own moves, and then enacting the moves of the game's "AI". Failure is common in cooperative games because there is often only one victory condition, while multiple conditions will end the game in a loss. In this article, we describe the insights from a systematic exploration of how it feels to lose together, face-to-face, against a board game. We question Juul's depiction of failure as an unpleasant means to an end, and focus on its inherent value as a rewarding emotional and social journey. When experienced together, both the process of losing and loss as a final result carry with them opportunities for camaraderie, humor, memory-making, and storytelling. In addition, the collaborative nature of the activity reduces the sting of failure through a shifting of focus from the self to the group. These findings reject failure as inherently or wholly unpleasant, and align with Ruberg's point that, from the perspective of queer studies, winning is not even the goal for all players in the first place. An examination of cooperative gameplay provides a more nuanced view of how failure can feel—disappointing and frustrating, perhaps, but also potentially exciting, joyful, or simply unimportant. This lesson from cooperative play—that working together toward a goal is meaningful and impactful in itself—suggests that perhaps we can benefit from a more collaborative approach in our schools, institutions, and communities.

CRASHING AND BURNING... TOGETHER

To better explore this question, we played four different cooperative board games several times.⁶ In total, we played four games a

6. Specifically, we chose a cooperative board or card game, played it, and separately wrote introspective reflections on the emotions we felt during and just after playing the game. We then shared our reflections with each other, which generated further observations. Finally, based on these observations, we decided what game experience was important to explore next (e.g., a game with different mechanics, or the same game but with additional players), which guided our next round of play and introspection. For details about this general methodology, see Gerhard Kleining and Harald

combined total of 12 times,⁷ with anywhere from one to five players (seven different players participated in at least one game session). Most commonly, the authors played together as a team of two. When possible, we played the games at the highest difficulty level. Eight of the twelve games ended in a losses, some worse than others. We played *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* (2011), *Hanabi* (2010), Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* board game (2000), and *Dead of Winter* (2014) each at least twice. These games were chosen for their differences in theme, mechanics, and/or scoring. In *Flash Point*, players take the role of firefighters trying to save victims from a burning home before it collapses; the game emulates some of the mechanics found in *Pandemic*, such as each player taking multiple actions, and then playing the AI's moves. *Hanabi* is a card game in which players can only see each other's cards and must attempt to steer teammates toward playing the appropriate card at the right time by use of the very limited communication that is allowed. It has a very thin theme of building fireworks, and a scoring system for judging final performance. *The Lord of the Rings* board game puts players in the role of hobbits in Tolkien's epic tale of Middle Earth, struggling toward Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring before they are overtaken by the Dark Lord Sauron and the evil power of the ring. Finally, *Dead of Winter* is a zombie-themed survival game which incorporates secret individual win conditions on top of a shared main objective, as well as the potential for one of the players to be a traitor (although in the two-person variant, the game is played in strictly cooperative mode with no traitor or individual objectives).

Witt. "Discovery as Basic Methodology of Qualitative and Quantitative Research." Forum: Qualitative Social Research 2.1 (2001). <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/977/2131>

7. While these plays represent our deliberate data collection sessions, we also draw upon our broader past experiences playing these and other cooperative board games.



One way to lose in Reiner Knizia's game "The Lord of the Rings" is to reach the final space on the Mount Doom Conflict Board. Image used with permission by Joanna Herron.

While playing, we experienced some emotional reactions that were consistent with Juul's observations about difficulty and failure. For example, we observed that our emotional investment and immersion were dampened when we were able to handle the challenges and win easily, because the 'crises' did not actually feel dangerous (as was the case with our first play of *Flash Point* on the regular difficulty level). A sense of having 'figured out' the game can diminish interest in playing again.⁸ For players in this situation, most cooperative board games, like many single-player video games, offer a ready solution for this problem – increase the difficulty level the next time you play.

8. Raph Koster. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (2nd ed.). Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2014.

In contrast, losses – especially when victory seemed within reach – tended to be motivating.⁹

As described earlier, Juul also describes the feedback that failure provides, which helps a player understand the game and the skills and techniques required to succeed:

[block quote] Whereas success can make us complacent that we have understood the system we are manipulating, failure gives the opportunity to consider why we failed... Failure then has the very concrete positive effect of making us see new details and depth in the game that we are playing. – Juul, p. 59[block quote]

Similarly, post-game analysis is a common, natural addendum to the cooperative board gaming session, particularly after a loss. Just as in competitive play, such as with a chess player pondering the moves made in a recent match, players can try to make sense of what went wrong, and when, and what strategies would lead to better performance the next time.

However, we also identified several features of cooperative board game play which serve to enhance the emotional experience of struggle and failure in a way that feels distinctly less painful than the experience of failure in video game play that Juul describes. And, in fact, players of cooperative games seem to want to fail, at least most of the time. A recent informal survey of nearly 300 hobby gamers suggest that roughly 80% of respondents prefer to lose more often than they win, and the most common preference was to lose 70-79% of the time.⁽¹⁰⁾ One possible reason for this willingness to lose, we believe, is that when people play, they have multiple goals (though some may be implicit), and victory is at best just one of those goals. Consider a group who are about to play a round of

9. For empirical work on near wins, see Monica Wadhwa and JeeHye Christine Kim. "Can a Near Win Kindle Motivation? The Impact of Nearly Winning on Motivation for Unrelated Rewards." *Psychological Science* 26.6 (2015).

Pandemic. Goals for the session among the players might include winning, but also socializing with friends, taking a break from work or other responsibilities, engaging in a mentally challenging task with no ‘real’ consequences, exploring a new game system (for those unfamiliar to the game), teaching the game (for experienced players), and creating memories to reminisce about later. In light of all of these reasons for playing, if the game ends in defeat¹⁰ the players are likely to experience both negative emotions such as disappointment or frustration, but also positive emotions such as social connectedness and vitality.

One of the hallmarks of cooperative board games is the dialogue players trade as they play. When we play by ourselves against others or against a computer opponent, we weigh the pros and cons of potential strategies we might employ and the moves we might make, as well as engage in an occasional accounting of how well or poorly the game is going. These thoughts represent a sort of internal dialogue with ourselves.¹¹ The same kind of conversation takes place in cooperative board games, but in the form of an actual collaborative discussion with one’s fellow players. Joint decision-making can be both fruitful and eye-opening in and of itself. They prompt us to consider how different perspectives and ideas can yield even better ideas which no single individual would have come up with alone. In addition to the potential for improved play through coordinated strategy, this externalization and sharing can enhance how it feels to play (and often lose) the game.¹² Certainly, the revelry associated with a group victory is often exhilarating. But struggling together against a cooperative game provides enjoyment in the form of collective

10. As it does in this episode of Table-Top <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytK1zDPPDhw>

11. See, for example, Adrianus de Groot. *Thought and Choice and Chess*. The Hague: Mouton, 1978.

12. One widely recognized drawback in most cooperative games, however, is the so-called “alpha gamer problem,” whereby an experienced player takes control of the group and suggests (or dictates) the moves the other players should take. Shared experiences often feel more intense than the same events experienced alone. See Erica J. Boothby, Margaret S. Clark, and John A. Bargh. “Shared Experiences Are Amplified.” *Psychological Science* 25.12 (2014).

tension and uncertainty as problems mount and the margin for error evaporates. Because of the slower pace in tabletop games, this tension and drama often feels sustained and extended in time. While death or defeat due to a wrong move can occur swiftly in many video games, in a number of our plays, we often spotted our impending loss well before it arrived. Additionally, players can easily put actual gameplay on hold temporarily while commenting on recent in-game events, the current state of the game, and their perceived chances of surviving the next crisis. Of all our plays, the most powerful and pleasurable was a game of *Flash Point* that we knew for the last 20 minutes of play we would almost certainly lose. On the verge of game-ending defeat for multiple turns, a string of good luck (including three potential victims consumed in the spreading fire which turned out to be simply false alarms) allowed us to draw out and savor the palpable despair, tinged with faint hope. The situation also drove home to us that if we were to have any chance of winning, we needed to work together to make the best possible moves.¹³

The rich communication and joint decision-making common to most cooperative board games also allow the player and her actions to become part of the collective whole. Although initial tactical options are usually generated by the player whose turn it is, this decision is ultimately chosen in consultation with her fellow player(s). We regularly experienced collective ownership over our entire play so that our failures were shared and exempt from the self-evaluative process that typically comes with active performance. According to the pioneer of flow research, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, this loss of self-consciousness is one of the key features of deep enjoyment of an experience:

[block quote] Because enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable

13. We lost.

rules, and challenges well-matched to skills, there is little opportunity for the self to be threatened... When a person invests all her psychic energy into an interaction... she in effect becomes part of a system of action greater than what the individual self had been before. This system takes its form from the rules of the activity; its energy comes from the person's attention.¹⁴ [block quote]

We experienced a counterpoint to this feeling in our plays of the card game *Hanabi*. *Hanabi* relies on effective communication—properly signaling to teammates about the cards they should or should not play is at the core of the game. But because open communication is severely limited, there is much less room for the collaborative strategizing common to most cooperative board games. The focus of play thus resides more with the individual players, who are unable to contribute to or comment upon each other's planned moves. Like trick-taking card games such as bridge, or sports like doubles tennis, players are working toward a collective team goal, but doing so individually. For this reason, failure can produce the unpleasant taste associated with the awareness of personal shortcomings.

Again, while Juul describes failure as painful or unpleasant, he regards it as valuable and even necessary for the feedback and motivation necessary for ultimate triumph. But while both he and Koster have focused on the instrumental value of player failure for learning and improving one's future play, in our cooperative sessions, we often experienced failure as a pleasurable social opportunity for banter, joking, and storytelling. Spectacular failure is just that—a spectacle to view and savor, and it turns out that, like most humor, it is best experienced with others. Because of the slower pace mentioned above, and the chance to detect defeat as it approaches,

14. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990, p. 63.

there is ample opportunity for players to commiserate over their misfortune, to identify the comedy within the tragedy, and to satisfy their curiosity not about whether the team will fail, but *when* and *how* the demise will play out (one fellow player admitted after a game that, upon judging that we were going to lose, he began secretly rooting for a particularly dramatic disaster to revel in). Taken together with the lowered self-consciousness and the observable vagaries of randomness from dice rolls and card draws, these features of cooperative board games make it particularly easy to experience camaraderie and humor with one's companions. Indeed, the two solo plays that the first author engaged in – both losses – lacked the joviality and humor of our other failures.¹⁵

In addition to laughing off poor performance, players often construct a unique narrative to flesh out the actual in-game events. In a talk he gave at LinkedIn, *Pandemic* designer Matt Leacock explains his hesitance to design games with a built-in storyline; instead, he prefers to give the game a solid premise, and let the players tell the rest of the story with each game they play.¹⁶ Players are not weighed down by a dominant narrative and are free to add their own flavor and personality to the plot of the game. In other words, in addition to the strategic collaboration in trying to win the game, players may also engage in a second, creative collaborative endeavor: interactive storytelling. As evident in the TableTop episode (shown below) the players embellished the story of the unfolding events through their roles (e.g., medic, researcher), current locations (e.g., Miami), and the names they gave to the four diseases (which are unnamed in the rules of the game). In our play of *Flash Point*, the three players ultimately lost when fire spread to the location of a

15. In one of these plays his daughter entered the room and started commenting on how poorly the game was going, at which point the experience switched from frustrating to funny, further illustrating this point.

16. Matt Leacock, "Engagement and Embodiment: Lessons From Board Game Design." April 11, 2014. <https://youtu.be/Et7nNmG6Qkc>

victim—a cat who happened to be sitting on the toilet in the one bathroom in the house. This fire then caused an explosion in an adjacent space containing a “hazmat” (hazardous materials), which destroyed the bathroom and its contents, and then led to the collapse of the entire building. Although play had ended and the game was lost, the game session’s highlight was this unlikely chain of events. The social nature of cooperative board games gives players the space to turn a devastating defeat into an amusing and memorable narrative.



A cat in peril in Flash Point: Fire Rescue. Image used with permission by Joanna Herron.

INTRA- AND EXTRA-GAME CONSIDERATIONS

While the features described above set the stage for pleasurable struggle in cooperative play, the in-game, social, and physical

environments strongly impact the emotional experience of the players beyond what happens in the game world. In this section, we show how emotional experiences are related to the game mechanics of the particular game being played, and the dynamics of those doing the playing.

Each game we examined contains a unique combination of mechanics and features that have the potential to impact the emotions we feel when we lose. For example, we found that scoring player performance may or may not detract from the enjoyment of tension as the game progresses. In *Hanabi*, once basic communication patterns are established, it is fairly easy to succeed, and the score at the end helps to distinguish the degree to which players have succeeded. As a result, an experienced group can play to beat a previous score, but the perceived stakes of play feel relatively low. On the other hand, in *The Lord of the Rings* board game, success is relatively rare, and the scoring track simply represents how close the losing group came to succeeding, so victory remains elusive as the journey is fraught with peril.

As another example, consider semi-cooperative games, in which one player may be selected through a secret and random process to play as a traitor, working from the shadows against the group's goals (such as *Dead of Winter*) while attempting to prevent others from discovering the betrayal. The traitor mechanic affects the social dynamics of these games by sowing suspicion and mistrust in the player group. The "semi" in semi-cooperative provides added dramatic tension, but it may also prevent failing traitor-players from being able to engage in the open strategizing, joking, or storytelling that enriches the experience of failure.¹⁷

17. As we only had a single play session with this semi-cooperative element, we encourage additional exploration of the emotions specifically associated with betrayal and deception in tabletop games, including the increasingly popular social deduction board games such as *The Resistance* (2009).

It is also worth considering whether the game provides a repeatable, self-contained experience, or a series of linked missions to be played in progression. Many video games are designed to be played through to completion, and failure results in a reset to the beginning of a section or the last save point. This lack of progress in an experience with this progressing, serial element almost certainly exacerbates the frustration associated with failure. Most card and board games are more akin to sports in that they are not completable in this sense—the conclusion of a single play session has no bearing on the next game’s state, which is simply reset back to a starting position. However, some recent cooperative board games, such as the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (2013) and *Pandemic Legacy* (2015) emulate a campaign approach to gaming where progress is dependent upon, or at least impacted by, successful completion of the current scenario. Therefore, we hypothesize that in such games, the desire to move the game or narrative forward (and, in some cases, to continue the development of one’s character as in tabletop roleplaying games) may prevent failure from being as enjoyable or entertaining.

Finally, it is no secret that the broader player relationships and dynamics have an enormous impact upon how playing feels, and this is true of how failing feels as well. Tired or disinterested players, long playtime, or significant player downtime between turns (all of which happened when playing *Dead of Winter* on a weeknight with a full group of five players in a dimly-lit lounge) can drain interest and weaken any tension or immersion associated with failure or near failure. Conversely, deep familiarity and friendship with one’s fellow players likely allows for an enhanced social experience – for example, laughter is more contagious among friends than strangers.¹⁸

18. Moria J. Smoski and Jo-Anne Bachorowski. “Antiphonal Laughter Between Friends and Strangers.” *Cognition and Emotion* 17.2 (2003).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our analysis of a dozen plays of various cooperative board games suggests that, at least within this subgenre of the tabletop gaming space, defeat is neither necessarily nor completely unpleasant. Rather, it has the potential to produce at least as rewarding a social gaming experience as a victory. The shift in focus from personal performance to collaborative action has the potential to remove much of the pain of losing, and even when we fail in our epic struggle against mighty foes and long odds, the pacing and social nature of cooperative board games provides a space for us to engage in fulfilling acts of camaraderie, humor, curiosity, and creativity. More generally, this exploration illustrates that by examining play within the broader interpersonal and motivational context in which it takes place, we gain a greater appreciation of the complexity and nuance of the resulting affective experience.

In her analysis of “no-fun” from a queer studies perspective, Ruberg argues that presumably natural player goals (e.g., to win, to have fun) and reactions (e.g., failure-induced pain) are in fact socially constructed assumptions of the way one does or should interact with games. She reveals that on deeper examination, individuals are free to (and do) exercise their agency in creating or playing games in subversive ways, such as a designer purposively building in an interactive experience that will elicit unpleasant emotions in the player, or a player choosing to pursue a goal other than victory or completion of the game. Ruberg’s point is that such choices and experiences are uglier than the normative message of “play to win, enjoy the ride,” but they are more authentic in the existentialist sense.¹⁹ Our own findings suggest a more subtle, less conscious form

19. Moria J. Smoski and Jo-Anne Bachorowski. “Antiphonal Laughter Between Friends and Strangers.” *Cognition and Emotion* 17.2 (2003).

of rebellion – when working together toward a common goal, players may not only tolerate failure, but may be engaging in play for the purpose of something very different than the emotional spoils of victory. This runs counter to the messages we receive from professional sports (“The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat!”), political campaigns, standardized testing, and Wall Street, but investigations such as these underscore that social institutions need not repress failure or proscribe how we feel when we fail. In the context of education, for example, we can start from a more explorative, thoughtful, process-oriented approach. Learning in such a context, such as John Hunter’s world peace game,²⁰ is difficult and rife with ethical and interpersonal struggles, but real and impactful. Such is the power of releasing ourselves from the bonds of the binary outcome and instead embracing the messy, human journey.²¹

20. John Hunter. Teaching with the World Peace Game. TED talk. (2011). https://www.ted.com/talks/john_hunter_on_the_world_peace_game?language=en

21. “Preferred cooperative game win-loss ratio”. Board Game Geek. <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1545558/preferred-cooperative-game-win-loss-ratio>

Platform Studies, Computational Essentialism, and Magic: The Gathering

JAN ŠVELCH

Platform studies has gained momentum since Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost¹ published their monograph on the Atari VCS in 2009. Presently there are seven books in the MIT Press series covering various digital platforms from older systems such as the BBC Micro² to modern ones like Nintendo Wii³. The series also focuses on computational systems, including the software platform Flash⁴ and the visual peripheral S-C 4020.⁵ Nathan Altice has broadened the scope of the platform studies framework, by arguing that playing cards can be understood as a platform.⁶ Broadening the platform

1. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009.
2. Alison Gazzard. *Now the Chips Are Down: The BBC Micro*. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016.
3. Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal. *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform*. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012.
4. Anastasia Salter and John Murray. *Flash: Building the Interactive Web*. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014.
5. Zabet Patterson. *Peripheral Vision: Bell Labs, the S-C 4020, and the Origins of Computer Art*. Platform Studies. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015.
6. Nathan Altice. "The Playing Card Platform." In *Analog Game Studies: Volume I*. Edited by Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner and Emma Leigh Waldron. ETC Press, 2016, 34–53.

studies framework to include analog games reveals a blind spot in the analytical frame—platform studies prioritizes the technical aspects of platforms over their cultural and social dynamics. This essay argues that better consideration of the cultural and social dynamics of platforms could strengthen the platform studies framework.

*Magic: The Gathering*⁷ (1993) shares many of the defining aspects of platforms as they were put forward by Montfort and Boost.⁸ Analyzing *Magic* provides new insight into the concept of platform, including its defining layers and the interactions between them. By refocusing the debate from *game machines* to *games*, I contest the rigid computational essentialism that privileges hardware and software over the cultural practices of player communities.

7. Richard Garfield. *Magic: The Gathering*. Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 1993. <http://magic.wizards.com/>

8. Magic has a long history, consists of many playable formats, and features a complex economy.



A rare set of Atari playing cards. Image by Kimili @Flickr CC BY-NC.

THE COMPUTATIONAL ESSENTIALISM OF PLATFORM STUDIES

The focus on computational systems in game studies creates an artificial disparity between digital and analog games. Not all analyses of platforms privilege the computational. For instance, Tarleton Gillespie argues that platforms are often the product of marketing strategies: “Platforms are platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity

to communicate, interact or sell.”⁹ Analog games are a product of a similar set of affordances, as they facilitate communication, interaction, and commerce. Although Nathan Altice brings analog games into the conversation around platform studies, he fits them into the established computational framework. He explicitly compares the mechanic of tapping to an upgrade of processor power: “To borrow a computational term, playing cards had a processor upgrade from one bit—face up or face down—to two, and that additional bit widened the spectrum of design possibilities.”¹⁰ Where Gillespie shows how platforms are explicitly related to social processes, Altice borrows the language of Montfort and Bogost to rethink analog games.

Culture sits at the margins of the platform studies discourse. While Montfort and Bogost distinguish five different levels of new media (reception/operation, interface, form/function, code, and platform)¹¹ these distinctions can be collapsed into the more inclusive categories of hardware, software and culture. In fact, the authors of the framework themselves often reduce the overall technological structure into the two categories of hardware and software which then interact with users and developers.¹² Although Montfort and Bogost occasionally try to stress the cultural dynamics of platforms,¹³ their original framework is most interested in technical architecture. Similarly, Altice argues that the material and technical aspects of platforms form the main organizing principle of the dimensions of the playing card platform despite the rather rich examples of the cultural surround of playing cards. This case of computational

9. Tarrelton Gillespie. “The Politics of Platforms.” *New Media and Society* Vol 12, Issue 3 (2010): p. 351

10. Altice, 2016, p. 35.

11. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost. “Platform Studies: Levels.” *Platform Studies*. <http://platformstudies.com/levels.html>.

12. They write: “The [note: platform studies] series investigates the foundations of digital media: the computing systems, both hardware and software, that developers and users depend upon for artistic, literary, gaming, and other creative development.” Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. VII

13. Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. 2

essentialism reduces the importance of the cultural layer to reception and operation. Built into the platforms of are analog games are rich community practices that have been forgotten in this conversation—communities do more than operate games; they modify, develop, and share them, too.

We can use *Magic: The Gathering* to show some of the limits of Montfort and Bogost's argument. Following a typical platform studies approach we could claim that the hardware level in *Magic: The Gathering*¹⁴ is represented by the available card pool (nearly 16,000 cards) and the software part consists of rules, errata and various playable formats. However, when we move beyond these computational essentialisms and into the cultural level, we see rich interactions which cannot be neatly packed into three (or more) separate categories. These practices encompass the metagame(s) established through play, deckbuilding and discussions, the processes of convergence between community and official formats, fannish practices such as card modifications and alterations¹⁵ and the supposedly lucrative secondary markets of the game. Let us look at how the cultural dynamics of *Magic* problematize platform studies' analytic of layers.

THE HARDWARE LAYER

Rectangular two-sided cards may seem simple in comparison to technical artifacts of video game consoles. Nevertheless, Altice¹⁶

14. It is also important to note that the original card game has been adapted to the video game medium many times throughout its history, including the official digital competitive version in 2002. While this makes *Magic: The Gathering* a transmedia entity, for the sake of this essay I will focus primarily on the analog form of the game considering its status as a potential platform. However, the existence of both digital and analog versions suggests that the cultural aspects might be more decisive in the construction of a platform than the hardware and software layers. For more insight on the relationship between the analog and digital versions of *Magic: The Gathering* see: Aaron Trammell, "Magic: The Gathering in Material and Virtual Space: An Ethnographic Approach toward Understanding Players Who Dislike Online Play." In *Meaningful Play 2010 Conference Proceedings*, East Lansing, 2010.

15. Aaron Trammell, "Magic Modders: Alter Art, Ambiguity, and the Ethics of Prosumption." *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 6, no. 3 (2013): 1–14.

16. Altice, 2016.

shows the rich material dimensions of playing cards in general. Thus, playing cards are planar – two sides allow for displaying and concealment of information, uniform – identical size guarantees fairness of chance distributions, ordinal – cards allow to be organized and stacked into decks, spatial – card arrangements on a playing surface create meaning, as well as textural – texture and surface allow for handling and shuffling.

Magic: The Gathering cards follow many of the conventions presented by Altice. Considering the planar dimension, they usually have only one relevant side while the other bears the uniform pattern. Given the material nature of the cards, however, there is a low level of meaningful (gameplay-wise) physical interactions in *Magic: The Gathering*, most of which are limited to the uniform, ordinal and textural dimensions.¹⁷

Despite this, we must consider the degree to which external processes impact the game platform. While ordinality plays a major role in the game itself, manufacturing processes play a large part in drafts and the game's secondary market. The scarcity of cards is directly influenced by the practical constraints of the printing process and the distribution of cards among print sheets (which follow industry standards). These constraints impose outside limitations on the *Magic: The Gathering* collectible model. They are similar to the implications of a particular processor chip (or other hardware parts) for digital platforms. The connection between the manufacturing process and ordinality also allows players and resellers to predict the odds of particular cards being in booster packs (which have semi-randomized contents) based on their knowledge of the printing process and then establish the market prices.

17. There is one exception to this rule: Some cards flip from one side to another, representing two things. For instance, a day and night cycle for werewolf creatures. Such double-sided cards are either covered in non-transparent sleeves or substituted by a dedicated placeholder card for play in un-sleeved playable decks.

THE SOFTWARE LAYER

The software level is best understood from a historical perspective which shows the “multiple potential pathways, technological dead ends, lost histories, circuitous routes, and alternative conceptions,” of media history.¹⁸ In the case of *Magic*, this means new rules, errata and formats. Initially, the lead designer Richard Garfield conceived it as a trading card game where players would gamble for cards from their own decks.¹⁹ This rule was problematic for legal reasons – *Magic: The Gathering* was considered gambling in some parts of the US. Also, some players did not want to part with their most valuable cards after a lost duel. This rule was later abandoned when *Magic: The Gathering* moved from the trading card format to a more collectible one, but it still remains a historical evidence of design dead ends developers experimented with in the 1990s.

18. Apperley and Parikka, p. 4.

19. Richard Garfield. “The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering.” *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*. Eds. Tracy Fullerton, Christopher Swain and Steven Hoffman, 2nd ed., Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier Morgan Kaufmann, 2008, pp.191-202.

- 117.5. Some costs are represented by {0}, or are reduced to {0}. The action necessary for a player to pay such a cost is the player's acknowledgment that he or she is paying it. Even though such a cost requires no resources, it's not automatically paid.
- 117.5a A spell whose mana cost is {0} must still be cast the same way as one with a cost greater than zero; it won't cast itself automatically. The same is true for an activated ability whose cost is {0}.
- 117.6. Some mana costs contain no mana symbols. This represents an *unpayable cost*. An ability can also have an unpayable cost if its cost is based on the mana cost of an object with no mana cost. Attempting to cast a spell or activate an ability that has an unpayable cost is a legal action. However, attempting to pay an unpayable cost is an illegal action.
- 117.6a If an unpayable cost is increased by an effect or an additional cost is imposed, the cost is still unpayable. If an alternative cost is applied to an unpayable cost, including an effect that allows a player to cast a spell without paying its mana cost, the alternative cost may be paid.
- 117.7. What a player actually needs to do to pay a cost may be changed or reduced by effects. If the mana component of a cost is reduced to nothing by cost reduction effects, it's considered to be {0}. Paying a cost changed or reduced by an effect counts as paying the original cost.
- 117.7a If a cost is reduced by an amount of colored mana, but its colored mana component doesn't contain mana of that color, the cost is reduced by that amount of generic mana.
- 117.7b If a cost is reduced by an amount of colored mana that exceeds its mana component of that color, the cost's mana component of that color is reduced to nothing and the cost's generic mana component is reduced by the difference.
- 117.7c If a cost is reduced by an amount of mana represented by a hybrid mana symbol, the player paying that cost chooses one half of that symbol at the time the cost reduction is applied (see rule 601.2e). If a colored half is chosen, the cost is reduced by one mana of that color. If a colorless half is chosen, the cost is reduced by an amount of generic mana equal to that half's number.
- 117.7d If a cost is reduced by an amount of mana represented by a Phyrexian mana symbol, the cost is reduced by one mana of that symbol's color.

A screen-cap of M:TG's comprehensive rules. http://media.wizards.com/images/magic/tcg/resources/rules/MagicCompRules_20140201.pdf

In the early history of the game, developers also tried to add more physical and spatial interactions into gameplay. For example, the card Chaos Orb could destroy anything it fell on: "Flip Chaos Orb onto the playing area from a height of at least one foot. Chaos Orb must turn completely over at least once or it is discarded with no effect. When Chaos Orb lands, any cards in play that it touches are destroyed, as is Chaos Orb." Such interactions caused complications for the players regarding the layout of play area and they also introduced inequality between players at differing levels of motor ability. All physical and spatial cards are now banned from the official

formats, but they still serve as an evidence of experimentation with the materiality of *Magic*. The current official rules have minimal spatial interactions barring some basic limitations on game zones. These developments show how the software level is greatly influenced by other elements of the platform and has over time focused on the most essential game mechanics and abandoned interactions that might dilute the main gameplay experience.²⁰

While in the beginning Garfield was against the strict codification of rules, the increasing interest in the game and arising competitive scene²¹ made it a necessity. At that time, different formats in which you can play *Magic*, started to emerge. Usually formats differ by card pool limitations, for example Standard allows only cards from the most recent sets, while Vintage offers nearly the complete card pool of *Magic*. Along the way, players themselves started creating their own formats and even more actively influencing the life of the game. Wizards of the Coast, publishers of the game, have embraced some of these community formats by releasing cards made especially for such formats. The popular Commander format has been receiving yearly expansions since 2011 when the first official Commander pre-constructed decks were released. Many of these emergent formats address the more controversial aspects of the official and sanctioned *Magic* formats, for example the rather high barrier of entry for new players and the high level of competitiveness. The aforementioned Commander started as a casual multi-player format and introduced a few new rules²² including the new “commander legendary creature” rule or expanding the deck size from 60 cards to 100 cards. Overall,

20. Dexterity cards could also pose problems for the digital versions of *Magic: The Gathering*.

21. The first notable official tournament (World Championship) took place at the Gen Con 1994 in Milwaukee. The highest level of the competitive play – so-called Pro Tour – started in 1996; see David-Marshall, Brian. “An Oral History of the First Pro Tour.” *MAGIC: THE GATHERING*, February 2, 2016. <http://magic.wizards.com/en/articles/archive/ways-play/oral-history-first-pro-tour-2016-02-02>.

22. See the official page of the independent rules committee of the format: <http://mtgcommander.net/rules.php>

Magic can be played in many variations. These variations make it at least a very complex system of games—one which functionally resembles the interaction between the hardware and software layers of video game platforms.

THE CULTURE LAYER

Although *Magic: The Gathering* is highly commercialized, its players often engage in community building and other fannish activities. In an early ethnographic study on *Magic: The Gathering*, Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich have stated that it “belongs to a group of gaming cultures that rely on emergent rules, cooperative associations, and fantasy theme constructions.”²³ Furthermore they argued that “the play is not necessarily the thing” pointing to the importance of participating in the overall culture of *Magic: The Gathering*. The communities around the game create a rich landscape of hobby practices. Some communities maintain unofficial formats through regular updates of rules and a banlist²⁴ whenever new sets are released or when particular metagames converge around a small number of extremely efficient decks. For example, the official banlist for the Commander variant is under control of a committee independent from the publisher,²⁵ but respected nonetheless. As mentioned before, the interactions between players and developers often follow the logic of cultural convergence²⁶ with popular community formats receiving official expansions. Creation of such community formats and their consequent commercialization by publishers can also be seen as a manifestation of fan labor in which

23. Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich. “Beyond Place: On Being a Regular in an Ethereal Culture.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38.1 (February 1, 2009): pp. 3–24.

24. A list of cards banned in a particular *Magic: The Gathering* format.

25. See <http://magic.wizards.com/en/gameinfo/gameplay/formats/commander>.

26. Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

fans create value which is later capitalized on by the official producers.²⁷ Despite the significant degree of commercialization caused by the collectible nature of the game, traces of fannish gift culture economies²⁸ can still be found among player communities, including various forums and sites which offer deckbuilding advice for free or share alternative card art for the casual formats.



An example of alter art in Magic. Note how the image has been extended by a second artist beyond the card's borders. Image by Roooooommmelllll @deviantart CC BY-ND.

The usual conflicts between fan communities and copyright holders also emerge around *Magic*. Aaron Trammell²⁹ has documented and

27. Mel Standfill and Megan Condis. "Fandom And/as Labor." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 15 (2014).

28. See Paul Booth. *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*. Digital Formations, v. 68. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. Karen Hellekson. "A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture." *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 113-18.

29. Trammell, 2013.

analyzed the complicated and often confusing area of alter art³⁰ which mirrors the vague legal regulation of transformative cultures³¹ more broadly. The popularity of the game presents many opportunities for fans, artists and players to make money out of their hobby. Furthermore, a large part of the *Magic: The Gathering* platform is directly influenced by card resellers due to their impact not only on individual card prices, but also on the prices of official pre-constructed decks which rarely follow the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP) but are instead sold at prices derived from the value of cards within. Wizards of the Coast is apparently aware of the status of *Magic* as a potential investment. They curate a list of cards which will never be reprinted in an effort to secure their future price for collectors.³²

30. Modification of the original artwork on a Magic: The Gathering card.

31. Aaron Schwabach. *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider Works and Intellectual Property Protection*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013.

32. See here for more information: http://mtgsalvation.gamepedia.com/Reserved_List.



More alter art. Image by Rooommmmmelllll
@deviantart CC BY-ND.

Another lucrative area enabled by *Magic: The Gathering* is the peripherals business which includes protective materials such as deck boxes, sleeves, play mats or card albums. The relatively high price for cards motivates players to protect their investment in the game by buying protection for their cards. These business practices are very similar to markets of video game platform peripherals including the distinction between unofficial, licensed and fan-made ancillary products.

ANALOG GAMES AND PLATFORM STUDIES

The structural logic of platform studies has both benefits and limits. In this essay, it has yielded an interesting and rigorous analysis of *Magic*. It has also enabled a legible comparison of analog and digital games. These analytics have their limits however, as the computational

essentialism of platform studies has in many ways diminished the conversation around *Magic* and culture. The player and industry practices which comprise most of the game appear here isolated from the game's more technical aspects.

New questions emerge: should platform studies (with its focus on the technological) be applied to new domains of game studies? For me, the benefits of studying *Magic* as a platform outweigh the limitations. Above all, the platform framework is able to address the existence of multiple formats (both official and community-created) of *Magic: The Gathering* which would be very hard to account for if it was seen as a singular game or a part of a greater platform of playing cards. Also, the materiality emphasized by proponents of platform studies plays an important role in the collectible card game. However, the cultural aspects of the game are intrinsically tied to the other elements of the platform showing complex interactions that take place across the platform as a whole, such as the practices of alter art, secondary markets, metagame discussions or the processes of convergence between community formats and official card products.

It is important to expand the horizon of the platform studies framework and confront the rarely questioned fundamentals of game studies which often prioritize digital games and their computational layers without thorough comparison to their analog counterparts. Nonetheless, new strategies for dealing with the computational essentialism of platform studies are needed as we begin to extend the framework into the domain of analog games.

Ruse, Trust, and the Fiction of Betrayal

How Game Designers Can Author Player Experiences

WILLIAM ROBINSON

Games with human opponents often present opportunities for ruse. In sports, such as soccer, football, or badminton there are misdirecting ruses: one pretends one's immediate goals are in a different place in order to relocate the opponents' focus. In card games, such as poker or gin, there are ruses of weakness and strength, where one deceives opponents through tells and bluffs. In all of these games, ruse is considered part of play.

Often where there would be stalemates, ruses generate victory and defeat. In contrast, there are also games of trust, such as the folk game, *Leading the Blind*, where one must move blindfolded guided by a partner whom we believe, or Yoko Ono's *Play it by Trust* (1966), where all Chess pieces are painted white.

Trust also plays an important part of Bridge because players are grouped in pairs and asked to communicate to one another solely through an abstract bidding system. You must be confident that one's partner is not (or in some cases is) making mistakes in order to respond to their bids. A low-level example of this is the bidding convention known as "Stayman," where one says "two clubs" in

response to a partner's bid of "one no-trump" to indicate strength in hearts and spades. If a player correctly bids Stayman and their partner does not trust them to have remembered what the "two club" response means, but rather assumes they meant to indicate strength in clubs, miscommunication will occur and cause the downfall of the team. In Tournament Bridge, ruses are juxtaposed against this trust and are an important part of play, to the point where certain feints are forbidden. For instance, whereas it is permissible to play a normally inappropriate card because it will fool one's opponents, one cannot do things like pause to think when no obvious strategy presents itself. Doing the latter is dubbed "coffeehousing," relating to old-world coffee houses where this behavior was permitted. Should someone think for too long about making a certain play and then be discovered to have had only one option, that person may be called out and have points deducted from his or her score.¹

Ruse and trust are thus socially determined and regulated tacitly by the players, if not explicitly by the rules. Game theorists have studied ruse extensively, particularly with regards to the Prisoner's Dilemma, in order to consider optimization and social structure.² However, in this essay, I take a very different tack and explore designed opportunities for ruse as crafted narrative tools.

Bridge combines trust and ruse, which exist between ally and opponent respectively, but what interest me are games in which trust and ruse intermingle between the same players. Such games of player unpredictability have their participants cooperate to reach conflicting goals. Examples of these include: *Diplomacy* (Calhamer 2008); *A Game of Thrones* (Peterson and Wilson 2003); *Werewolf*

1. "Law 74: Conduct and Etiquette." World Bridge Federation. December 20, 2010. <http://www.worldbridge.org/departments/laws/internationalcode/Law74.asp>

2. Thomas M. Steinfatt. "The Prisoner's Dilemma and a Creative Alternative Game." *Simulation and Gaming* 4.4 (December 1973): pp. 389-409; Jonas Heide Smith. "The Games Economists Play." *Game Studies* 6.1 (2006). http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/heide_smith

(Davidoff 1986, Plotkin 1997); *Battlestar Galactica* (Konieczka 2008); and *Shadows over Camelot* (Cathala and Laget 2005). These are all non-digital games that, as a result of deploying rules surrounding trust and ruse, create emergent fictions of betrayal. Such fictions of betrayal are noteworthy because they are generated bottom-up by players following a rule set.

Unlike novels, theatre or film, these games offer up unscripted moments of play in fictional worlds that communicate ideas (in these cases, ideas about betrayal). Their depiction of betrayal is magnified by the fact they are adapted from historical events, stories and folk tales, which themselves are understood as depicting betrayal. For instance, in the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2004), the human race is betrayed by a machine that is virtually indistinguishable from a person. The show's premise is that Cylons secretly continue to live amongst the few humans remaining, garnering trust, while waiting to make their final move. Instead of recounting these kinds of betrayals through pre-designed narrated stories, games of ruse, trust, and betrayal incentivize their players – and consequently their avatars – to betray each other within the confines of a game space. Celia Pearce, who has written on the topic of performing and productive players, explains: “It is clear that some fictional genres lend themselves to interactivity better than others. The key to success seems to be the appropriate pairing of genre with play mechanic.”³ Pearce suggests that not all stories are told well through games, and those that are must have a proper set of rules to match their fiction. Pearce argues for a productive player who can be considered as a co-author in the creation of a narrative. Instead, I argue nearly the opposite: I suggest that there is an emergent fiction crafted by the game designer. The players in these specific games

3. Celia Pearce. “Emergent authorship: The next interactive revolution.” *Computers & Graphics* 1 (2002): pp. 21–29, here p. 22.

of ruse, trust and betrayal (henceforth RTBs) create a fiction in an altogether different way than authors do. They pursue goals at the behest of a designer, following that designer's rules, and procedurally generate a fiction in parallel. To demonstrate this argumentation, I will go over three rules that game designers have historically put in place to procedurally generate betrayal, once I have defined several terms of note.

Game Ruse

In games, the line between a ruse and a cheat is not always clear, perhaps because ruses can bend rules to their breaking point in order to continue being effective. What is more, ruses in games are not the same as ruses *simpliciter*. For instance, ruses normally have no restrictions as to their purpose. One could create an altruistic ruse that would have a baby try a new vegetable, a witness to testify in front of a judge, or a business person accept to give half of their fortune away. However, a game ruse can only serve the interests of the player. Borrowing from Bernard Suits, "to play a game is to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]."⁴ One cannot be said to be playing in the spirit of the game (with lusory attitude) if one is deceiving opponents into improving their positions, because one must necessarily attempt to reach a specific state of affairs (the prelusory goal). To do anything that is contrary to achieving the desired state of affairs is akin to ceasing the play of the game.

To make this more explicit, consider poker, in which one must

4. Bernard Suits. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005, p. 55.

accumulate the most money possible. If Alex were to attempt to deceive Beth into gaining Alex's own money without any ulterior motive (such as trying to keep Beth in the game because Alex is certain that he can beat Beth at a later date and hopefully between now and then Beth will grow her money with that of a third opponent Chrissy, which Alex cannot read so well) then clearly Alex is not playing poker (although he may be playing something that looks like it). There are, however, cases where one might deceive an ally into improving their position. But this only makes sense if helping one's ally furthers one's plans to reach a desired state of affairs prescribed by the game. Ruses which deceive one's allies are somewhat anomalous, given that it is normally easier to convince an ally to make a proper move through truth and reason. Cases where these might occur would likely involve either the deceiver or the deceived to be considered wrong and stubborn by their ally in question. For it is usually after failing to find a consensus about the proper course of action that one will begin to manipulate one's allies.

Setting aside these strange cases, for now and for my purposes I will limit the term "ruse" to mean an intentional act which communicates something about the game-state in order to induce an *opponent* to worsen her position. This definition does not mention whether the ruse is sanctioned by the rules, which intuitively makes sense, given that certain ruses can only be the results of cheating. Nevertheless, I will continue to discuss only fair ruses, ones which do not break game rules, given that this is a study of how *rules* build fictions. My definition above specifies that a ruse relate to the game-state in order to avoid discussing ruses that operate on a meta-gamic level, such as lying about the rules or about the alcohol content of an opponent's beverage. The reason the definition cannot specify anything about the truth value of the communication is because truths are often told

as part of ruses, either to misdirect the attentions of one's opponents or because one assumes the opponent will take the truth for a lie. This communication can happen through bodily gestures, changing the game-state, or verbal statements. Finally, some ruses are meant to improve an opponent's position with the ultimate goal of worsening another opponent's position. Alex, in second place, might improve his position by deceiving Beth, who is in third place, in order for her to harm Chrissy, in first place. In this case, the result could potentially be Alex in first, Beth in second, Chrissy in third. So while the ruse would have helped an opponent (in this case Beth), it still induced an opponent to worsen her position (in this case Chrissy).

GAME TRUST

Game trust, much like game ruse, is a fickle concept which would do well with a tailored definition, rather than rely on definitions of trust *simpliciter* (if such a concept could even be defined). For my purposes, if Alex trusts Beth, Alex is said to believe that Beth is not attempting to deceive Alex and that Beth is going to intentionally improve Alex's position. In other words, to trust someone is to believe that they are not attempting a ruse at your expense when it appears that they are aiding you. Therefore, a precondition for a game with trust is that there are situations which make it reasonable to aid another player, but not necessary.

Diplomacy is a game in which players secretly negotiate with other players, attempting to gain control of Europe. In *Diplomacy*, trust enables players to act on verbal, non-binding, agreements, such as when Alex tries to take Belgium away from Chrissy, with the support of Beth in Germany. We can say that *Diplomacy* grants players the opportunity to trust one another because players can write a support command for an opponent who will benefit from it. Players

in *Diplomacy* can trust each other, at times, knowing there are mutual benefits to lasting alliances. One might argue that although alliances might be made, there is in fact no trust, because the game does not forbid players from lying and does not bind anyone to their agreements. However, if players did in fact play like that, it would be equivalent to playing without alliances and we would be forced return to a set of stalemates. Soon, a paradox emerges: how can trust persist even after multiple betrayals across different games and across games into real life? A first answer could be that players never really trust each other in games and that any act that aids an opponent is understood as having an additional motive of eventually helping oneself. However, this answer is somewhat unsatisfactory, given that these games are intended to be played multiple times, especially when one insists that favors be regularly offered for some kind of returned favor, even to people who have historically failed to return their favors. A second answer might relate to the kind of social space which games take up.

SEMI-SEALED GAME SPACE

The “magic circle”, often credited to Johan Huizinga but more recently championed by Eric Zimmerman,⁵ describes the social space of play which is dissociated from the everyday world. This concept was part of a set of conditions Huizinga used to define games. The definition, matching closely with Suits’, goes, “a voluntary activity or occupation within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted, but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and *the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’*”⁶ With RTBs, the magic circle is

5. Eric Zimmerman. “Jerked around by the magic circle: Clearing the air ten years later.” Gamasutra. February 7, 2012. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/135063/jerked_around_by_the_magic_circle_php

6. Suits, p. 28.

helpful for understanding how people can come together, betray one another, and still leave as friends. Or even: how players can continue to trust one another after repeated betrayals among each other over several Entering in the game space, one might be signing a tacit contract with one's fellow players as to what can be done, what can be taken away from the experience, and what can be brought into it. However, these ideal scenarios are not always the case. While initially quite popular, the concept of the magic circle has been refined/attacked several times, perhaps most notably by Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron in "Magic Cycle: The Circle(s) of Gameplay,"⁷ Mia Consalvo in "There Is No Magic Circle,"⁸ or by Ian Bogost in *Unit Operations*. Bogost, in an attempt to save games from being considered rhetorically impotent, writes:

Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions. There is a gap in the magic circle through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the gamespace.⁹

Arguing that games can change one's mental state, Bogost challenges one of early game design theorist Chris Crawford's central tenets of games, *safety*.¹⁰ For Crawford, games are a place where consequences to actions are only simulated, and that this is one of their important points of attraction.¹¹ The problem with this argument is that it is Bogost chooses to undermine Crawford by citing rage as an unsafe result of many games, but with RTBs equally terrible things can

7. Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron. "In the Frame of the Magic Cycle: The Circle (s) of Gameplay." *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. Eds. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 109-131.

8. Mia Consalvo. "There Is No Magic Circle." *Games and Culture* 4.4 (2009): pp. 408-417.

9. Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 134.

10. Bogost, p. 134.

11. Chris Crawford. *The Art of Computer Game Design*. 1982. http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~stewart/cs583/ACGD_ArtComputerGameDesign_ChrisCrawford_1982.pdf

ANALOG GAME STUDIES

spill out into real life. While an RTB might begin with friends or strangers, if this is their first time playing, many will not have formulated firm ideas as to the trustworthiness of the other players. However, after each game, players will learn more about one another from knowledge they gather in-game and take out. Eventually, the more untrustworthy players begin to lose games as none will ally with them, thus breaking the fairness of the game. What is worse, players may infer that the other players are untrustworthy in real life. But while it is necessary for the continuity of play and for the social well-being of players that these games remain hermetically sealed off from the everyday (and often from each other), it is equally important that these games remain able to communicate with their audience.

The bias here is that games are a form of communication and that some games communicate in artful ways. This means that players cannot be allowed to remain safe while inside the magic circle, otherwise they limit the relevance of their experience and the value of a given game-art-work. RTBs need a porous magic circle, one in which players have a communal understanding of what should and should not be taken away. That said, it is now time to look at how designers go about getting players to feel betrayed or to feel like betrayers.

UNKNOWN AGENDAS

While Suits refers to goals, and Huizinga refers to aims, both appear to speak of a *desired result* from play that is constrained by a set of rules. For instance, if you want to play golf match with someone else, then you must both hold that the desired result is each of your balls in the hole, using fewer strokes than your opponent. With RTBs these desired results are not always symmetrical, as they are in golf, but also games like football, racing or chess. In these games, one can write a

single goal which applies to each team/player: score the most touch downs, capture the enemy king, and reach the end of the track before anyone else.

In Bruno Cathala and Serge Laget's *Shadows over Camelot*, each player takes the role of a knight from King Arthur's round table. These players are encouraged by the rulebook to speak in archaic sentence structures and act out as their chosen knight (be it Gawain, King Arthur, Sir Kay, etc.). Each player receives a loyalty card from a deck with a single traitor card inside. The deck is always larger than the number of players so that it is never certain whether there will be a traitor in a given game. While the knights must attempt to place seven white swords on the round table, the traitor must do his best to undermine the round table's attempts at acquiring white swords, which is to say do his best at surrounding the castle with twelve catapults, killing all the knights, or by placing six dark swords on the round table.¹² Before being uncovered, the traitor will secretly harm the round table, usually by pretending that his hidden discards are appropriately low when they aren't, or that his abilities of foresight are preventing, rather than encouraging, what the knights consider "evil." However, the game is designed to defeat a traitor who remains passive. The traitor must additionally attempt to have the knights accuse one another of being the traitor for every false accusation leads to a dark sword being lain on the table. Once successfully accused, the traitor takes on a new role, which makes him dangerous in new, but non-secretive ways. This describes only a small portion of game which would take several pages to explain, but these mechanics essentially enable the game to retell a tale similar to those of the Vulgate Cycle. This text recounts the evil deeds of Morgan Le Fey,

12. Bruno Cathala and Serge Laget. *Shadows over Camelot*. Days of Wonder, 2005.

her denouncing of Lancelot's betrayal and his quest for the Holy Grail.

For the players to beat the game, they usually need to perform a combination of feats which involve defeating Lancelot, finding the Holy Grail, repelling the Saxons/Picts, defeating the dragon, dueling the Black Knight and consistently preventing the evils of Morgan Le Fey. One accomplishes this by collecting and using cards with certain abilities. The players must trust one another to make the right decisions, which often have repercussions and opportunity costs known only to player making them. Midway through the game, players are allowed to begin accusing one another in an attempt at revealing the traitor. Failure to do so either indicates that there isn't a traitor in the game, or misplaced trust on behalf of the non-traitors and successful ruse on behalf of the traitor. Trust is only possible because there is a possibility, and not a certainty, that multiple players are working towards the same goal. As a result, betrayal is probable in *Shadows Over Camelot*. Combined with movements and plays which mimetically or thematically relate to the world of Camelot, the game builds an emergent fiction from the ground up with asymmetrical goals.

UNATTAINABLE GOALS

Another method of structuring RTBs is to make it so individuals cannot attain their goals without help. If we look at *Diplomacy*, we can say that good players are forced to trust one another and form an alliance. Without this kind of communication between players, *Diplomacy* will likely generate multiple stalemates, as one cannot defend the number of fronts one has, let alone push them forward. To try and do so would turn the game into guesswork as players must attempt to foretell which units will move in which direction.

Therefore, alliances necessarily form around players who rationally want to win and have the game reach its conclusion. Regardless: should an alliance become more of a nuisance than a benefit, such as when the only opponents left are impractical to attack, or when the game has only a single opponent left, then a break in trust proves necessary. No longer can either player trust the other. It becomes practical to betray before one is betrayed. The same can be said of Kevin Wilson and Christian Petersen's *A Game of Thrones*, in which play is nearly identical. Instead of writing down orders with specific attacks and supports, however, players give orders to their units to behave certain way (defend, march, raid, support, consolidate power), which offers flexibility in the face of a betraying ally. And while it is rare for players to support one another in the same way, people will often need to make cease fire agreements so that they can leave claimed territory undefended to press an attack elsewhere. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the need for teamwork behaves differently. A prominent mechanic is the "executive order" which allows a player to forgo their once-per-turn action to grant another player the opportunity to take two actions (with the only restriction being that they cannot "executive order" anyone else). However, while doubling the effectiveness of their turn, it is not always certain that they are ordering someone with the same agenda. If it were unnecessary to play executive orders, people wouldn't, but because the game has goals which are too difficult to attain individually, players are yet again forced to trust one another.

SOFT MECHANICS

Before continuing to the final element of RTBs, the term "game mechanics," as previously mentioned, will need some quick refinement. Here I build off of Miguel Sicart's definition of these

“as methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state.”¹³ The important thing to note here is that he is working mainly with video games such as *Gears of War*, and although his text indicates that this definition should work for board games, certain clarifications are required. The first is that, although players’ will convince, manipulate, ally with, or betray each other, these are not game mechanics in any of the games mentioned so far. No token or indicator on the board or cards of these games will ever indicate the state of these kinds of player relations in the game. In addition, the game state is not argued to extend to the minds of the players, and while that is certainly one route that could be further explored for some games, it is impossible for RTBs. This impossibility stems from the way ruses work. Although players will have representations of the game state in their minds, players will attempt to manipulate these, discredit them or take advantage of mistakes already made inside them. The only time a mind will hold a game state in an RTB, is in a situation like *Werewolf* in which a neutral person will facilitate the gameplay without playing the game themselves. The relevant mechanics of these games are instead the means with which players can act on their understandings of their relations with other people. Sicart writes, “Game mechanics are concerned with the actual interaction with the game state, while rules provide the possibility space where that interaction is possible, regulating as well the transition between states.”¹⁴ This statement leaves a clear gap where ruses occur, somewhere inside the space provided by the rules, but outside the actions provided by the game mechanics. This is not to say ruses cannot be caused by changing the game state and having opponents infer information from those changes, only that it is conceptually impossible for trust or ruse to be methods which can

13. Miguel Sicart. “Defining Game Mechanics.” *Game Studies* 8.2 (2008). <http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>

14. Sicart.

be called on. Neither is this to say that ruses or and alliances are at the meta-game level; without player unpredictability elements, there would be neither a *Diplomacy* nor a *Shadows over Camelot*. For our purposes, we might refer to these as soft mechanics, which do not change the game state, but a person's perception of it. These are not methods which are designed by the game maker, but methods which pre-exist socially and are assumed to continue existence even when inside the magic circle.

FALSIFIABLE INFORMATION

Soft mechanics seem to thrive in RTBs, given the sheer amount of falsifiable information. Because these games do not enforce verbal agreements and encourage secrecy, illocutionary acts can make use of soft mechanics, given that they are not allowed to make changes in the game-state. Player A's comments cannot be guaranteed by the game, so when Player A asks player B for a favor, explaining that he will return it moments later, Player A is free to disregard her promise without penalty. To make agreements binding would turn soft mechanics into plain mechanics because the game state will have changed. What is more, this would reduce the importance of trust, or even negate it, given that players could not be lying without cheating. Corey Konieczka, with *Battlestar Galactica*, does something similar to Cathala and Laget, using the same loyalty card system. In order for either of their mechanics to work, their rulebook's each have a section on secrecy, with nearly the exact same rules, where Knights could be replaced by humans and traitor by Cylon:

with other like-minded Knights in your group will often turn out to be crucial to winning.

A few rules must thus be observed at all times, when conferring with your fellow Knights.

Declarations of intent can be made freely; resources and capabilities can all be discussed openly, as long as your comments are general and nonspecific.

However, you must never reveal or discuss the explicit values of cards in your hand, or volunteer any other specific game information not readily available to your fellow players.... It is permissible to lie about your intent or your resources at hand (a particularly useful ploy for a Traitor), **though you must never cheat.**¹⁵

However, the *Battlestar Galactica* rulebook adds a unique section to explain that the secrecy retains a purpose in maintaining the proper ambiance,

A key element of *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game* is the paranoia and tension surrounding the hidden Cylon players. Because of this, secrecy is very important, and the following rules must be observed at all times...¹⁶

It should be noted that these rules are explained as means of inducing aesthetically relevant emotional content.. Players take on the roles of those responsible for Galactica's everyday function. However, just like the television series, not everyone is who they appear to be. Rules about revealing information and lying meet their theme successfully. Pearce writes, "In the ideal case, the play mechanic is synonymous with the narrative structure; the two cannot be separated because each is really a product of the other."¹⁷ In this case, the soft mechanics of communication and secrecy, combined with a necessity for cooperation with people who might be against you, mesh with the desired fiction. One understands how to be an effective game-traitor by understanding how fictional and real traitors operate. However, to

15. Cathala and Laget, p. 8.

16. Corey Konieczka. *Battlestar Galactica*. Fantasy Flight Games, 2008. p. 20.

17. Pearce, p. 22.

act as a game-traitor will often provide insights into lying and deceit, effectively communicating how these operate in given situations.

It is important that the fictional elements of the board game's architecture not be understated. In "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins argues that virtual game spaces elucidate facts about a fiction by the way they are constructed. He theorizes four distinct ways in which architecture tell stories. While it is likely that each of these can be found operating in board games, there are three in particular which interest me here. Firstly, as an "Evocative Space," a video game, and I would argue board games as well, through its depictions and cultural associations with pre-existing narratives, evokes shared ideas about how the world represented in the game functions and who inhabits it.¹⁸ With *Shadows over Camelot*, we are brought to think about the Arthurian legends; with *Battlestar Galactica*, the fiction of the television series, and so forth. Games come packaged with a story that players already know, but upon which the fiction can be developed. Should players be ignorant of these narratives, then it stands to reason that they will lose out on much of the content and context. Secondly, Jenkins discusses "Emergent Narratives" where he explains that characters in *The Sims* "are given desires, urges, and needs, which can come into conflict with each other, and thus produce dramatically compelling encounters."¹⁹ The same, of course, is happening in RTBs where multiple agendas and forced interaction generate their own encounters. Players first take in the fiction which is evoked and then play out an unscripted, but dramatically charged initial position. There is a blurring here as emergent narratives tend to be the result of a third narrative form, "Enacted Stories."²⁰ Players, through their

18. Henry Jenkins. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." First Person. Eds. Noah Wardrip Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2004, pp. 118-130, here p. 125.

19. Jenkins, p. 128.

20. Jenkins, p. 124.

actions and participation, generate the actions of their avatars or of a given system. So when a player makes a move, which subsequently supports an opponent's position, we can say that in the fiction of this playing of the game, the narrative unfolded in such a manner.

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, this work is somewhat ambitious in attempting to touch on so many topics and their relations to one another. While it delineates certain formal definitions of what it would mean to trust and trick in games, it also makes attempts at demonstrating both how fictions emerge from play and how these emerging fictions add aesthetically interesting dimensions to fictional content, in particular, by engaging players to experience a version of the fiction first hand. With RTBs, it was shown that the rules which regulate initial situations must conflict with the desired results of each player. Games that have players take on avatars from a fictional world with multiple hidden agendas, pose tasks dependent on co-operation and require secret/falsifiable information will procedurally generate a fiction of betrayal. Bogost explains that there is unavoidable, ancillary, unintended, or accidental politics inscribed in games: "The objective simulation is a myth because games cannot help but carry baggage of ideology."²¹ However, it is also possible that these politics could be intended. Just as one can make a city-building simulator which can favor libertarian policies by collapsing cities that tax above low thresholds, one can simulate a fictional world which favors trust and betrayal.

21. Bogost, p. 135.

Mandatory Upgrades

The Evolving Mechanics and Theme of Android: Netrunner

SEAN C. DUNCAN

Android: Netrunner (2012) is the update of Richard Garfield and Wizards of the Coast's (WotC) cult classic *Netrunner* (Garfield, 1996). Like its collectible card game (CCG) predecessor, *Android: Netrunner* is an asymmetrical, dystopian cyberpunk card game in which one player acts as a "Runner," attempting to hack another player's (the "Corporation's") servers, to steal agendas before the corporation can advance them. Redesigned primarily by Lukas Litzinger and released by Fantasy Flight Games, *Android: Netrunner* has become popular among game developers, designers, academics, and critics,¹ and is the current centerpiece of an expanding new intellectual property (IP).²

I look at the game not just as a competitive environment or a set of mechanical interactions, but as an evolving IP. I examine the impact of its production/release model, the evolution of the game's mechanics, and the development of the game's narrative/theme. Though analyzing games involves deconstructing multiple vectors of

1. For a personal account of one's deep involvement and learning within the game and its social communities, see Leigh Alexander and Quinns Smith. "Life Hacks: A Netrunner story." Shut Up & Sit Down, 2014. <http://www.shutupandsitdown.com/blog/post/test/>
2. The "Android: Netrunner universe," covering multiple games, narrative media, and upcoming digital games.

analysis,³ rarely has the evolution of a game series' narrative world been explored in board and card game formats. Ironically, as stated by the original *Netrunner's* creator, Richard Garfield, some believe that “games are not the best format in which to get people to like a new IP — something else had to get you to like *Battlestar Galactica* before you bought the boardgame. Books, movies, and television are all much better, probably because they are better at telling stories, and stories are what make people love IPs.”⁴ This piece offers a useful counterpoint: I argue the development of this IP and its paratexts⁵ reveals ways that narrative worlds have been effectively developed in conjunction with an evolving set of game mechanics.

A “LIVING CARD GAME”

Android: Netrunner is considered a “Living Card Game” (LCG), distinguished from collectible card games on account of its ongoing, updated release schedule organized into cycles of expansions and “datapacks.” Such a distinction proves interesting in several respects. Unlike the original *Netrunner's* (and many other CCGs') randomized booster packs, cards are released in non-randomized packs. For instance, if one wants the pack with the powerful card “Faust” in it, one simply needs to go out and buy the datapack *The Underway* rather than buy many randomized booster packs or explore a secondary card market.

At first blush, this seems a potentially more equitable position for the player — one does not need to purchase nearly as many randomized packs in order to find the key cards they need to play. Additionally, there is a lack of a secondary card market, unlike the

3. Casey O'Donnell. “Inhabiting games well (if not uncomfortably...)” *Well Played* 2(2). Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2013, pp. 5-20.

4. George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield and K. Robert Gutschera. *Characteristics of Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, p. 217.

5. Paul Booth. *Game play: paratextuality in contemporary board games*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

well-established market for collectible card games such as *Magic: the Gathering*. With the release of a sizable 252-card core set and regular, consistent datapacks organized in thematic “cycles” (see Figure 1, below), *Android: Netrunner* provides players with consistent but periodic releases that have deprecated some forms of play dependent upon randomness and the contingencies of booster pack draws.⁶

This periodic-but-consistent release of cards has created a system in which any player can enter into deckbuilding with the very same resources as any other who has purchased the same number and kind of datapacks.⁷ Participating in the game at the most competitive levels requires players to consistently purchase the latest cards, as well as ancillary expenses: card sleeves, participation fees for tournaments, etc. These costs quickly become barriers to entry for new players, as well as impediments for lapsed players who are interested in rejoining the game. To take an analogy from digital games, it’s as if players who decide to take a several-month break from *World of Warcraft* (2004) would be expected to pay the subscription fees for each of their months away from the game when they rejoined. While an intertwining of the game’s release model and its mechanical evolution speaks to the ways that *Android: Netrunner* requires a different sort of engagement from its dedicated players than in similar games, and than in the earlier version of *Netrunner*, the regular release of cards is not solely a mechanical evolution, and has parallels in the development of a narrative world for the game. Theorycrafting⁸ players are, potentially, guided in their practice of mechanical optimization through engagement with the IP’s expanding storyworld.

6. Draft play has only become a relatively recent addition to the game, several years after release.

7. This potentially leads to financial inequity for players of a different kind than that of traditional CCGs.

8. Christopher A. Paul. “Optimizing play: How theorycraft changes gameplay and design.” *Game Studies*, 11(2). (2011). <http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/paul>

THE *ANDROID* UNIVERSE

Android: Netrunner's mechanics, while still largely the same as the original Garfield/WotC game, have been altered to fit Fantasy Flight's LCG model and to capitalize on thematic changes that place it within a pre-existing "Android universe" promoted by Fantasy Flight across multiple games, novels, and novellas. Whereas the original game had only two roles — Runner and Corporation — *Android: Netrunner* features multiple factions within each of these two roles, and multiple "identities" (with special abilities unique to each identity) within each faction. The original game relied upon the aforementioned random booster packs to provide a degree of depth and complexity, as well as ensure consistent income for WotC. This loose narrative world of the "Android universe" provides both Fantasy Flight opportunities for transmedia⁹ exploration while inspiring mechanical constraints that further develop tensions in the game's narrative space.

For example, the "Custom Biotics" Haas-Bioroid Corporation identity disallows any corporation cards from Jinteki, a competing Corporation, and the severely limited influence of 1 for the Runner "The Professor," reflects a Shaper Runner who, in the game's narrative world, is an academic who has been discredited due to corporate retribution. Card mechanics are directly inspired by narrative effects, and the *implementation* of both frequently intertwines the two. As the game's world expands into multiple gaming properties, we can see thematic elements driving mechanical design. For instance, in the recent *Android: Mainframe* (2016) board game, developed by Damon Stone from mechanics originally designed by Jordi Gené and Gregorio Morales, Fantasy Flight has

9. Henry Jenkins. *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Mandatory Upgrades

repurposed art from *Android: Netrunner*, taking underplayed, mechanically “weak” cards (such as “Leviathan,” see Figure 2 below) and revived them into useful, interesting drivers of gameplay in a narratively-identical but mechanically-distant game space.



Figure 2. The card “Leviathan” as seen across two Android games (*Android: Netrunner*, and *Android: Mainframe*, respectively).

Though loose and occasionally maligned concepts such as “ludonarrative dissonance”¹⁰, or the ludic disconnect between game mechanics and game content, often come into play in making sense of narrative-based digital games, such discussions are unusual with these forms of tabletop games. Moreover, they are relatively unexplored *across multiple games*, as Fantasy Flight’s expanding *Android* universe demonstrates. The synchronicities and disconnects between theme and mechanic in *Android: Netrunner* provide an

10. Clint Hocking. “Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock: the problem of what the game is about.” Well Played 1. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2009, pp. 114–117.

unusually strong impetus for the player to investigate the game further and to dive into the most tedious of CCG/LCG tasks. As tactical advantage in the game is often reliant upon knowing what the range of an opponent's potential cards are, as well as what the likely cards are to arise with a certain style of play, perhaps the evolving narrative of *Android: Netrunner* serves a *pedagogical* role: To draw the player into the necessary task of learning the range of cards more effectively than other CCGs that do not feature a novel, developing theme.

Although players of other LCGs can rely upon their understanding of narrative worlds drawn from literary source material¹¹ or filmic source material,¹² *Android: Netrunner* and the *Android* universe reflect a new IP, and thus a developing set of works in progress. Some of the pleasure of *Android: Netrunner* is in watching the relationships and characters change across generations of cards. One dives into the “upgrading” story world of the *Android* universe with each new datapack or expansion, as well as witnessing dissonances between new novels, novellas, and games. This can involve identifying how loose story threads cut across multiple card sets (e.g., Haas-Bioroid's Director Haas and the apparent tension with her layabout son, Thomas) or multiple games in the *Android* universe (e.g., “Gabriel Santiago,” a Criminal identity in *Android: Netrunner* and a character in Donald Vaccarino's *Infiltration* [2012], or “Caprice Nisei,” a Jinteki Upgrade card in *Android: Netrunner* and a playable character in *Android*).

Most recently, we have seen the development of the first datapack cycle entirely designed under Damon Stone's direction, which features even more interplay between *Android: Netrunner* and the

11. Examples include Fantasy Flight's Lord of the Rings LCG, Call of Cthulhu LCG, and Game of Thrones LCG.

12. E.g., the Star Wars LCG

evolving *Android* IP. The current Flashpoint cycle of *Android: Netrunner* datapacks details the narrative fallout from a moment players can play through in *Android: Mainframe* (a hack of a key financial institution). As a consequence of the actions in this stand-alone game, the *Android* Universe's Corporations are sent into chaos, which is shown through each Flashpoint cycle datapack, and has led to the overt conflict found in the stand-alone game, *New Angeles* (2016).

As characters pique fan interests, new novellas have been commissioned addressing these characters' backstories, such as the *Monster Slayer* (2016) novella by Daniel Clark, addressing character Reina Roja's backstory, and narrative evolution has found its way into the design of card cycles themselves (e.g., the Mumbad Cycle's storyline involving an election cycle in a future Indian Union). Many questions about connections between characters, spaces, and embedded storylines remain intriguingly unanswered: Whose picture is the runner Exile wistfully considering on the "Motivation" card? Is Thomas Haas actually 'Director Haas's Pet Project' and thus a bioroid? What *is* the "virtual" runner Apex, anyway? The changes in theme supported by the LCG model imbues *Android: Netrunner* in ways that the original *Netrunner* did not have, and also provides inquisitive players a theme with appealing *gaps* that give them further reason to familiarize one's self with the litany of cards, and to begin to associate card actions with the game's evolving narrative world. The LCG model, in this case at least, promotes continued purchasing of cards not solely for tactical advantage, but potentially to encourage player engagement with the game on a narrative level that might

also reap rewards on better understanding the game's mechanical systems.¹³

DATAPACKS AND NARRATIVE

The LCG model promotes narrative development in ways perhaps unique to this form of game. The cyberpunk theme of the Android narrative universe has changed over several games¹⁴ as well as through a number of novels and novellas set in the *Android* universe, such as William H. Keith's *Android: Free Fall* (2011) or Mel Odom's "The Identity Trilogy" (2011-2014). And, as *Android: Netrunner*'s release schedule drives the further release of cards, we have seen the recent release of a large and detailed sourcebook, *The Worlds of Android* (2015), edited by Katrina Ostrander, which explicitly elaborates the *Android* transmedia project's world and history (see Figure 3, below).

13. For more on this topic, see Jonathan Gray. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

14. It originated with Daniel Clark and Kevin Wilson's *Android* (2008) board game and was further developed with Vaccarino's *Infiltration* and now Gené and Morales's *Mainframe*.

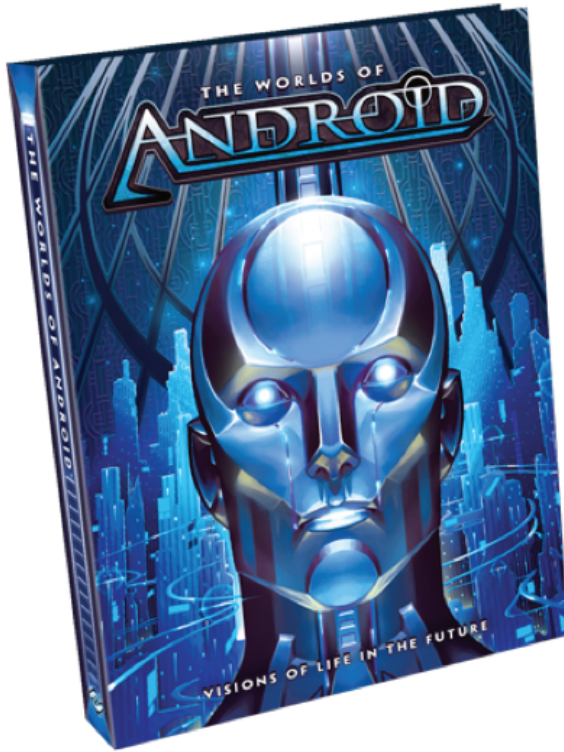


Figure 3. The Worlds of Android sourcebook, not tied to a specific game.

The LCG model permits Fantasy Flight to stagger the description of the world, as well as significant events within it. The most recent three completed datapack ‘cycles,’ the Lunar Cycle, the SanSan Cycle, and the Mumbad Cycle) have all been focused on specific locales in the world of *Android*: The space elevator known as the “Beanstalk” and the path to the Lunar colony, the megalopolis of “SanSan” (San Francisco to San Diego) that covers a chunk of the West coast of North America, and “Mumbad,” the megalopolis extending from present-day Mumbai to Ahmedabad, in India. Unlike the current larger, deluxe expansions, the game’s creators have taken

the opportunity to use the staggered release of datapacks as a means of exploring different parts of the game’s narrative world.

With the Mumbad Cycle specifically, the designers have been intent on helping a story evolve through the release of datapacks. With a storyline spread over the cycle involving a contested Indian Union election, we have seen *character* dynamics play out over the release of cards. For instance, in Figure 4 below, we see three cards organized chronologically — “Jesminder Sareen,” a “Runner” (playable character within the game, released in the first pack), her sister “Akshara Sareen” (a political leader, and “resource” for a player to rely on, released in the third pack), and “The Price of Freedom” (an event, released in the final pack of the cycle). The interaction of these cards presents the player with both the staggered release of options (the mid-cycle release of Akshara mirroring her rise to prominence in Indian politics), as well as a moral quandary (“The Price of Freedom”’s mechanical implications and card art implying Jesminder’s sacrifice of her own sister to achieve her anti-Corporate goals).



Figure 4. The evolution of story through Android: Netrunner’s Mumbad Cycle.

The development of the Sareen family drama is a peculiar-but-

interesting moment in the evolution of the game. Previous story overtures have been synonymous with *theme* and *location* in the game — while, say, Nasir Meidan’s travels to the Lunar colonies to uncover the mythical “Source protocols” was a featured story in the flavor text that accompanied datapacks in the Lunar Cycle, the Sareen case appears to be different. In the Mumbad Cycle, Fantasy Flight has staggered narrative elements through the datapacks, using temporal ordering of the release of packs to further a specific storyline. It would make little sense to release either “Akshara Sareen” or “Jesminder Sareen” after “The Price of Freedom,” with the Event card capturing a potentially-tragic moment in the lives of the characters. As the current cycle, Flashpoint, develops, we see similar play between mechanics and narrative evolving — the aftermath of a serious financial hack has seen datapacks bounce between cards that provide powerful new strategies to the Corp followed by datapacks that provide powerful new Runner counterstrategies. The mechanical changes are couched in a conflict that maps directly onto the IP’s ongoing story development.

The sense of “story” here is admittedly thin and largely limited to card art and the “flavor text” seen at the bottom of some cards. But while datapacks have been seen primarily as collections of cards to change one’s play, recent design developments illustrate the ways that their sequential release is used to further a storyline. As datapacks in *Android: Netrunner* were initially presented as an alternative to the randomized boosters of collectible card games, their thematic focus has been sidelined in favor of mechanical innovations (e.g., the Lunar Cycle’s inclusion of “currents”). As Fantasy Flight refines its LCG model, it also provides the opportunity for researchers and designers to better consider *temporality* in the release of gaming products (and

transmedia products released in parallel, such as *Android: Mainframe* and the upcoming game *New Angeles*).

CONCLUSIONS

Android: Netrunner is a rich and evolving updated version of a nearly two-decade old analog card game that has developed a number of interesting innovations in how its release model has affected both the mechanical development of the game, as well as its evolution as a transmedia property. In particular, Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera's statement on the design of gaming intellectual properties seems to be directly challenged by the continued evolution and development of the *Android* universe. *Android: Netrunner* and the *Android* universe provoke us to consider the ways that narrative interplays with mechanical and commercial concerns over multiple intellectual properties.

I also suggest that LCGs such as this should also serve as an impetus for new community-level questions about analog game studies: How do we understand the interrelations of games as sets of mechanics and evolving storyworlds? How do we understand how game models such as the LCG provide new and interesting approaches to the development of narrative in analog games? Through this cursory analysis, I have hoped to raise the possibility that deeper investigations of game release models (as well as their interactions with larger transmedia enterprises) may provide insights on how nascent fandoms are created through mechanics and business strategies.

Positionality and Performance

A Player's Encounter with the Lost Tribes of Small World

ANTONNET JOHNSON

I listened to my partner read the rules as I pressed my fingers along the cardboard perforations, freeing each token one-by-one. The objective in this game is to win the most victory points—a task primarily achieved through strategic race selection and territorial expansion. “Easy enough,” I thought, mentally noting its similarity to other games I’d played.

Weighing my choices, I asked, “What happens to the Lost Tribes if I move here?”

“I think it just goes back in the box,” my partner responded while thumbing through the rules.

“Really? That’s it? They don’t come back onto the map like race tokens do?” I pressed.

“Yeah,” he assured me, “It just costs more to take their territory, but as long as you have enough to cover the cost, they just go back into the box, and you get the land.”

Uncomfortable for reasons I couldn’t quite parse, I found my mind wandering to memories of childhood. “I’m not playing anymore!” I’d whine, practically begging to be taken seriously. That kind of

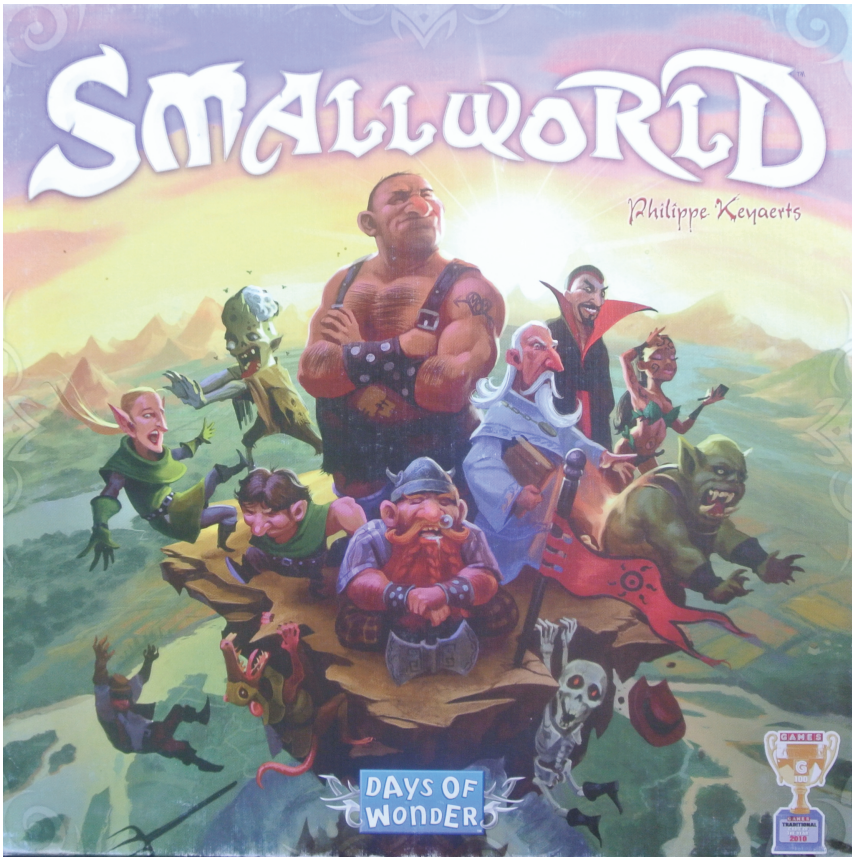
outburst was usually the result of physical or mental discomfort like when horseplay pushed the boundaries of “fun” or when it had become painfully clear my brother was about to defeat me in another game. As an adult, I’ve come to recognize that such an exclamations are inappropriate, that there are ways you are expected to behave.

I quieted the impulse, but still felt it there, beneath the surface, threatening to boil over, begging to be taken seriously.

The tension between social and cultural expectations of behavior and what we do in the games we play is central to conversations in game studies. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga’s “magic circle”—the invisible boundary that divides play space from the rest of ordinary life—has been a core concept in these debates.¹ As ludologist Jesper Juul explains, “playing a game not only means following or observing the rules of that game, but there are also special social conventions about how one can act towards other people when playing games.”² Despite being broadly understood as a boundary, the magic circle is not impenetrable; it is socially negotiated among players. Juul argues that because it is co-constructed, the magic circle should be examined within its specific context rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all explanation of the absolute, unchanging barrier between the real world and the temporary game-world. Following this vein, in this article I will analyze my own experiences playing the board game *Small World* (2009) in order to explore how games can position players in networks of social difference. Using visual rhetorical analysis, textual analysis, and the lens of performance, I will specifically examine the role of the Lost Tribes tokens in *Small World* and their possible implications for players. In doing so, I show how games place players in precarious social positions by expecting

1. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play-Element of Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.
2. Jesper Juul. “The Magic Circle and the Puzzle Piece.” In *Conference Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games 2008*. Edited by Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch. Potsdam, Germany: Potsdam University Press, 2008, p. 60.

players to perform in ways or to enact values that contradict their lived realities.



Small World box art. Image used with permission of the author, and reproduced for purposed of critique.

PLAYER POSITIONALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND THE PRODUCTION OF FUN

Many scholars have dedicated their work to studying games and play in effort to better explain and understand the place of games in our world. What makes games different and sets them apart from other social practices? In what ways are games similar to other forms of

media, and other activities? As board game designer and historian Bruce Whitehill demonstrates in his analysis of *The Mansion of Happiness* (1843), American board games were once designed as tools intended to teach players (usually children) how to live in the world, and have only recently become reframed as *mere* leisure activities characterized by play and fun.³ That games have become closely aligned with cultural beliefs about frivolity, play, fun, and the non-serious is the impetus behind anthropologist Thomas Malaby's essay, "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games." Malaby argues that many dominant narratives about games are the result of uncritically layering the study of play atop the study of games. The assumption that games and play must necessarily be joined sustains the belief that games are necessarily separate "from what matters, from where 'real' things happen."⁴ Even the idea that games are "potential utopias promising new transformative possibilities for society"⁵ suggests they are somehow beyond everyday experiences. Rather, much like Juul's call for examining instances of the magic circle within its context, Malaby suggests that we can create a more enriched body of study if we work toward understanding the various contexts that open up or limit possibilities for "cultural accomplishments" like fun.

Some game scholars do this kind of research (often indirectly) by examining how social difference is represented in and by game components, mechanics, and themes. Such critical conversations regarding board games, specifically, have been circulating at *Analog Games Studies* where Nancy Foasberg's examination of *Goa* (2004) and *Navegador* (2010) illustrates how foundational economic mechanics in the games combined with selective historical

3. Bruce Whitehill. "American Games: A Historical Perspective." *International Journal for the Study of Board Games* 2 (1999), pp. 116-141.

4. Thomas Malaby. "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games." *Games and Culture* 2.2 (2007): p. 97.

5. Malaby, p. 97.

engagement replicate “colonial fantasies;” Will Robinson discusses the ways games “contribute to Orientalism, shaping what the East is to the West through abstraction and the politics of erasure;”⁷ and Greg Loring-Albright advocates abandoning *Catan*’s (1995) “frontier myth” in favor of a critical modification that incorporates indigenous tribes rather than ignores their existence.⁸ Critical games scholarship, by critiquing the perpetuation of particular narratives (e.g., classist, racist, sexist, heteronormative, colonial, and capitalist) underscore how “fun” can depend upon player positionality. Furthermore, the study of how games (re)produce dominant narratives and Western ideologies raises important questions about the implications that these games have for players. *Because* tabletop games are often seen as leisurely, low-stakes activities (which are, therefore, relatively inconsequential), it is expected that individuals assume the roles and values assigned to players in a given game—even, and perhaps especially, when this means engaging in practices they would otherwise disagree with, and in some cases, condemn. It is this very expectation that makes the work of both Foasberg and Loring-Albright so important. Concern for the ways individuals navigate the complicated positions they are expected to occupy as a condition of agreeing to play the game (or to enter the magic circle) is integral to both Foasberg’s and Loring-Albright’s research.

Whereas much of the work outlined above centers on game components, mechanics, and themes to reveal the privileging of particular values, I analyze my own positionality in relationship to a specific game (*Small World*) to illustrate how one’s necessary

6. Nancy Foasberg. “The Problematic Pleasures of Productivity and Efficiency in Goa and Navegador.” *Analog Games Studies* 3.2 (2016). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/the-problematic-pleasures-of-productivity-and-efficiency-in-go-a-and-navegador/>.

7. Will Robinson. “Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames.” *Analog Game Studies* 1.5 (2014). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames>.

8. Greg Loring-Albright. “The First Nations of Catan: Practices in Critical Modification.” *Analog Game Studies* 2.7 (2015). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-first-nations-of-catan-practices-in-critical-modification/>.

compliance with such mechanics or themes can spoil, interrupt, or bar the very production of “fun” through gameplay. Additionally, my work centers on how games both open and close possibilities for the performance of—that is, the (re)construction of—identities, and demonstrates how games, by placing players in precarious positions of social performance, are spaces where meaning must be (re)negotiated, contested and (re)shaped. Here, performance is both the simple execution of tasks as expected (i.e., playing by the rules and with the objective of winning the game), *and* a theoretical frame for thinking about the (re)construction of social identities. Sociologist Erving Goffman’s understanding of performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants,”⁹ speaks both to the social roles we play in our day-to-day lives, as well as the simple ways our actions in a game influence the actions of others (e.g., modifying strategies and moves based on the actions of others, or eliminating options for other players by removing pieces from the board). Even activity that is not regulated by the game itself, such as our body language, can influence how other players participate. More important to my argument, however, is the notion that identities are (re)constructed through performance, and that engagement in and with games—which do not preclude the lived realities of participants—often requires performances that (re)construct the self in relationship to the game. As philosopher Judith Butler has famously argued, identities are not fixed and stable. They do not exist before or outside of discourse and performance; identities are thus shifting and flexible, constituted by iterative performances.¹⁰ In this way, the repetition of non-neutral actions as part of gameplay, can be understood as a means of performing, or (re)constructing, identity.

9. Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959, p. 15.

10. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

THE LOST TRIBES OF SMALL WORLD

In this section, I examine the game *Small World* as one example of how player positionality (i.e., the extent to which players identify or align themselves with the game's expectations) affects the game experience and how game actions open and close possibilities for the (re)construction of identities through performance. I have chosen *Small World* as my example because it is generally well-received and popular, and also because it relies on familiar and relatively accessible mechanics, which allows me to focus on analysis rather than explanation of the game. Although I briefly describe the game's mechanics and theme and conduct a brief textual and visual analysis of its components, I do so to contextualize the focus of this section: positionality and performance in game play. By using performance as a lens for considering my own positionality, I demonstrate how—and argue that—players must sometimes perform in ways that complicate, contradict, and even undermine their own lived realities.

In 2009, Days of Wonder published Philippe Keyaerts' *Small World*, the highly anticipated follow-up to *Vinci* (1999). *Small World* is an area control game like its predecessor, but what sets it apart is the combination of its positive reception among designers and players,¹¹ its eye-catching and award-winning artwork,¹² its adoption of a fantasy theme (departing from the more common settler-colonial or civilization themes), and its resistance to easy categorization among hobbyists. Although bearing many similarities to Eurogames, such as indirect conflict, *Small World's* mechanics favor direct conflict in a manner typically associated with Ameritrash games, as evidenced

11. With a peak rank of 34, it maintained a spot among the 100 most highly rated games on boardgamegeek.com for three years. Given the sheer volume of games in the database, this is particularly impressive. As of June 2016, *Small World* has the 10th highest number of ratings and is one of only twelve games with more than 30,000 votes.

12. Globally, the game was nominated for a variety of awards in a range of categories from artwork and presentation to game of the year. The Days of Wonder website lists a selection of honors and awards, but the most detailed list of nominations and awards can be found on boardgamegeek.com.

by the language displayed on the box: “It’s a World of (S)laughter, After All!” *Small World* embraces and emphasizes a cut-throat battle of races, in which players “use their troops to occupy territory and conquer adjacent lands *in order to push the other races off the face of the earth* . . . players rush to expand their empires—often at the expense of weaker neighbors.”¹³ Such militarized language—“troops,” “occupy territory,” “conquer,” “expand their empires,” and “expense of weaker neighbors”—is juxtaposed with vibrant, colorful, cartoon-like designs that ultimately overshadow the darkness of the text. The appearance of fantasy races (Amazons, Dwarves, Elves, Ghouls, Giants, Halflings, Orcs, Ratmen, Skeletons, Sorcerors, Tritons, Trolls, and Wizards), along with the game’s artwork, lightens the overall tone of the game. Ultimately, the design signals to players that the game is not real, that the game is fantasy, and that by engaging with the game, one is pretending to be something they are not.

While the text and artwork of *Small World* is a rich area for further analysis, this article focuses on how the game’s rules—specifically concerning the Lost Tribes—positions its players in social relations that exist both in and outside of the game itself. As a Filipino-American, cisgender woman, I am socially, culturally, and economically positioned (and read) differently than many of the people with whom I often play games. Therefore, although we may be playing the same game and following the same rules, each of us experiences the gameplay in different ways. These experiences are particularly complicated for players whose realities are not represented and/or are contradicted by elements of the game.

In *Small World*, players begin their first turn by selecting from a randomized set of face-up race tokens. Using the race they have selected, they spend each turn strategically conquering territory on

13. See product description on the game’s website, <https://www.daysofwonder.com/smallworld/en/>.

the board. Each region occupied by a player's race at the end of their turn earns them a victory point. Play continues with their selected race until players use a turn to place the race into decline, at which point they remove most of those tokens from the board and use the following turn to choose a new race. The player with the most victory points at the end of the game wins. Prior to *Small World*, I had played a number of games in which territory expansion is the primary means of winning. So, this gave me little pause. Part of this process sometimes involved overcoming obstacles, such as lairs, mountains, encampments or other physical obstacles that would generally make taking the land more challenging. Still, this made sense to me. Of course it would take more people—and more loss—to conquer a region with unfamiliar terrain. The same is true of taking land from other races in the game. If Trolls want to take land from the Orcs, there will be a battle and some will be lost. However, one aspect of the game halted me: the Lost Tribes.

The game rules describe the Lost Tribes as “remnants of long-forgotten civilizations that have fallen into decline but still populate some regions at game start.”¹⁴ Their function is similar to lairs, fortresses, or mountains: to take a region occupied by the Lost Tribes, a player must pay an additional race token. Mechanically, this seems similar to taking land from an opponent, but the Lost Tribes are impacted differently. Despite its resemblance in size and shape, the Lost Tribes are not considered a race token. While race tokens can be redeployed, the Lost Tribes cannot. Instead, they are removed from the board and returned to the box, a point that can have a significant effect on individual player experiences. Furthermore, the artwork on the token offers relatively few details compared to race tokens: a white outline envelops a blend of reds, browns, and blacks

14. Philippe Keyaerts. *Small World*. Paris: Days of Wonder, 2009. Game rules insert, p. 2.

to create shadowy profile known only as the Lost Tribes. Regardless of whether they are intended to be humans or humanoid creatures, they occupy a dehumanized position in relationship to game's race tokens. Literally faceless, the Lost Tribes are thus represented more abstractly than race tokens, which are illustrated with richer, more detailed visuals including facial features. Even in name, their fate is predetermined. They are to be forgotten, to disappear from the world as their land is taken. Their only function is to be eliminated; they exist for eradication at the hands of others.

Not until I was confronted with the choice of taking their land was I confronted with my own positionality as a player of color. To play the game to win was to take their land, returning the token to the box, and earning victory points for doing so. Yet, I found myself choking on my conflict. I wanted to win, but I didn't want to participate in this kind of narrative. The game-world began to collapse; the magic circle began to look a lot more like everyday life. With clarity, I saw the way my choice would symbolically constitute myself, and how, as sociologist Dennis Waskul argues, "neat distinctions between person, player, and persona become messy . . . erod[ing] into utterly permeable interlocking moments of experience."¹⁵ Something stirring crawled inside me, pushing and pulling in different directions at once, and this thing, having been there for only a moment, turned these seemingly separate pieces of me into a viscous, malleable muck, making clear the muddiness of the self, the messiness of my positionality. In games, Waskul explains, players must take on "a marginal and hyphenated role that is situated in the liminal boundaries of more than one frame of reality."¹⁶ I knew I was removing a token from a board, but I also knew that having

15. Dennis D. Waskul. "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: the Ludic Self and Everyday Life." In *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006, p. 31.

16. Waskul, p. 19.

to physically *do* this—replace the Lost Tribes with my own token and physically eliminate them from the game—felt like a socially symbolic gesture of approval. I felt I both *was* and *wasn't* participating in the eradication of Lost Tribes. This was a moment of what critical cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification:

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious and shameful . . . It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.¹⁷

As a player of color, I recognize in this moment of tension that *Small World* was not designed for me, and yet, it also was. I live in a reality where most texts and activities I consume are *not* made for me, and yet, I consume them—voraciously, and with a pleasure of questionable authenticity. As a gamer with a particular appreciation of Eurogames, a gamer who *enjoys* winning, and often at games that require me to engage in activities I would never condone otherwise, I am, in many moments, the kind of person for whom *Small World* is created. Thus, while I am overtly critical of this game's inclusion and treatment of the Lost Tribes, I also recognize that it is productive. It produced, in me, the need to vocalize my disapproval, to re-read the game through the eyes it was not meant for, to "to hold on to this object and invest it with new life," by performing in this essay, the decoding of a "cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy."¹⁸ While I cannot account for the experiences of other players, I hope

17. José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 12.

18. Muñoz, p. 25.

that in seeing me publicly begin the work of theorizing my own experience as a tabletop game player and researcher will open up the space for others to consider the significance of moments when gameplay unfolds unpredictably, reaching beyond the magic circle, and into lived realities of everyday life.

CONCLUSION

As game scholar Mia Consalvo argues, an overly rigid concept of the magic circle erases the very real ways in which our lives and identities both touch and are touched by the game space.¹⁹ I suggest that we look to these moments of tension as productive moments of negotiation. The Lost Tribes in *Small World* should neither be overlooked as an unimportant element of fun, nor wholly condemned as overtly complicit with racist and imperialist ideologies. Rather, examples such as this serve as important nodes of tension that can lead to productive conversations.

As critical game studies show, and my work here illustrates, games often require that players negotiate multiple positions: some oppressive, others imperialistic, still others racist (though none are mutually exclusive). When navigating social terrain requires movement along paths that are not for us, our movement becomes one of reconciliation, fraught with the contradictions among sense of self, expectations, and performances. And when these moments of tension present themselves, when they are *recognized* and *felt*, they become moments of performance—opportunities that are never wholly good nor wholly bad, but that must instead be seen as presenting players with a chance to (re)negotiate meaning. These are productive moments, creating needs, feelings, and (re)actions among players, scholars, and designers. For instance, others who have

19. Mia Consalvo. "There Is No Magic Circle." *Games and Culture* 4.4 (2009): 408–417.

struggled with this element of *Small World* have turned to modifying how the Lost Tribes function within the game, reaching for a critical modification not unlike that proposed by Loring-Albright.²⁰

When I encountered the Lost Tribes in *Small World*, I was confronted by the simultaneous pleasure and displeasure of my disidentification with the player position constructed by the game's language, artwork, and mechanics. This is evidenced in my own symbolical contribution to a narrative of erasure entrenched with values I would not typically call my own, feeling uneasy with this choice, and coming to the realization that perhaps they *are* my own and I am merely being called upon to recognize them. Both are true and neither is *always* the case. When the condition of playing the game by the rules necessitates performing or acting out what we recognize as a contradiction of who we believe we are, or who we want to be and want others to see us as, there is both possibility and limitation. They are not separate, but bound together, existing in uneasy tension that can lead to productive conversations and new ways of gaming.

20. There are several posts on boardgamegeek forums discussing options for modifying how players use the Lost Tribes token. One in particular voices discomfort with taking land from the Lost Tribes and asks others for advice on modifying the game. <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/702780/small-world-lost-tribe-overhall>.

Pen and Paper

How Dungeons and Dragons Appropriated the Orient

AARON TRAMMELL

“...The mysterious and exotic Orient, land of spices and warlords, has at last opened her gates to the West.” —TSR, Inc.¹

The above blurb was printed on the back of the 1985 “official” *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* supplement *Oriental Adventures*. Tellingly, it reveals much about the target reader. The reader here is assumed to be of western descent, specifically American, Canadian, or British.² They find the “Orient”³ mysterious and exotic, notable for both its colonial bounty—the riches of the spice trade—and its war-torn landscape, made famous by warlords like Genghis Khan. Finally, the reader is assumed to perceive the Orient as somewhat feminized, possessing a subordinate relationship to western nations, culture, industry, and governance. A skeptical reading of this blurb

1. Gary Gygax. *Oriental Adventures*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Inc., 1985 [back cover].

2. A point which is driven home by the publishing houses used to distribute the book: Random House, Inc. (in the U.S.), Random House of Canada, Inc. (in Canada), and TSR UK Ltd. (in the U.K.).

3. Like Edward Said, I choose to drop the scare quotes around the Orient for the remainder of this essay. The term is highly problematic and the intent of this paper is to grant insight toward how its problematic logic is reproduced. Edward Said. *Orientalism*. London: Vintage Books, 1978.

suggests that the success of *Oriental Adventures* was predicated upon a racist and sexist culture of American, Canadian, and British gamers who were interested in barnstorming through the gates of the “Orient” to confront barbaric hordes in order to plunder the land’s riches. A more generous reading would suggest that a racist and sexist culture of American, Canadian, and British gamers simply wanted to develop a finer sense of appreciation for the another more “exotic” culture. Either way, it is clear that *Oriental Adventures* revels in what cultural theorist Edward Said refers to as *orientalism*—a way of reducing the complexity of eastern culture to a set of problematically racist and sexist stereotypes. This essay explores how orientalism was schematized as a set of game rules in *Dungeons & Dragons* and argues that we can observe how the affiliated racist and sexist attitudes are articulated within the game’s procedural logic.

This essay looks at how notions of race and culture inform broader practices of game design and representation. I am judiciously reviewing material from *Dungeons & Dragons*, as it was both central to discussions of role-playing in the 1980s and tremendously influential in the history of game design.⁴ Although some games like 2005’s *Jade Empire* have followed explicitly in the tradition of *Oriental Adventures*, this essay shows its impact on the discourse of game design more broadly. In particular, the influence of orientalism can be traced through game mechanics governing comeliness, non-weapon proficiencies, and alignment in games featuring role-playing elements.

Oriental Adventures was both a critically lauded and commercially successful supplement for *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was rebooted in 2001 for compatibility with *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd edition, this

4. Michael J. Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013; Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World*. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

time winning an ENnie award.⁵ The original 1985 supplement, as described in the introduction the 3rd edition reboot, was influenced by the 1980 television miniseries *Shogun* and the 1979 role-playing game *Bushido*. As such, *Oriental Adventures* is very much indebted to the interest in eastern culture which was popularized in America, both by Kurowsawa's samurai in the late 1950s, and the kung fu film genre—typified by Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* (1973)—in the early 1970s.⁶ The game is written for a presumably western, white, male audience who is interested in exploring the cultural tropes of the eastern world.

Can *Dungeons & Dragons* even exist without Orientalism? For all of the excellent work that Mike Mearls and Jeremy Crawford have done in designing a world that fosters a more critical dialogue around gender though 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014),⁷ overtones of orientalism pervade the text, adorning the *Player's Handbook* like sequins. First, there are illustrations: an East Asian warlock,⁸ a female samurai,¹⁰ an Arabian princess,¹¹ an Arab warrior,¹² and a Moor in battle,¹³ to name a few. Then, there are mechanics: the Monk persists as a class¹⁴ replete with a spiritual connection to another world via the “ki” mechanic. Scimitars and blowguns are commonly available as weapons,¹⁵ and elephants are available for purchase as mounts

5. The ENnies (Annual Gen Con EN World RPG Awards) are a fan moderated award system affiliated with the site EN World and distributed annually at the Gen Con gaming convention. For more information about the ENnies, see <http://www.ennie-awards.com/blog/>

6. As this essay will later explain, orientalism appropriates East and Central Asian figures like the samurai and kung fu master under the veneer of appreciation. These figures were lauded in American cinema at the time, whereas Southeast Asian representations were generally negative due to their associations with the Vietnam War.

7. Mike Mearls, Jeremy Crawford, et al. *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook*. 5th Edition. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

8. Although I focus on the *Player's Handbook* here because it is more popular, it is worth noting that the 5th edition *Dungeon Master's Guide* offers a few notes on “Wuxia” as a campaign setting (p. 41) that follows in the tradition of *Oriental Adventures* (although far more implicitly).

9. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p.105.

10. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p. 140

11. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p. 148

12. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p. 156

13. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p. 188.

14. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, pp.76–81.

15. Mearls and Crawford, *Player's Handbook*, p. 149

for only 200 gold.¹⁶ Although all of these mechanics are presented with an earnest multiculturalist ethic of appreciation, this ethic often surreptitiously produces a problematic and fictitious exotic, Oriental figure. At this point, given the embrace of multiculturalism by the franchise, it seems that the system is designed to embrace the construction of Orientalist fictional worlds where the Orient and Occident mix, mingle, and wage war.

For Edward Said, “orientalism” means many different things. Orientalism is an antiquated yet pervasive (in 1978) academic way of understanding the Orient. Orientalism is also philosophical mode of comparing western (known) culture, people, customs, and society to the exotic eastern unknown. Finally, orientalism is the practice of reducing the people, religions, nations, geography, and cultures of east to a singular and stereotypical imaginary. In Said’s words, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹⁷ These three definitions of orientalism work together to produce an oppressive system of knowledge of around the Orient systematically reproduced in *institutions* such as academia, *authoritative texts* such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and histories, and *popular culture* such as kung fu movies, bric-a-brac in head and curiosity shops, role-playing supplements.¹⁸ Notably, orientalism is closely related to the figure of the Orientalist—the western researcher who acquires cultural knowledge from the eastern world in order to define, restructure, and produce an authoritative vision of what the Orient is. Although we might criticize the position of authority

16. Mearls and Crawford, *Player’s Handbook*, p. 156.

17. Said, p. 3.

18. Debates and discourse around orientalism have continued long after Edward Said wrote *Orientalism* in 1978. Notably, Aijaz Ahmad (*Orientalism and After* (1992)), Sadik Jalal al-‘Azam (*Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse* (1980)), and Ibn Warraq (*Defending the West* (2009)) have criticized Said’s work for relying too much on binary logics (Orient and Occident; east and west; self and other), an arbitrary focus on 18th, 19th, and 20th century thought, and the paradoxical use of western methods in criticizing western thought. Despite these critiques, I choose to follow Said’s thought in this essay as I feel that it helps to provoke a critical dialogue around problems of knowledge and epistemology that lie at the heart of today’s game design practices.

that the Orientalist maintained as well as the stereotypes that were developed and disseminated through their work, it is important to remember that the Orientalist saw themselves as somewhat “heroic,”¹⁹ cultivating a popular appreciation for eastern culture.

In the tradition of the Orientalists, Gary Gygax—author of the first *Oriental Adventures* supplement—related a keen sense of enthusiasm in his preface to the manual. “*Oriental Adventures* is a landmark work in the game system. It brings not only new information; this book adds a whole new world. As such, this is a wonderful event that brings enthusiasts the best of both worlds...literally.”²⁰ Gygax saw the volume as an effort to make the exotic locales of the “far east” mundane, and in the spirit of the post-racial politics of Reagan’s America inject the spirit of multiculturalism into *Dungeons & Dragons* through “cross-cultural adventuring.” Gygax’s foray into chronicling the cultures of the “orient” had much to do with his appreciation of the culture.

These contending factors—the related notions of appreciation and authority—are key to understanding how orientalism, despite the best intentions of Orientalist authors, persists as an ideology. Although Gary Gygax envisioned a campaign setting that brought a multicultural dimension to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the reality is that by lumping together Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Philippine, and “Southeast Asian” lore he and co-authors David “Zeb” Cook and Francois Marcela-Froideval actually developed a campaign setting that reinforced western culture’s already racist understanding of the “Orient.” Appreciation and authority are conjured, in part, through the manual’s form. *Oriental Adventures*, like all *Dungeons & Dragons* manuals is written in a comprehensive and exhaustive style that

19. Said, p. 121.

20. Gygax, p. 3

mimics the form of an encyclopedia in its organization.²¹ Apart from the tables, charts, and illustrations that had, at this point, become standard fare in role-playing supplements, *Oriental Adventures* also included a 72-work bibliography that simultaneously relates an appreciation of and authority over the Orient. This structure, the encyclopedic, although derived through practices of appreciation becomes ultimately an exercise in producing an authoritative source in what does and does fit into the imaginary of the game's world.

Although the manual's form speaks to the interest of Gygax and company in displaying both appreciation and authority toward the Orient, it also encouraged players to develop a similar disposition. In "A Step Beyond Shogun... A Reader's Guide to Adventuring in the Orient," David Bunnell offers a review of the literature contained in the *Oriental Adventures* bibliography.²² In Bunnell's words:

the books I have mentioned are excellent resources for the gamer who wishes to add that extra flavor to his campaign. I enjoy role-playing, and I started (as most of us did) by playing the medieval ancestors that I imagine that I once had. Now, after a great deal of reading, I am ready to try to role-play in a totally different feudal culture. I don't know if I'll ever truly understand the Japanese culture, but I will certainly enjoy myself while learning.²³

It is by learning the Orientalist texts listed in the *Oriental Adventures* bibliography that Bunnell felt able to authentically role-play characters in a non-western feudal society. Simply put: by cultivating a sense of cultural appreciation, Bunnell was able to authoritatively produce a feudal Japanese world for himself and his players. "A short survey of a few especially significant books in the field may help

21. To this point, TSR Hobbies at one point published a Rules Cyclopedia in a similar fashion to help orient players to the rules of the game. Aaron Allston, et al. *Dungeons and Dragons Rules Cyclopedia*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, Inc., 1991.

22. David Bunnell. "A Step Beyond Shogun... A Reader's Guide to Adventuring in the Orient." *Dragon* 122. (June 1987), pp. 18-19.

23. Bunnell, p. 19.

these bewildered [Dungeon Masters] get back on the path toward successful Oriental gaming.”²⁴ Clearly “success” for Bunnell is linked to both the appreciation of the Orientalist texts as listed in the *Oriental Adventures* bibliography and the authority that is cultivated through this form of appreciation.

**TABLE 5-7: NEW WEAPONS
SIMPLE WEAPONS—RANGED**

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Critical	Range Increment	Weight	Type**
Small						
Blowgun*	1 gp	1	x2	10 ft.	2 lb.	Piercing
Needles, blowgun (20)	1 gp	—	—	—	**	—
MARTIAL WEAPONS—MELEE						
Small						
Wakizashi*	300 gp	1d6	19–20/x2	—	3 lb.	Slashing
Large						
Nagamaki	8 gp	2d4	x3	—	10 lb.	Slashing
Naginata*†	10 gp	1d10	x3	—	15 lb.	Slashing
EXOTIC WEAPONS—MELEE						
Tiny						
Nekode*	5 gp	1d4	x2	—	2 lb.	Piercing
Tail spikes, ratling*	1 gp	1d4	x2	—	1/2 lb.	Piercing
Small						
Butterfly sword*Δ	10 gp	1d6	19–20/x2	—	2 lb.	Slashing
Jitte*	5 sp	1d4	x2	—	2 lb.	Bludgeoning
Ninja-to*	10 gp	1d6	19–29/x2	—	3 lb.	Slashing
Sai*	1 gp	1d4	x2	—	2 lb.	Bludgeoning
Tonfa	5 sp	1d6	x2	—	2 lb.	Bludgeoning
War fan	30 gp	1d6	x3	—	3 lb.	Slashing
Medium-size						
Katana*	400 gp	1d10	19–20/x2	—	6 lb.	Slashing
Kau sin ke Δ	15 gp	1d8	x2	—	4 lb.	Bludgeoning
Kawanaga*¥Δ	10 gp	1d3/1d3	x2	—	1 lb.	Slashing/ Bludgeoning
Lajatang, korobokuru*‡Δ	80 gp	1d6/1d6	x2	—	3 lb.	Slashing
Large						
Chain*¥	5 gp	1d6/1d6	x2	—	5 lb.	Bludgeoning
Chijiriki*‡	8 gp	1d6/1d4	x2	—	6 lb.	Piercing/ Bludgeoning
Kusari-gama*¥	10 gp	1d6/1d4	x2	—	3 lb.	Slashing/ Bludgeoning
Lajatang*‡Δ	90 gp	1d8/1d8	x2	—	7 lb.	Slashing
Sang kauw*‡Δ	95 gp	1d8/1d8	x3	—	10 lb.	Piercing
Sasumata*†	8 gp	1d4‡	x2	—	8 lb.	Bludgeoning
Shikomi-zue**Δ	12 gp	1d8	x3	—	5 lb.	Piercing
Sodegarami*	4 gp	1d4	x2	—	5 lb.	Piercing
Three-section staff Δ	4 gp	1d8	x3	—	8 lb.	Bludgeoning
EXOTIC WEAPONS—RANGED						
Tiny						
Fukimi-Bari* Δ (mouth darts)	1 gp	1	x2	10 ft.	1/10th lb.	Piercing
Small						
Chakram Δ	15 gp	1d4	x3	30 ft.	2 lb.	Slashing
Large						
Blowgun, greater*	10 gp	1d3	x2	10 ft.	4 lb.	Piercing
Darts, blowgun (10)	1 gp	—	—	—	1 lb.	—

The goal of orientalism is to produce encyclopedic knowledge about an imagined and exotic other. Image used for purposes of critique. James Wyatt. *Oriental Adventures*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2001, p. 73.

24. Bunnell, p. 18.

COMELINESS AND HONOR

The secret to understanding the forms of racism that accompany *Oriental Adventures* is recognizing that it is assumed that the characters played will be oriental—whatever that means. This sometimes means connecting the dots and questioning why certain game mechanics have been included or altered. Take for example the new statistic that is offered: “Comeliness.” At face value, Comeliness seems like a simple modification to the game’s core mechanics, which had already been taking into account “Charisma” for the better part of ten years. But unlike Charisma, Comeliness is meant to speak more directly to beauty: “While Charisma deals specifically with leadership and loyalty, Comeliness deals with attractiveness and first impressions.”²⁵ Comeliness becomes a game mechanic in *Oriental Adventures* because the feminized Asian man is part of the Oriental imaginary.²⁶ Where the assumed male player in *Dungeons & Dragons* enjoyed a Charisma score which determined the extent to which his masculine charm would win the loyalty of his men on the battlefield, the Oriental man’s beauty can be apprehended through the Comeliness statistic²⁷—a dubious honor previously reserved only for women in Len Lakofka’s unfortunate article “Notes on Women and Magic.”²⁸ Thus the introduction of the Orient in *Dungeons & Dragons* invokes a radical rethinking of what constitutes a “man,” and the

25. Gygax, *Oriental Adventures*, p. 10.

26. Edward Said claims that in Orientalist ideology, all of the Orient is considered weak and childlike compared to the west. Said, p. 40.

27. *Oriental Adventures* was developed at TSR Inc. simultaneously to Gygax’s other supplement *Unearthed Arcana* (1985), which also included a Comeliness statistic. That said, M. A. R. Barker’s game *Empire of the Petal Throne*, published by TSR Hobbies in 1975, was heavily influential in Gygax’s decision to adopt a Comeliness mechanic. The world of *Tékumel* was highly influenced by Orientalist lore as M. A. R. Barker was a professor of Urdu and South Asian Studies at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s. Barker’s work as a game designer was heavily influenced by the cultures of India, the Middle East, Egypt, and Meso-America. His dissertation, which was written on the Klamath language, was eventually published as a grammar and a dictionary. He would be regarded as an Orientalist by Edward Said, who was critical of the academic recapitulation and restructuring of exotic cultures and languages.

28. Len Lakofka. “Notes on Women and Magic.” *The Dragon* 3 (1976). Read more about it in my previous article “Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

sexist and racist precept that Oriental men must be evaluated also in terms of their physical beauty.

Not only does *Oriental Adventures* encourage players to think through how to quantify the appearance of Oriental men and women, it also encourages players to quantify their social worth. In addition to the implementation of Comeliness, *Oriental Adventures* also presented players with a system to consider character honor. Honor in an *Oriental Adventures* campaign is related to a character's sense of character, value to society, and overall trustworthiness. Unlike honor for a paladin in a traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, Honor in this context has been detached from the ethical matrix of alignment. Honorable characters in *Oriental Adventures* can be evil, and dishonorable characters in *Oriental Adventures* can be good. Honor, like Comeliness, is also quantified. Characters are awarded honor points by the game master: as few as zero and as many as one hundred. The imposition of an honor system within the rules of *Oriental Adventures* makes clear what had been invisible and taken for granted in Western campaign: unlike Western characters, the social worth of Oriental characters is always suspect.

Character Race/Class	Base Honor
Shukenja	20
Sohei	15
Kensai	25
Bushi	10
Hengeyokai	10
Wu Jen	15
Yakuza	1d20 + 20

A table comparing the honor of several Oriental races. Image used for purposes of critique. Gary Gygax. *Oriental Adventures*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, Inc., 1985, p. 35.

Honor is a paradigm case of Orientalism in *Dungeons & Dragons*, as it explicitly compares an imagined Oriental ethic and the West, epitomized by Christianity. Said explains:

My thesis is that the essential aspects of modern Orientalist theory and praxis (from which present-day Orientalism derives) can be understood, not as a sudden access of objective knowledge about the Orient, but as a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, redisposed, and reformed by such disciplines as philology, which in turn are naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism.²⁹

The game makes clear the comparison between Oriental honor and the Christian ethic. Western honor, epitomized by the paladin, maps cleanly onto the values that we associate with good or evil in *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment system. Good players are grounded through the dogma of the Judeo-Christian imagination, which associates good deeds with the good and honorable life. By proposing a system to govern honor that operates independent from the traditional politics of alignment, *Oriental Adventures* re-forms and contorts the Oriental family to co-exist as secular within a Judeo-Christian alignment table.

Gygax's invention of alignment in *Dungeons & Dragons* alone is replete with the tropes of Orientalism. It is a fascinating effort to juxtapose the exotic creatures and planes of a multicultural religious pantheon into the legal and religious framework of 1970s Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. By this I mean that *Dungeons & Dragons*' alignment system is a uniquely American (Law vs. Chaos) and Christian (Good vs. Evil) way of understanding the world. Gygax's early attempts to map both mythological creatures and divine

29. Said, p. 122.

landscapes upon this strata reflects this. Here, the Buddhist idea of “Nirvana” co-exist within the Christian poles of “Heaven” and “Hell”(see below). It is made to contort the polemical religious logic of Christianity. Creatures from the *Arabian Nights* mythology are also made to conform to the dynamics of alignment, yet they are placed across the grid from Christianity—away from law: Djinni are good, but chaotic; Efreeti are evil, but chaotic. Within the logic of alignment, Christian ideology is ordered, controlled, lawful while all the rest of the world skews toward the chaotic Orientalist (and mythological) pole which opposes it.

One exception to this analysis is Gygax’s analysis of Buddhism’s Nirvana which aligns itself with law and neutrality, while simultaneously evading the binary Christian constructions of Heaven and Hell (and therefore Good and Evil). Appreciation of Buddhism as another path toward lawful spiritual conduct is given here as Gygax simultaneously invented an authoritative guide to alignment. Because alignment has become so pervasive a mechanic for guiding consistent role-playing practices in role-playing games,³⁰ it is important to recognize how Gygax’s work as an Orientalist has contorted non-Western spirituality and behavior into a system of knowledge that is readily adaptable for use as a game mechanic. In other words, all games which make use of an alignment system are, to some extent, relying on a system which takes Judeo-Christian values for granted and essentializes all other ethical and spiritual thinking onto a grid governed by its boundaries.

30. For example, a good character will not murder others for fun.

ANALOG GAME STUDIES

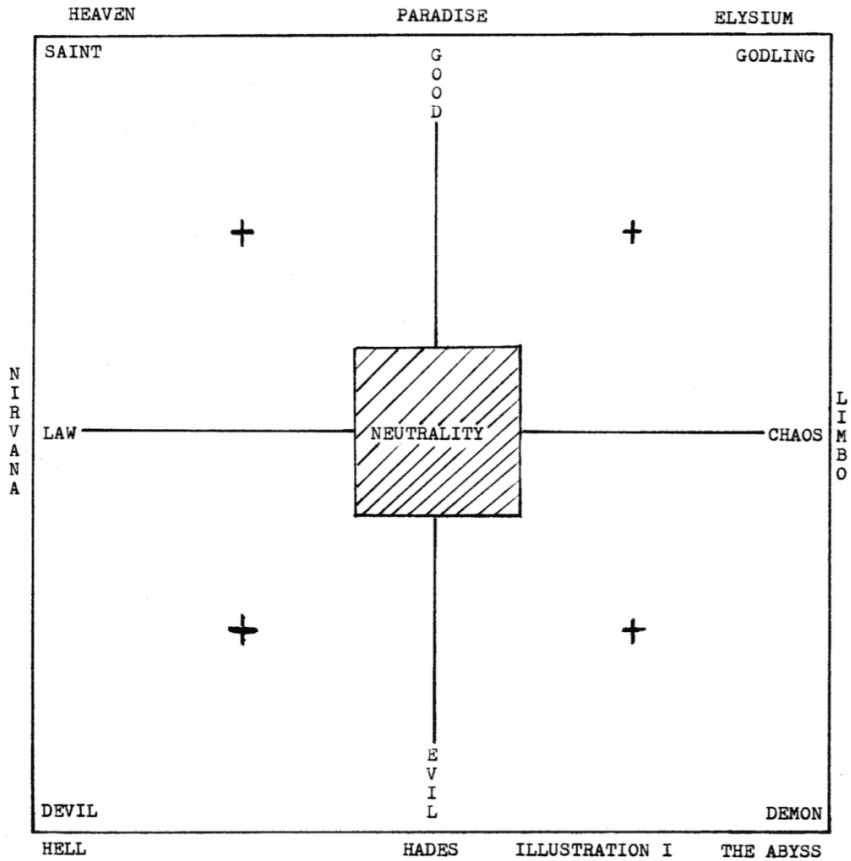


Image used for purposes of critique. Gary Gygax, "The Meaning of Law and Chaos in Dungeons & Dragons and their Relationships to Good and Evil." *The Strategic Review* 2.1 (1976), p.3.

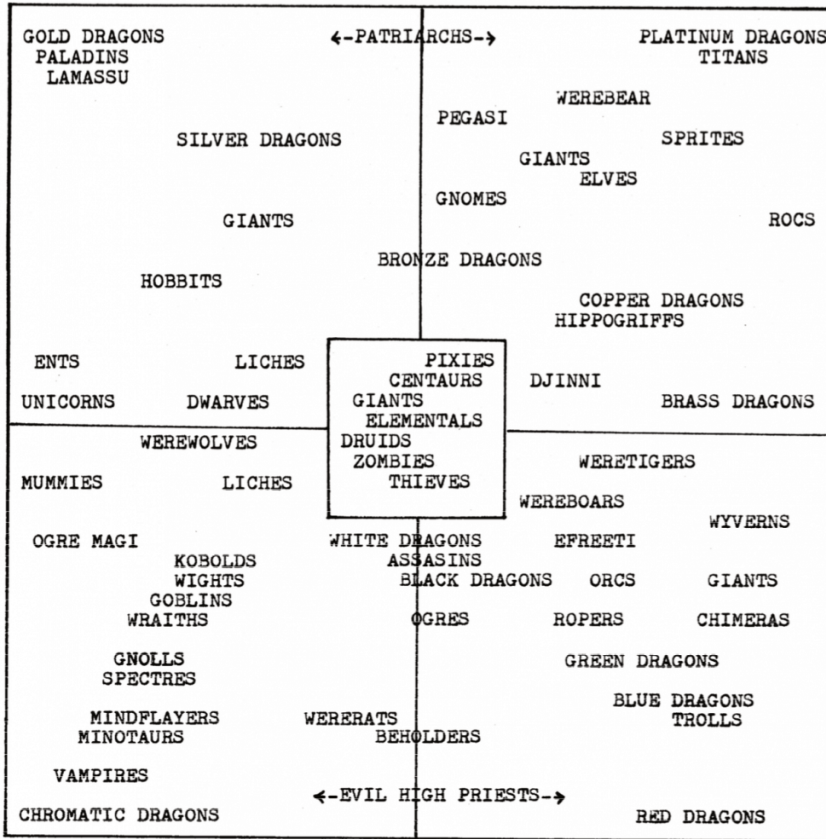


ILLUSTRATION II

Image used for purposes of critique. Gary Gygax, “The Meaning of Law and Chaos in Dungeons & Dragons and their Relationships to Good and Evil.” *The Strategic Review* 2.1 (1976), p.4.

Both Comeliness and honor show how Gygax’s appreciation for eastern culture is articulated through a set of game mechanics that both quantify this culture and compare it to the invisible and assumed dynamics of Western American culture. This mode of reductionism encourages players to imagine eastern culture as if it could be contained by a single text and represented through a single Oriental campaign setting. At its most problematic, *Oriental Adventures*

represents a complex and multifaceted set of cultural interests through a single and singular set of game mechanics.

NON-WEAPON PROFICIENCIES

Having established that the *Oriental Adventures* manual is a clear example of an Orientalist text, we can now look at the supplement's impact on the *Dungeons & Dragons* system, the invention of "non-weapon proficiencies" in particular. Here I argue that there is an isomorphic relationship between the abstraction of culture into a reductionist Orientalist imaginary and the newly minted non-weapon proficiency that reduces culture into a controllable and quantifiable procedural function. Despite the problematic nature of this reduction, the introduction of non-weapon proficiencies allows for players to consider how the game's mathematic world might exist outside of combat. Interestingly enough, the introduction of cultural game mechanics to *Dungeons & Dragons* prompts players to imagine how the game might transform into something more than a game derived from and simply about warfare.³¹

The comparison to warfare is explicit in the manual. The section on "Non-Weapon Proficiencies" begins: "In addition to weapons, characters can learn proficiencies in various peaceful arts."³² The logic of these peaceful proficiencies was folded into a logic parallel to that of combat or contest. Because the cultural differences of Oriental life could be accommodated by an honor system which established a value to life outside of the American standbys of wealth and eternal reward, modes of conflict that deal with honor specifically were built into the system. Gygax explains that the "victors of such contests gain honor and experience for their skill, while those defeated lose honor. The outcome of contests can greatly affect a character's social

31. As D&D's predecessor, Chainmail, was distinctly modeled from wargames.

32. Gygax, p. 52.

position.”³³ Within these peaceful, non-weapon proficiencies is an ideal folding of an imagined Oriental everyday life into the logic of honor, social standing, and familial worth.

Although some of the rules that were developed around non-weapon proficiencies that would have been at home in Western settings as well (Agriculture, Running, Carpentry, and Herbalist to name a few) many are distinct to Gygax’s Orientalist world. Most notable here is the distinction of specificity between those proficiencies known by nobles and those by commoners. The implication here is that the interesting aspects of Oriental culture lie within the hands of the elites, whereas the culture of the common people is barely distinguishable from that of the Western common folk. To make this comparison compare the specificity of two lists, one made for nobles in the subset “Court Proficiencies” which includes Calligraphy, Etiquette, Falconry, Flower Arranging, Heraldry, Landscape Gardening, Noh, Oragami, Painting, Poetry, Religion, and Tea Ceremony to one made for common folk in the subset “Common Proficiencies” which includes Agriculture, Animal Handling, Cooking, Dance, Fishing, Games, Horsemanship, Hunting, Husbandry, Iaijutsu,³⁴ Juggling, Music, Reading/Writing, Sailing Craft, Singing, Small Water Craft, and Swimming. These lists further the classist understanding that “culture” is possessed by elites and inaccessible to poor people.

This dichotomy relates to Said’s theory of Orientalism because it reflects the sources used to produce Orientalist discourse. Because the Orientalist’s understanding of the Orient was limited to documents which were published by those in the elite sectors of eastern culture, the whole of the Oriental imagination is focused around an idea of

33. Gygax, p. 52.

34. Iaijutsu is the art of fast weapon drawing. It has been implemented as a combat proficiency in later Western role-playing games as “fast draw.”

culture which privileges the rituals of those of the upper class and court.

REAL AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

The invention of non-weapon proficiencies in *Oriental Adventures* reflects Gygax's work as an Orientalist. Non-weapon proficiencies become a game mechanic in *Dungeons & Dragons* at the same time that Comeliness becomes a way of understanding masculinity in the game and honor becomes a way of understanding one's social value because the work of Orientalism is to produce a reductionist understanding of all culture. Ironically, reductionism in the work of game design is often regarded as a necessary evil. Without reducing and abstracting social concepts into controllable and quantifiable game mechanics, it would be quite difficult to design games. In this sense, although Gygax's *Dungeons & Dragons* furthered an appropriative and Orientalist discourse, it also expanded the horizons of the game far beyond combat.

It is difficult to judge the merit of this transformation. I for one feel that it definitely cannot be seen as an adequate sense of compensation for the violence of Orientalism. Although *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games owe *Oriental Adventures* a debt of gratitude for seeding the ideas which would eventually lead to robust crafting mechanics and secular systems of character development, these systems are in truth based upon a discourse that values, appropriates, and exploits "exotic" races, customs, and cultures. For all of the life these game mechanics now breath into the games we play, they must be regarded as a final sort of symbolic violence that renders the rich traditions of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa invisible. For example the mechanics that govern agriculture or farming in *Fallout 4* (2015) have no relation to the histories of knowledge that have been

lost in this process of abstraction. We forget that all of the rich ways that cooking has been developed as a mechanic in role-playing games hold an inextricable historical relationship to the ways that cooking was fundamental to the everyday life of common folk in the Orient.

What's more, we lose the most important connection between non-weapon proficiencies and war: the fact that non-weapon proficiencies were initially supposed to be peaceful. Because many role-playing games seek to enfold non-weapon skills within the logics of combat and acquisition (Cooking helps to restore wealth, Etiquette may help to gain economic favor in the court or to prevent combat, Crafting is often a way to develop better weapons and armor) they participate symbolically in colonialism's modern legacy. They reduce the richness of non-western culture to a set of "non-weapon proficiencies" which can be developed and exploited to further the Western war effort.

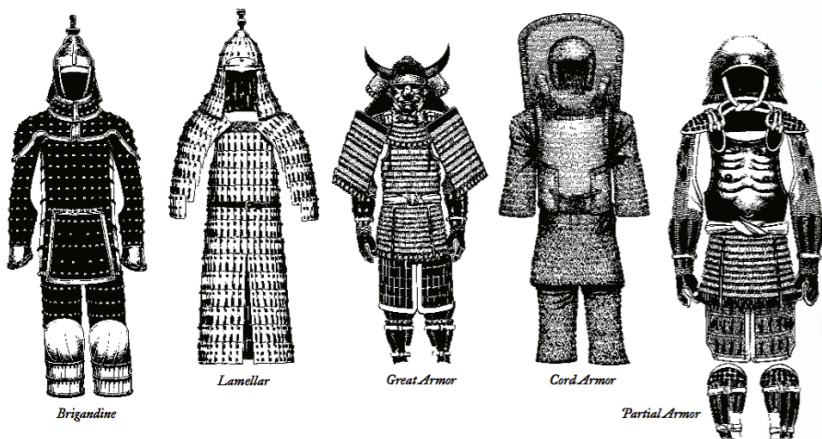


Image used for purposes of critique. James Wyatt. *Oriental Adventures*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2001, p. 75.

The problem of Orientalism can very much be attributed to the

ubiquity of warfare as a motif for conflict in role-playing games.³⁵ Because the worth of characters is often related to their finesse on the battlefield, the experience of the players is also intimately connected to warfare. Warfare drives an unending need for expansion, which of course is historically connected to colonialism and the valorization of exotic goods and resources. With expansion, however, comes diaspora, which can be in the appreciation for multiculturalism in *Oriental Adventures*, or more recently, *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition.

The value of multiculturalist design in role-playing games is yet to be seen, however. On the one hand, it offers a space of inclusion for players who were once stymied by the commonplace white supremacist worlds inspired by Sword & Sorcery fiction in early role-playing game design. At the same time, the ethic of multiculturalist design in role-playing games still reads as Orientalist and appropriative. A way to engineer a fiction of diversity in games engineered by white men who, much like Gary Gygax, long to enjoy and celebrate the exotic, while also profiting from it. The fiction of diversity, as Edward Said would note, is dangerous because it promotes a singular imaginary of diverse people. It allows for a singular idea of the Orient, which is always already the object of violence, appropriation, domination, and conquest.

This essay has shown ways in which the *Dungeons & Dragons* supplement *Oriental Adventures* fits Edward Said's criteria of an Orientalist text. It shows this by revealing how the supplement's Comeliness and Honor mechanics are the result of a racist discourse that reads Oriental men as feminine and Oriental people against the lawful values of Christianity. Beyond this, it also considers how the invention of peaceful, non-weapon proficiencies are derived from a

35. Evan Torner. "Bodies and Time in Tabletop Role-Playing Game Combat Systems." *The Wyrd Con Companion Book*. 2015, pp. 160-171. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/xslwh0uxa544029/WCCB15-Final.pdf>

classist understanding of what Oriental culture is. Despite these racist, classist, and sexist values, the legacy of *Oriental Adventures* persists in many role-playing games today in the non-weapon proficiencies and skills given to characters. Finally, it argues that we must question the implementation of non-weapon proficiencies in many of today's role-playing games because of the symbolic violence they produce when placed in a synergistic relationship with the game's core combat mechanics. If we are to resist the legacy of Orientalism in role-playing games, we must work to recover forgotten aspects of Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African culture which have been lost within the abstraction of game design.

Affective Networks at Play

Catan, COIN, and The Quiet Year

COLE WEHRLE

“We were each willing to play. We were each willing to play that particular game. We were each willing to play with each other. We arrived at a well-played game because of the way we combined with the game.”

—Bernard DeKoven, *The Well-Played Game* (1978)

BODIES AT PLAY

In Milton Bradley’s *Twister* (1966), players are contorted at the beck of a spinning dial. Arms and legs knot together as uncomfortable glances are exchanged. Without prejudice or modesty, the bodies of its players are compromised. When the game first appeared, it caused a sensation.¹ Competitors accused Milton Bradley of selling “sex in a box” and Sears Roebuck refused to sell the game.² These days the game has traded such controversy for awkward giggles in church basements. The tyranny of the game’s dial—overlaid with two circles for both appendage and position—seems almost quaint. The

1. The game’s big splash came when it was featured on the Johnny Carson Show. For more on the game’s history see Bill DeMain. “Sex in a Box: The Twisted History of Twister.” *mental_floss*, November 3, 2011. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/29152/sex-box-twisted-history-twister>.

2. Rick Polizzi and Fred Schaefer. *Spin Again, Board Games From the Fifties and Sixties*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991, pp. 116–117.

physical bodies so easily manipulated in *Twister* have given way to more elaborate social contortions.



“Twister” by Karen on Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND.

In games one can readily find all manner of physical and intellectual pretzels. Indeed, the uncomfortable entanglements found in *Twister* have become—if now metaphorically—a hallmark of contemporary game design. While there are many ways to understand the complex social spaces that games facilitate, I believe there is much to be gained from understanding games as networks of feeling. Here I mean to invoke Raymond Williams’s paradigmatic “structures of feeling” which describe the murky space between articulated ideologies and emotive response.³ Though evocative in the abstract, Williams’s term

3. Williams first used the term in Preface to Film (1954) and then developed it in *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). I mean to reference his use of the term in relationship to the work of Antonio Gramsci. Whereas Marxist critics often work with totalizing ideas that inform everyday thinking, Williams’s term provides a space for new modes of thinking to emerge and thus to contend such a hegemony.

contains a basic flaw. As literary scholar Mitchum Huelhs has noted, “The problem with [Williams’s] term, and with deploying it critically, is that by definition it names an ambiguous configuration of the social that has not yet fully emerged.”⁴ While this may be true of the social experiences and configurations towards which Williams directed his analysis, games provide a far more tractable subject. Games have rules that inform the affective responses of their players. They are sites of what sociologist Evan W. Luteria has called “affective structuring.”⁵ That is, a game’s affective responses are informed both by the other players and, critically, the game itself, which organizes the relationships between the players and the way that they are able to interface with the game-state.

Here the abstract and the embodied come into contact. For, if a player position is an abstraction (that is, a subject position created by a system of rules), it is one anchored by our affect and rooted in our flesh. Whatever their digital or analog footprints, games are bodily experiences. We inhabit the games we play. Our bodies interface with their components. Eyes search those of our opponents. Hands grip controllers until the tensed muscles seize with exhaustion. It is this embodied quality that makes the language of affect so useful when it comes to understanding games. So often games, especially multiplayer games, are understood merely as systems of rules. Although this proceduralist lens provides many insights into the nature of games, it tends to obscure the experiences of players and the emotional dimensions of play.⁶ Games allow us to occupy new and strange positions of affective entanglement. They offer an exceptional

4. Mitchum Huelhs. “Structures of Feeling: Or, How to do Things (or Not) with Books.” *Contemporary Literature* 51.2, 2010, p. 419.

5. See Evan W. Luteria. “Affective Structuring and the Role of Race and Nation in XCOM.” *Analog Game Studies* 3.1, 2016. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/affective-structuring-and-the-role-of-race-and-nation-in-xcom/>.

6. For more on the many problems with proceduralist game criticism see Miguel Sicart. “Against Proceduralism.” *Game Studies* 11.3, 2011. http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap.

space of unlikely dependencies and interrelations. Indeed, such entanglements have become a hallmark of what a game is.

As has been noted in recent years, the world of non-digital games has experienced a renaissance both in terms of popularity of specific titles and the creation of new titles.⁷ However, critics have been less vocal about the specific dimensions of this renaissance. What kinds of games is it producing? What kinds of interactions are being generated? I would like to suggest that the chief design innovation revolves around the way the decision space of a game seeks to organize the feelings of its players. Not only has this engagement with feeling helped foster the revolution in game design, but it also continues to generate ever more sophisticated and reflective designs that continue to investigate the tangled feelings of players and the shared activity that continues to bring them back into the space of the game.

In this article, I want to consider the affective possibilities and consequences of contemporary board games. I begin with a discussion of Klaus Teuber's *Die Siedler von Catan* (1995). Teuber's design is something of a foundational text of the contemporary board game design. Using *Catan* as a lodestone, I want to draw on the vocabulary of affect studies in order to reorient how we talk about games, in hopes of better understanding why *Catan* proved to be such a phenomenon. From there, I will consider a recent trend in the subfield of historic wargames, where convention has been upended by the COIN (COunter INsurgency) game system by Volko Ruhnke. Rather than focus solely on military affairs, Ruhnke's games reproduce the political tensions surrounding armed conflict and ask the players to inhabit positions of moral compromise in the interest of historical simulation. I end with brief discussion of Avery Mcdaldno's

7. Crowdfunding platforms have certainly helped this expansion, but it should be noted that the industry's growth was already well underway by the time Kickstarter and Indiegogo appeared on the scene.

storytelling game *The Quiet Year* (2013). *The Quiet Year* pushes on the limits of the game as an engine of affect and asks hard questions about the power of affect and the formal limits of games to understand our knotty feelings.

COLONIZATION AND COMMUNITY

By now, Klaus Teuber's *Die Settlers Von Catan* requires little introduction. As of 2014, the game had sold more than 18 million copies. These figures dwarf those of any other similar design published in the past thirty years and are growing so quickly that, according to Mayfair, the game's US publisher, the franchise is poised to become the biggest game brand in the world.⁸ For gamers who have come of age since its publication, *Catan* served as a gateway into the broader world of contemporary board games. And, in an industry often defined by innovation and novelty, *Catan* continues to be played and to inspire new titles.

Catan's popularity is a consequence of the way the game structures the feelings of its players, but this affective focus is not readily apparent from the game's setting. The fictional island of *Catan* is an abstract location. There is little backstory, and the game's art, while evocative, is inspecific. The game offers its players only the spare outline of a story: there is an island and you are its settlers.⁹ Given the game's generic setting, its popularity speaks to the strength of its design. For, as unremarkable as that little island of *Catan* might seem at first glance, the game that takes place on its shores is a

8. See Adrien Raffel. "The Man Who Built Catan." *The New Yorker*, February 12, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-man-who-built-catan>.

9. Initial editions of the US publication traded the game's loose Viking aesthetics for a late 16th century English Colonialism. However, more recent US editions have rebranded the game with its original Viking theme. This inauspicious lore is remarkable in-and-of-itself—the sanitized retelling of settler colonialism continues to be a popular motif in board game design.

riveting exercise in the management of dependency and the affective possibilities of game design.

Before looking at some specific elements of *Catan's* design, I want to consider some formal qualities of games themselves. In the critical discourse around games, there is some considerable debate as to what a game is. In anthropology, a game is often defined as a form of structured play.¹⁰ This general definition allows for considerable wiggle room as the systems that structure play may take many forms. For instance, in game designer and scholar Bernard deKoven's view, a game is an emergent artifact of play, negotiated by its participants in the interest of cultivating a shared experience.¹¹ Under these rubrics, it becomes rather easy to think of a game as only a mathematical abstraction that exists virtually in the minds of its players. However, we should remember that games are also defined by their particular manifestations in digital and non-digital spaces. All games have an aesthetic footprint. Their aesthetics, like the rules that structure their play, are essentially political in that they organize the relationship between the players. This management carries with it an affective charge. For, if games structure play, so too do they structure feeling.

Catan's interest in the structuration of feeling is built into the core of its design. The game's demands seem simple enough: *Catan* tosses its players on an island and asks them to build a network of roads and settlements in a race to domesticate their surroundings. At first view, the game would seem to be an exercise in Randian objectivism, complete with *terra nullius*.¹² However, in *Catan* players need one another, especially in the early stages of the game. The primary currency of the game is found in its five resources: wood,

10. See Kevin Maroney. "My Entire Waking Life". *The Games Journal*, May 2001. <http://www.thegamesjournal.com/articles/MyEntireWakingLife.shtml>.

11. See Bernard deKoven. *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978.

12. See Greg Loring-Albright's "The First Nations of *Catan*: Practices in Critical Modification." *Analog Game Studies* 2.7, 2015. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-first-nations-of-catan-practices-in-critical-modification/>. Loring-Albright offers an interesting design corrective on *Catan's* imperial overtones.

bricks, ore, wheat, and sheep. These resources are drawn from the island based on the location of the players' settlements and cities. Here players encounter important complications. First, players begin the game with only two settlements, which are placed on the vertices of the map's hexes. This gives them a maximum initial footprint of six hexes out of the island's nineteen. Because of the random distribution of the map tiles, it is unlikely that a player has access to all five resources at the start of the game. Moreover, players tend to specialize in a particular good as the construction of far-flung settlements with access to new goods is often resource intensive. This specialization is complicated by the lack of a common medium of exchange. Unlike *Monopoly* (1903), there is no single currency. Players are forced to barter, and, from the first turn of the game, networks of dependence take shape.

Dependency is an important engine of affect. As infants, we enter the world in a total state of dependence and much of our emotional range is cultivated under its influence. Evolutionary psychologists have emphasized the ways that this early relationship informs our emotive range and provides the groundwork for later, more complicated networks of feeling.¹³ Games replicate these networks. The quarterback on a football team leads their players just as a manager might be responsible for their employees. These structures provide a frame for affective response. In other words, feelings are muted or amplified depending upon a subject's position within a broader structure of dependence. Though a subject may simultaneously participate in several networks, the various structures of each network are largely fixed. For instance, in the student-teacher relationship, the student occupies the position of vulnerability and dependence. Of course, this structuration doesn't preclude

13. For an overview of this conversation, see Jeffrey Simpson and Douglas Kenrick's edited collection, *Evolutionary Social Psychology*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.

transgression. A teacher could certainly forfeit the affective safety of their position or undermine it. Still, even in such a scenario, the roles could still be reinstated in some fashion. In this way, the various networks of dependence that exist in society provide both positions of strength and vulnerability: we can lord over our own children, and yet still retreat into our mother's arms.

Catan never allows such networks to ossify. Instead, the interpersonal relationships in *Catan* are always mutating. Their constant flux is built upon two specific elements of the game's design. First, the players are always oriented towards the victory condition. The game ends the moment a player secures ten points. A player's score is totally transparent, and therefore looms large in any negotiation. Secondly, the system of interaction in the game is highly regulated. Only the active player can initiate trades and there must always be at least one good exchanged by the two trading parties. This stops gift giving and creates a constant circulation of goods. Furthermore, the game also routinely (and randomly) culls player stockpiles, forcing players to do as much as possible with what they have at that moment. These pressures brutalize the players. Friendly relationships between players rarely survive more than a few rounds. Good play is opportunistic and cutthroat. Players will sometimes need to collude to stop another player from winning, but will soon find their alliance disintegrate.

In practice, this gives the game a tremendous range of feelings. Traditional games such as chess, *Risk* (1957), or *Monopoly* are purely adversarial. Though teamwork is possible, the game's rules afford little opportunity for direct collaboration. This limits their affective scope. *Catan*, in contrast, forces players to navigate a much broader range of feelings. If *Catan* paved the way for the renaissance in game

playing in the 21st century, it was a path paved with the charged feelings the game creates.

AFFECT GOES TO WAR

Catan is not the only game that has attracted recent attention in the mainstream press. In early 2014, *The Washington Post* published a feature length piece on a new type of series of wargames. These games traded set-piece battles for meditations of political will and counter-insurgency. The purely adversarial positions of classic wargame design were exchanged for complicated relationships and shifting alliances. What's more, the games made no attempt hide their subjects. Unlike the sanitized colonial narrative of *Catan*, these games were upfront about the violence they sought to represent and made no apologies about the uncomfortable directions in which they pushed their players.

The COIN Series games are the brainchild of Volko Ruhnke, a CIA national security analysis. Ruhnke began designing games in the 1990s as an extension of the simulations he ran for his coworkers. His first widely-released design, *Wilderness War* (2001), covered the Seven Years War in North America and paid particular attention to unconventional warfare. The game was published by GMT Games, the largest wargame publisher in the US, and was met with immediate critical acclaim. Several years later Ruhnke pitched an idea for a new project to GMT: he wanted to make a series of games on modern counter insurgency. It would begin with a title on early 90s Columbia that would cover the interplay of the Colombian government, the drug cartels, the FARC, and right wing paramilitaries. The topic produced some anxiety, but eventually GMT agreed to pursue the project. It proved to be a shrewd decision. The resulting design, *Andean Abyss* (2012), was so successful that it

spawned three sequels covering Afghanistan (*A Distant Plain*, 2013), Cuba (*Cuba Libre*, 2013), and Vietnam (*Fire in the Lake*, 2014). So far every COIN game has sold out and several new titles are planned in order to meet demand, as indicated by preorder information on the GMT website.¹⁴

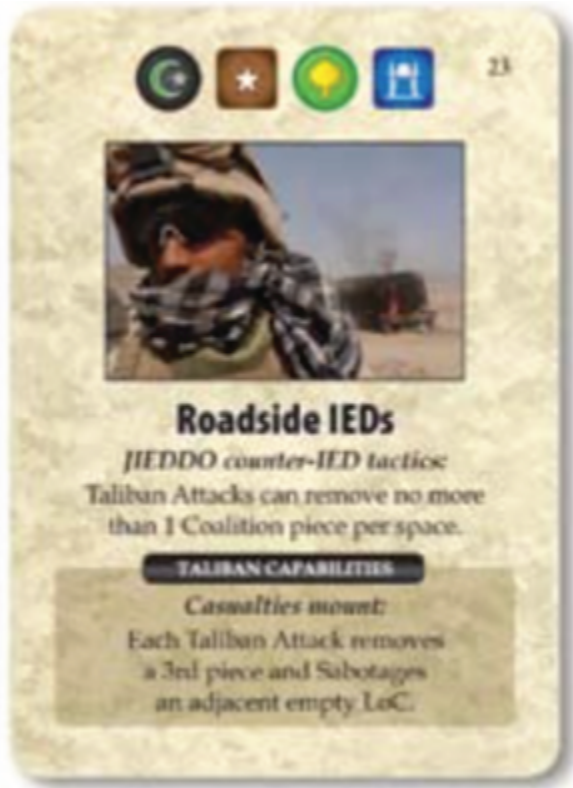
Surprisingly, the horrifying subject material of these games, which can include kidnappings and suicide bombings, is a novelty in wargaming. Though all wargames concern violence, many find ways of burying the gruesome details of war. As military historian Philip A. G. Sabin notes, “war games deliberately downplay the dark side of war. Casualties or destroyed units are usually removed cleanly from the board, with no simulation of the grisly aftermath in terms of the dead and wounded.”¹⁵ This tactical ignorance reflects the focus of the game. Wargames are not so much about war as they are about a specific part of war. The concerns of wargames tend to revolve around issues of supply, command and control, morale, and battlefield tactics. Anything outside of these interests is either abstracted or ignored outright, including the bodily violence and the more complicated elements of a conflict’s political context.

Ruhnke’s COIN games take a different approach. Though their scale doesn’t allow for an extended focus on individual acts of violence, the games make no attempt to hide the ugliness in war. Indeed, players must confront it directly. This confrontation is staged mechanically. The COIN games are card-driven games (CDGs). In CDGs, a player’s possible moves are informed by the play of cards. This dramatically expands the representational possibilities of a game design. For instance, the various moves in chess are limited by the fact that there are only six different types of pieces. In contrast, there

14. Since beginning research for this article, a fourth game—*Liberty or Death: The American Insurrection*—has also been published and gone out of print.

15. Philip A. G. Sabin. “Playing at War: The Modern Hobby of Wargaming.” In *War and Games*. Edited by T. J. Cornell and T. B. Allen. Suffolk, UK and Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2002, p 215.

are 72 unique cards in *Andean Abyss*. By housing the complexity of the game's rules in a deck of cards, the general course of play is free to move smoothly. On a turn a player will be confronted with a card. They may choose to ignore the effect of the card and do one of a handful of actions, or they can capitalize on the event. In practice, this keeps all players focused on their various interactions and the possibilities that the present card offers. The turn's current card will always be the central object of attention. This has a way of unifying the game. Though it is a CDG, players do not maintain separate hands. All eyes are on a single card, and, it is through those cards that the story of the game is told.



“Roadside IEDs” card from *A Distant Plain*. Image used for purposes of critique.

The cards themselves seem sensitive to this attention. Consider a card from *A Distant Plain* (pictured above). The card concerns the use of roadside IEDs. However, rather than reproduce a photograph of the device itself or a technical schematic, the card’s illustration is immediate and raw, picturing a close-up of a soldier’s face in the aftermath of an attack. Furthermore, the photographs chosen for the cards in *A Distant Plain* are usually morally ambiguous, opting for a journalistic ethos that seems invested in capturing the truth of a moment over one that might glorify the action depicted. This immediacy is significantly different from the classic wargaming

aesthetic that privileged clarity and simplicity over immersion. The landmine piece from Milton Bradley's *Stratego* (1960) offers essentially the same effect. However, its design encourages players to think in the abstract about the conflict. The violence it represents is cartoonish, playful, and, above all, unthreatening to its players.



Bomb and flag pieces in *Stratego*. “Capture the Flag” by Derek Bruff on Flickr, CC BY-NC.

Ruhnke’s games are both serious and threatening. They want to pull players into their dark and complicated decision spaces. In his piece in the *Washington Post* on Ruhnke, writer Jason Albert noted how, during play, “[t]he palpable discomfort among [players] brings [Ruhnke] joy. It means he has done his job.”¹⁶ This discomfort extends not only from the events depicted on the cards but also how the game structures the relationships between the players. With

16. Jason Albert. “In the world of role-playing war games, Volko Ruhnke has become a hero.” *Washington Post*. January 10, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/in-the-world-of-role-playing-war-games-volko-ruhnke-has-become-a-hero/2014/01/10/a56ac8d6-48be-11e3-bf0c-cebf37c6f484_story.html.

some exception, the COIN games are designed to be four-player experiences. Every player has a specific set of relationships with every other player, and these relationships are never simple. The tensions of *A Distant Plain* revolve around two uneasy alliances: the Coalition and Afghan government on one side and the warlords and the Taliban on other. Though the relationships are more rigid than in a game like *Catan*, they are designed to maximize the players' vulnerabilities to one another. Players, even those with a clear advantage, feel exposed. This vulnerability heightens their sense of immersion and the affective responses that follow it. Albert pays particular attention to these responses in his article, noting how "A subtle movement—pieces slid from Nuristan province to Kabul—is met with tensed shoulders and exhaled expletives." These observations appear to be somewhat common. A quick perusal of the critical reception of Ruhnke's games yields dozens of instances of affective entanglements like Albert describes.¹⁷ Judging by this reaction, it seems that the COIN series was successful in torquing the affective networks that make people play in the first place. Though the restaging of counter insurgencies in the developing world is undoubtedly a political project, Ruhnke seems far more interested in a dialectic between the players and the game itself. In this sense the game is not meant to be prescriptive but instead provide a set of systems for exploration. Ruhnke appears to be asking players to never forget the context of their experience. The game seeks to pull its players in, but also to allow them to see beyond that immersion. Players are competitors and also fellow actors, able to view a situation holistically while working within it.

Of course, in order for this fraught experience to be generated

17. For examples see Bruce Geryk's "If you stare into the Andean Abyss" (<http://www.quartertothree.com/fp/2012/10/04/if-you-stare-into-the-andean-abyss/>) and Matt Thrower's review (and the comments) in Shut up & Sit Down (<http://www.shutupandsitdown.com/blog/post/review-distant-plain/>).

in the first place, the game demands that players push against one another. Like *Catan*, the game's victory conditions provide the central tension of play, and the game's design needs those tensions in order to generate its narrative. Without them, the design sits like a boat in irons. The "game" as an affective form, can only manifest through play. Like stage-acting, this demands players put themselves in a position of vulnerability. But the rules of the game are not a script. Players are at once then both actors and writers, working within a designed space to produce something larger than the space itself.

POST-PLAYER AFFECT

We return where we began. Games structure our interaction, and many new designs seem intent on heightening the affective component of our play. Yet, as innovative as these modern games are, certain formal constraints seem to remain. In order to play a game, the players must divide themselves. They may have arrived at the table as a group, but the game splits them.

This is not necessary. I want to end this piece by turning to Avery Mcdaldno's *The Quiet Year* (2013). *The Quiet Year* has no peers in the contemporary tabletop gaming landscape.¹⁸ The design offers only gentle guidelines as to the limits of the game's decision space. Over a variable number of turns—determined at random by an end-game card shuffled into a deck so that the ultimate length of the game is unknown to players as they play—players attempt to collectively build a community after some unspecified disaster. Significantly, players are not even given a chance to react to this peculiar setup, as unlike the majority of board games, table talk

18. Role-playing games have a much longer history of this kind of affective exploration. Sandy Peterson's seminal *Call of Cthulhu* inverted the standard power dynamic of the RPG form in the interest of engaging with subjects such as fear, paranoia, and mental/physical decline. While *The Quiet Year* certainly could have been made into a role-playing game, I think it is especially noteworthy that Mcdaldno's game wishes to occupy the more restrictive space of the board game, and, indeed, provides more prohibitions on the social elements of play than even most other board games.

is expressly forbidden in *The Quiet Year*. Instead, players can only communicate in very limited remarks and only by drawing on a shared map. Conversation is impossible.



An example of a gameplay map from *The Quiet Year*. “Winter is coming. *The Quiet Year*. Our abundance is robots. #rpg” by Scott Bristow on Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA.

Yet, *The Quiet Year* is a game that directs its attention wholly on the question of feeling. Here the game makes two related interventions. First, it decouples players from the specific characters that may emerge through play. The rulebook is explicit on this point:

“We don’t embody specific characters nor act out scenes. Instead, we

represent currents of thought within the community. When we speak or take action, we might be representing a single person or a great many. If we allow ourselves to care about the fate of these people, *The Quiet Year* becomes a richer experience and serves as a lens for understanding communities in conflict.”¹⁹

Here *The Quiet Year* appears to be disrupting one of the most sacred elements of game design: the player-position relationship. Games usually provide players with somewhat stable thematic anchors through which they can understand their own position within the game. In *Catan* a player is a particular group of colonists. In a COIN game, a player might be a set of insurgents. In either case, the player is tethered to that position—their fortunes rise and fall with the single avatar or group to which they have been assigned. But *The Quiet Year* doesn’t allow for this bound to form. Players instead are encouraged to flow through different subject positions or “currents of thought.”

This decoupling leads directly to *The Quiet Year*’s second intervention. The game lacks victory conditions. Players can achieve neither victory nor defeat. The game simply ends. A victory condition is usually an essential component of game design. It is the death-drive that pushes the game towards its conclusion. It gives the players their motivation and the game’s narrative its dynamism. A victory condition also fosters a sense of investment in its players that, in turn, can cultivate their affective responses. Players rejoice precisely because the course of play enabled them to meet a goal outlined by a victory condition. These conditions are engines of feeling.

The Quiet Year contains no such benchmarks. This may at first seem to make the game a strange, affect-less space. But, in practice, the opposite is true. Without explicitly stated guidelines as to *who*

19. The rules for *The Quiet Year* can be accessed here: <http://buriedwithoutceremony.com/the-quiet-year/>.

the players might embody and *what* their goals are, players are encouraged to explore a broader affective space. Yet, this open space is rigorously curated by the game's rules and its severe communication limits. This means that the central tension of *The Quiet Year* comes not from the attempt to win, but instead, the desire to be understood. It is this desire which structures the player relationships and generates feeling.

In considering three very different games over the course of this article, the management of affect is clearly a central element to the design. But, while the relationships between the players and the affective possibilities of those relationships are largely informed by the rules of the game, often it is the victory condition which determines which affective networks will dominate play. Games can make us feel, but, so too can they numb us to each other's feelings. In this sense then, the victory conditions in a specific game serve to mute other (and potentially richer) player relationships. Without this drive to win, players are left to explore what remains, a complex knot of desires and hopes and fears, a network of affect in which to play.

The Incorporeal Project

Teaching through Tabletop RPGs in Brazil

CARLOS KLIMICK, ELIANE BETTOCCHI, AND RIAN
REZENDE

Brazil faces a great educational challenge – students, teachers, parents and employers are unhappy with how the country’s current educational system works and its outcomes. Yet the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) of Brazilian students’ reading, mathematics, and science scores yielded disappointing-yet-optimistic results:

While Brazil performs below the OECD average, its mean performance in mathematics has improved since 2003 from 356 to 391 score points, making Brazil the country with the largest performance gains since 2003. Significant improvements are also found in reading and science. [...] Brazil performs below the average in mathematics (ranks between 57 and 60), reading (ranks between 54 and 56) and science (ranks between 57 and 60) among the 65 countries and economies that participated in the 2012 PISA assessment of 15-year-olds.¹

Educator Jose Pacheco points out one possible underlying cause:

1. OECD. BRAZIL–Country Note–Results from PISA 2012. http://download.inep.gov.br/acoes_internacionais/pisa/resultados/2013/country_note_brazil_pisa_2012.pdf (2013) p. 1

Brazil insists on using 19th educational paradigms and 20th century teachers to teach 21st century students². Simply adding new electronic or online technologies will not solve the problem if these are planned and implemented in the old paradigm.

Another problem found in different levels of education is that many students do not show the level of *autonomy* that is expected of them. We understand autonomy as proposed by Gui Bonsiepe: a key element of democracy – the possibility to create a space of participation and self-determination for anyone. A space for individual projects of one's own design. The opposite is *heteronomy*, or subordination to an order imposed by external agents, be that a dictatorship or the media.³

Educators continue to ask us to create didactic situations that stimulate students to develop autonomy and teamwork skills. At the moment, our educational system reduces these competencies, instead promoting an individualist heteronomy that reduces our students' creativity and critical thinking. Sir Ken Robinson has notably criticized the factory line educational model that produces this.

Role-playing games (RPGs) provide a way to develop autonomy and teamwork skills by our students due to their nature: a cooperative storytelling environment in which a player interprets one of the protagonists of the story being told and actually decides, within the rules of the game, what his or her character does. But how should we run tabletop RPGs, our specialty, in classrooms that have from 20 to 40 students? What if it is not possible to ask other students to be the Game Master (GM) for other students? Below is a discussion of our two attempts.

2. José Pacheco. "Educação no Brasil desperdiça recursos, diz especialista português." (September 2013). <http://g1.globo.com/pernambuco/vestibular-e-educacao/noticia/2013/09/educacao-no-brasil-desperdica-recursos-diz-especialista-portugues.html>

3. Gui Bonsiepe. Design, Cultura e Sociedade. Bucher Press, São Paulo, SP. 2011, p. 20.

DIDACTIC LUDONARRATIVE

Didactic ludonarrative is a method to create a narrative game in which a player will experience a story and create a character, a plot, a setting or even a whole new story. This creative experience mobilizes competencies and existing knowledge from the participant through narrative gaming, desire and fantasy, and allows this person to build new competencies and knowledge.

Although we are aware of the use of the term “ludonarrative” in the videogame industry, and its variations, ludonarrative dissonance, ludonarrative cohesion and resonance, and ludonarrative alienation, through published gamer articles,⁴ we came to the term through our own work with educational applications of tabletop RPGs.

Currently, didactic ludonarrative consists in experiencing/playing a participatory story that happens in a setting chosen by the participants to achieve learning goals through the expression of and/or solution of project *problems*⁵ and/or the development of a *setting* by the participant.⁶

The didactic aspect of our method is based on the constructivist perspective of the Brazilian educators Paulo Freire and Carmen Moreira Neves, Fernando Hernández’ project pedagogy and Roland Barthes propositions about the educational potential of narratives.

In his book *Pedagogy of Autonomy*,⁷ Paulo Freire emphasizes giving value to the knowledge that students already have from previous experiences, both academic and from everyday life. Freire proposes that the teacher should try to establish an “intimacy” between the curricular knowledge that is considered fundamental for the students’

4. For blog articles about ludonarratives, two good starting points are Jaydra Dawn’s “Ludonarrative Cohesion and Dissonance 101” and “The Value of ‘Ludonarrative Dissonance’ within Games Discourse.”

5. *The participants have to produce material (characters, places, narrative accounts, images, etc/) that will be incorporated into the preexisting materials already available in the setting used to play.*

6. Making a setting feel real in supporting materials that he/she can produce him/herself.

7. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogia da autonomia: Saberes necessários à prática educativa*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1996.

education and their social experience as individuals. Such an approach has an ethical commitment to recognize and respect the particulars of the students as co-protagonists of the educational process. Teachers are not considered the sole source of a “fundamental knowledge” that has to be transferred into the students, but rather the *facilitators* of a knowledge construction process in which they must work with the students and not for them. Freire points out that it is indispensable that the future teacher, since his/her formative years, understands and persuades him/herself that to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge.



Incorporeal setting Terranova handbook and character cards made by the teachers and students of the research group Interactive Stories. Picture by Eliane Bettocchi.

Carmen Neves, educator and former Secretary of Distance Learning (Seed) for the Brazilian Ministry of Education, drew on her many experiences to theorize a “pedagogy of authorship.” The pedagogy of authorship seeks to appropriate different forms of media for content creation through collaborative work among teachers and students.

Neves proposes that the pedagogy of authorship “stimulates the integrated use of multiple forms of language (visual, written, musical etc.)”⁸ and promotes authorship and respect for plurality and collective construction, recognizing teachers, students and school managers as active subjects instead of passive ones. She proposes a 3-step process: *exploration*, *experimentation* and *expression*. *Exploration* is the search for information in different sources: books; TV; web, etc. *Experimentation* is the work done with the collected information (comparing, analyzing, debating with colleagues, extrapolation, etc.) *Expression* is authorship, i.e., creating from the information collected and analyzed.

The pedagogy of authorship does not intend to transfer the responsibility of the educational process solely to the students. It does wish to stimulate autonomy, creativity and the search for knowledge in the students, but the teachers are always present in the process working with the students.

Pedagogy of autonomy and *pedagogy of authorship* intend to motivate students and teachers to think critically and produce creatively. Our goal with Didactic Ludonarrative is to have the students present a production about what they have experienced (existing knowledge) and then move to present a creation based on what they have experienced but offers something new, thus creative (new knowledge)!

To organize the expected productions of the participants, we follow the example of work projects by Fernando Hernandez,⁹ who uses the word “project” with the same meaning that architects, designers and artists use: “the work procedure that involves the process of giving form to an idea that is in the horizon, but that

8. Carmen Moreira de Castro Neves. “Pedagogia da Autoria”. Boletim Técnico do Senac 31.3. (September/December, 2005): pp. 19-27.

9. Fernando Hernández. *Transgressão e Mudança a Educação*. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas, 1998.

admits modifications, that is in permanent dialogue with the context, with the circumstances and with the individuals who, in one way or another, will contribute to this process.”¹⁰ Therefore, we use a project method to guide the configuration of the expected production from the participants.

The ludic or game aspect comes from a Game Based Learning (GBL) perspective. Kevin Corbett, former science teacher and specialist in e-learning proposes the following definition of GBL:

[GBL] is a branch of serious games that deals with defined learning outcomes. They're called Serious Games because instead of providing only entertainment, they have an educational goal to provide retention of a skill or concept that can be applied in the real world.¹¹

Corbett explains that in games “failing” not only is allowed but also can be considered an expected part of the process. In games, a player can have second chances, multiple lives, and different paths to succeed. Games also require concentrated attention, thus developing focus. Feedback is constant and in real time, which constitutes an important element of learning. He points out that most games have a context-specific story, that is an important factor to attract and engage players, and that games can be fun.

The study conducted by the UK-based National Foundation for Educational Research on the effectiveness of Game Based Learning points out a series of principles and mechanisms of GBL.¹² Yet we disagree with their definition that refers only to videogames to support teaching and learning.¹³ But we consider their list of principles and mechanisms applicable to Didactic Ludonarrative since

10. Hernández, p. 22. Our translation.

11. Kevin Corbett. “Game Based Learning VS Gamification.” 2015.

12. C. Perrotta, G. Featherstone, H. Aston, and E. Houghton. “Game-based Learning: Latest Evidence and Future Directions” NFER Research Programme: Innovation in Education. Slough: NFER, 2013. <http://www.nfer.ac.uk>

13. We are not alone in our dissent on this, as Kevin Corbett also presents the possibilities of non-digital game based learning. See: Kevin Corbett. “Non-digital game based learning.”

they also point out to the principles of learning by fun while doing, autonomy, and the mechanisms of rules, clear goals, student agency, immediate and constructive feedback, the social element of sharing experiences and a fictional setting.

For the narrative aspect, we referred to the work of Roland Barthes.¹⁴ He argues that literature, and by extension all forms of narrative, have the powers of *mathesis* (many types of knowledge interweaving themselves) and *mimesis* (representation of reality), stressing its educational potential. Narratives allow the ludic meeting of several forms of knowledge in their production and reception, legitimating multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary work. For example, one can find in Daniel Defoe's romance *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) different "teachable" elements: History, Social Geography (colonialism), Technology (building a house, creating tools), Anthropology and others. In a narrative, many forms of knowledge can coexist and, as he puts it, be "spun and savored." That is *mathesis*. In its mimetic power the narrative can represent reality and make the applications of a concept or technique clearer for the student, thus answering a lingering question that anguishes many students: Why am I learning this? Barthesian *mimesis* has an answer, for it aims at a creative representation of reality that goes beyond its mere reproduction. The *mimesis* of Barthes does not limit itself at showing reality how it is (which it considers to be an impossible goal), but rather aims at showing how reality may yet be, assuming, therefore, a poetic commitment. Our students are our future poets.

In participatory narratives such as RPGs, the "movement" of the story occurs due to the decisions of the participants about the actions of their characters who are the protagonists of the story. Participatory

14. Roland Barthes. *Image – Music – Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

narratives, as Janet Murray points out,¹⁵ engage us in a different way because they become “ours” – that story unfolded the way it did due to our decisions as readers or participants. When this participation is mediated through rules, such as in choose-your-own-adventure gamebooks (hereafter referred to as “gamebooks”) and RPGs, we have a convergence of game and narrative, a ludonarrative.

Therefore, we would like to propose a third Barthesian power for participatory narratives: *dynamis*. This power allows the participants to perceive that their actions bring consequences and, in the case of RPG, recreations of the plot. We believe that *dynamis* resonates with the GBL principles of “autonomy,” “learn by fun,” and the mechanisms of “clear goals,” “rules,” “student control,” “immediate and constructive feedback,” “fictional setting,” and, in the case of RPG, “social elements.” *Dynamis* permits a participant to have a similar experience to “dramatic agency” proposed by Murray, even though the play may not occur in a digital environment:

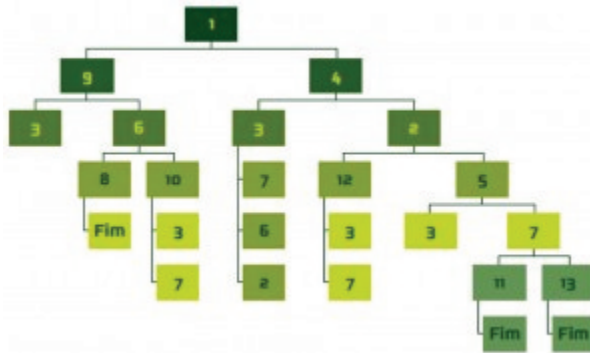
DRAMATIC AGENCY – The experience of agency within a procedural and participatory environment that makes use of compelling story elements, such as an adventure game or an interactive narrative. To create dramatic agency the designer must create transparent interaction conventions (like clicking on the image of a garment to put it on the player’s avatar) and map them onto actions which suggest rich story possibilities (like donning a magic cloak and suddenly becoming invisible) within clear stories with dramatically focused episodes (such as, an opportunity to spy on enemy conspirators in a fantasy role playing game).¹⁶

In our work we currently use gamebooks and tabletop RPGs. Gamebooks are choose-your-own-adventure stories in which the

15. Janet Murray. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. New York: Free Press, 1999.

16. Janet Murray. “Dramatic Agency.” Glossary. <https://inventingthemedium.com/glossary/>

reader has to decide the path followed by the main character during certain key moments. Therefore, the reader is allowed to choose among preset alternatives. It can be considered a first step to motivate the development — or reawakening — of autonomy for the students. Using rules to determine the outcome of certain events not only brings gaming into the classroom, but the game design can promote learning goals. We present below the structure of story events of a gamebook designed by us. It is being used for 5th year students (11 year old) in Brazil’s National Strategy for Financial Education (Enef).



A storyboard for an ENEF gamebook. Image used with permission by the authors.

Tabletop RPGs were used as a follow-up with the students in the second experience where they played with the same characters in the same fictional setting used in the first gamebook.

THE EXPERIENCES

Let us now discuss two experiences created by our research group. The first experience was conducted with bachelor degree students at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF). The second experience happened in a private school with students of the 4th year of the

Fundamental level (10–11 years old) students. In both experiences, the same university teachers were involved, as well as bachelor students who are members of our research group, most of which are studying to pursue a career as teachers themselves.

THE FIRST EXPERIENCE – BACHELOR DEGREE STUDENTS AT UFJF

The first experience was conducted throughout 2013, involving twelve students and two university professors. All the participants were members of our research group.

The goal was to use the *Incorporeal RPG*¹⁷ to help students to develop their competencies of Creativity, Ethics and Management for the production of illustrations. Competencies are here understood as mental operations through which a person articulates and mobilizes skills, knowledge and attitude to solve a challenge.¹⁸

The RPG scenario used was one of medieval fantasy with an Art Nouveau-inspired visual structure. A narrative and visual mixture that we named “Anthropophagic Pillage” in a combination of the strategies of “Narrative Pillage” and “Visual Anthropophagi”. Narrative Pillage consists in acts of appropriation of personal references and of other sources to create one’s character and other narrative elements.¹⁹ Visual Anthropophagi brings the proposals of contamination of the colonizer by the colonized as stated in the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* – a Brazilian artistic movement of the early 20th century. Based on these conceptual premises our students

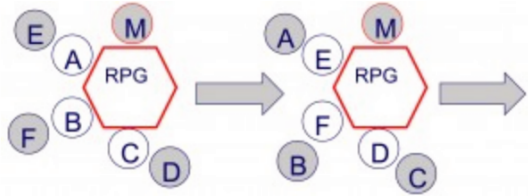
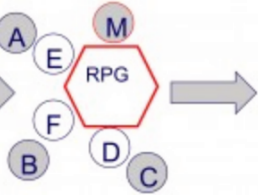
17. *Incorporeal RPG* is part of the *Incorporeal Project* that combines *Poetic Design*, a project method that guides the production of materials, with the *Techniques for Interactive Narratives (TIN)*, a narrative design method for the educational use of participative narratives. For more information please see <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/incorporealproject/>

18. Philippe Perrenoud. *Construir as competências desde a escola*. Tradução: Bruno Charles Magne. Porto Alegre, RGS: Artes Médicas Sul, 1999.

19. Sônia Rodrigues Mota. *Roleplaying Game: a Ficção enquanto Jogo*. Ph.D. dissertation. Rio de Janeiro: Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, 1997.

needed to combine their personal repertoires with Brazilian and non-Anglo-Saxon Art and Literature references.

To accommodate larger groups each character was played in duo with a player and a “conscience”. The player controlled the character while the conscience wrote down the events and gave advice. Therefore a group of five player-characters actually involved ten students. There were several RPG sessions in which the students switched the roles of “player” and “conscience”. So each player would be the conscience for the other player’s character. One teacher (M) acted as the Game Master in all sessions.

1 st RPG Session	2 RPG session	Joint research
		
<p>A, B, C, act as players</p> <p>D, E, F, act as conscience</p>	<p>D, E, F, act as players</p> <p>A, B, C, act as conscience</p>	<p>The duos do joint research and production on their characters.</p>

The structures of RPG play sessions and post production. Image used with permission by the authors.

Afterwards, the students made conceptual illustrations as a preparation to create a final illustration for a card to incorporate their characters into a “RPG deck of characters”. They also created stories regarding places of the scenario and their characters. This was their final production. The students registered the steps of their production process in “journals” or sketchbooks. The first RPG experiences occurred from December 2012 to March 2013.



Incorporeal setting Terranova handbook. Picture by Eliane Bettocchi.

Besides the weekly face-to-face sessions the experiment also had the support of a Moodle platform for distance-learning where texts, images and references were made available.

This first experiment was conducted in the following steps:

Contextualization: students read the setting concept in the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (AVA) available to them. Then they proceeded to:

Create their characters and play RPG sessions in the “Terra Nova” setting.

Register through handwritten or virtual diaries the story of their characters and the events experienced during the adventures.

Materialize the characters and their context through concept arts registered in personalized sketchbooks.

Research: activity in a forum format in the AVA with links available for research. They had to:

Based on the concept of their character, the students should research visual styles that they would like to “cannibalize” and “mestizise”²⁰ with the Art Nouveau style.

Make an iconographic research of places and cultures that they find interesting to mix with the background and context of their characters.

Conception: activities of production that had to be presented through online posting of files and face to face presentation of the sketchbooks from January 11th of 2013 to March 22nd of 2013.

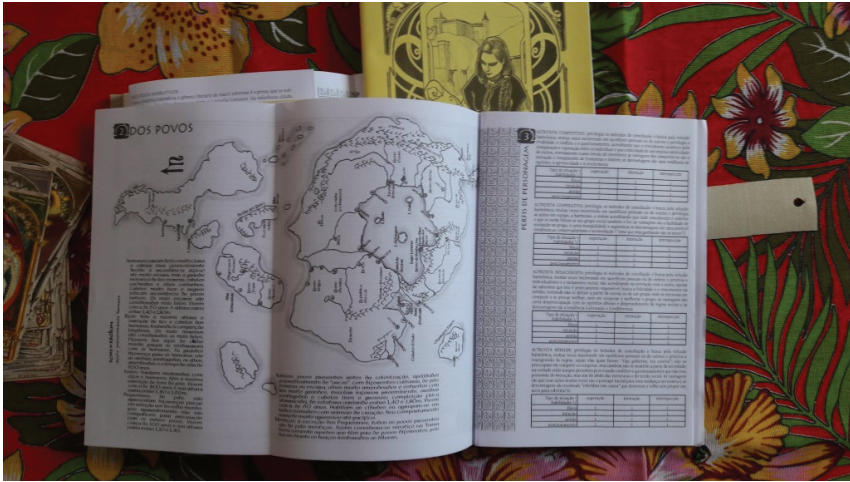
After a brief recess due to university activities, we resumed the research project from July to October of 2013. This time we had to include another goal: the creation of materials for an academic event called SEMAD. We organized the previous production of the students (concept art, text, sketchbooks) to extract a visual identity for a deck of character cards and non digital notebooks. This activity was registered in the AVA.

The students’ production finished with the elaboration of the final arts of their characters that became a part of the Terra Nova characters deck card that was posted in the setting blog.²¹ We assembled 14 Terra Nova RPG books, 2 for game masters (GM) and

20. It should be noted that the term “mestizo” in the sense of a person of mixed descent is not a derogatory term in Brazil, except for the very conservative and some xenophiles that consider everything foreigner to be better than native production (the so called “mongrel syndrome”). In our anthropological tradition, it is a well known and accepted concept that we Brazilians are a mixed people in the vast majority of our population.

21. <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/terranova/2-das-personagens-e-seus-feitos/>

12 for players, size A5 (closed), using black and white printing over offset 75g paper.²²



Incorporeal setting Terranova handbook and player's pull out. Picture by Eliane Bettocchi.

Finally, the results obtained by the students were evaluated considering innovative recombination (Creativity), critical thinking (Ethics) and consistency (Management) in the use of visual and narrative repertoires.

ANALYZING THE FIRST EXPERIENCE

Our analysis revealed that a process of research and combination of different repertoires was indeed used by the students in the elaboration of the materials that they presented.

Through interviews with the students, we verified that they considered the experiment engaging and that it had propelled the development of the competencies in question, leading to the creation of interesting illustrations. We reached the same conclusion. Here

22. These RPG books can be seen at: <http://historias.interativas.nom.br/terranova/caderno-e-encartes/>

follows a summary of the interviews' results with six students (A, B, C, D, E and F).

(A): felt the need to research to refine her character. Her brother (6th year Fundamental level, 12 years old) researched Geography and Mythology with her, including content that he was studying at school classes at that time. The little brother's goal was to help her to elaborate a map of *Terra Nova*.

(B) and (C): it made a difference for them to have affection and fun as motivators to research things that otherwise they would never have researched.

(D) and (A): worked with personal and psychological questions in their production.

(D): the first version of his character was, in his view, "bureaucratic", but when he worked with his desires and wishes, the relation with the character became pleasant and interesting. The method made it easier for him to draw from references, something that he did not like to do. He liked to be able to change and add things to his character as the narrative progressed through RPG sessions. He wished that the "consciences" could have participated more in the narrative itself. He missed seeing the production of the other students and felt that they could have produced more.

(E): felt that researching contemporary things to mix with Fantasy was very enjoyable.

(F): created a character based on the fact that he was a beginner as a RPG player and transferred that feeling by creating a character that was an inexperienced person. He researched the setting and made a connection with the Brazil's state of Bahia in the northeast. He chose as a stylistic reference the color pallet of the illustrator Lisa Frank.

The production of the students was analyzed through what we called the "Anthropophagic Test." We concentrated the analysis in

the final art of the cards for the characters' deck that were produced by the students. Two people produced written texts. The categories for the analysis were:

Visual anthropophagi: recombination of iconographic and stylistic repertoires of the setting with iconographic and stylistic repertoires that the participant mobilized and/or appropriated.

Narrative pillage: recombination of narrative repertoires of the setting with narrative repertoires that the participant mobilized and/or appropriated.

The production was analyzed in a group meeting with the students where all could give their assessment and opinions on each other's production. The following questions were used as guidelines:

Were there a mobilization and/or appropriation of visual styles other than the base style (art nouveau)? Which ones?

Does the visual style of the presented card satisfactorily present the concept of the setting?

Were there a mobilization and/or appropriation of iconography that not only the available iconography based on Tolkien's work? Which ones?

Does the iconography of the cart presented satisfactorily describe the concept of the character?

Our analysis showed that there was indeed a process of research and combination of different repertoires by the students in the elaboration of the materials presented by them in different narrative supports. After the test results some of the students remade their cards, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Character card presented before the test



Character card presented after the test



Figure 1: character created by one student that she opted to change after the anthropophagic test.

The activity brought a productive alternative to expositive classes. It is currently being used in the Illustration course of the first cycle of the Interdisciplinary Bachelor Program in Arts and Design of UFJF and was also used in the Ludonarrative Workshop for future Visual Art Teachers for the second cycle of the IAD-UFJF.

ANALYZING THE SECOND EXPERIENCE

The second experience happened from October to November of

2014 with 36 students of 2 classes of the 4th year of Fundamental School and had the collaboration of 2 school teachers, the professors and 5 bachelor degree students of the first experiment.

The briefing session with the school teachers determined that the main competencies to be developed by their students were “focus” and “teamwork”. It was also necessary to work with topics of History and Geography. Plus, the school in question applies a “project approach” using the students’ current interests to motivate them. In that semester the project was “Greek Mythology” due to the students’ interest in fictional works in that area. All these aspects were taken into consideration to elaborate the activity. The RPG scenario used was a contemporary one with a magic and a focus on Sustainability.

The experiment was done using two regular school classes in which the two groups of students were organized in one classroom under the supervision of their teachers. In the first session, the students played a gamebook that helped them to create their characters. The decisions made while reading the gamebook led to conclusions with different character profiles: Greek demigod or magical being from Brazilian folklore. The kids played the gamebook in pairs and at the end of it they created their characters together.

Three weeks later the students had their RPG session. They were organized in three groups of 12 participants. Each character was controlled by a duo, again a player and a conscience. One professor and two college students acted as GameMasters. After the RPG adventure the students were required to present a textual and visual production.

The topics of History and Geography were a part of the plots of the gamebook and the RPG session, the competencies of focus and teamwork were developed through the activities involved in these participative narratives.

The results of the experiment were evaluated using the techniques of participant observation and semi structured interviews with teachers and students. Two weeks later, the teachers were interviewed again and reported that the impact of the experiment had been very positive both in the learning of the topics and the development of the competencies by the students based on their observations of them and evaluation their production. As a result, the school requested that the experiment continue and expand to other classes in 2015.

A “SPECIAL EVENT”

The first experience was considered very satisfactory. The results for the second experience were not so satisfactory for us, as we haven't yet received the production of the Fundamental Level students from their teachers. Also, some of the follow-up tasks that we proposed for the students were not done due to a lack of time in their part. Overall, we came with the impression that our ludonarrative activities became a “*special event*” but not really integrated into the school activities and therefore may not have the lasting effects in terms of attitude that we hoped for, although they did help with focus and content absorption. Since we will be working with the same group, now as 5th year students, we intend to research these matters further. We would like to encourage debate with other educators and researchers interested in the educational possibilities of tabletop RPG for classroom students.

Tabletop Role-Playing Games, the Modern Fantastic, and Analog ‘Realized’ Worlds

CURTIS CARBONELL

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) harness the flows of modernity within their fantasy spaces. If that statement is not agreeable, then one can at least take notice that the broad category of “role-playing games” has been subjected to a considerable amount of critical commentary in the past decade. Monographs by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Jennifer Cover examine tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) beyond Gary Alan Fine’s seminal sociological study *Shared Fantasy* (1983) and Lawrence Schick’s early history of the industry, *Heroic Worlds* (1991).¹ Jon Peterson’s *Playing at the World*

1. For representative academic monographs, see Daniel Mackay. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001; Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. 2nd Ed. University of Chicago Press, 2002; Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland, 2010; Michael J. Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010; Jennifer Grouling Cover. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010. Brad King and John Borland. *Dungeons & Dreamers: A Story of How Computer Games Created a Global Community*. 2nd edition. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2014. For books written in the popular sphere, see Mark Barrowcliffe. *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange*. Soho Press, 2009; Ethan Gilsdorf. *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest For Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, And Other Dwellers Of Imaginary Realms*. Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2010; David M. Ewalt. *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It*. Reprint edition. New York: Scribner, 2014. Ewalt. For anthologies, see: J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, eds. *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy*

(2012) and Shannon Appelcline's *Designers and Dragons* (2015) both offer expansive histories of TRPGs.² What ties these works together is fantasy's seminal role in opening horizons of possibility for new technological-driven world creation and subject formation. Game texts that outline analog TRPG procedures, be they paper or available on PDF through DriveThruRPG, DMsGuild.com, and/or Kickstarter, continue to deliver foundations for the creation of realized worlds.

As historian Michael Saler argues, the late 19th century's imaginary, spectacular texts—like that of H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), Robert Louis Stephenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)—set the stage for later works that created the first virtual worlds: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 221B Baker Street, H.P. Lovecraft's redacted Cthulhu Mythos, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.³ For Saler, these 'virtual' worlds allowed fans to engage them far beyond their authors' control through letters to editors, clubs, amateur journalism, conventions, walking tours, etc., thereby infusing a supposed pessimistic Weberian modernity with a much needed ironic enchantment. Today, the Internet has drastically expanded the reach of such worlds full of imaginary elements. Saler postulates that "we are all geeks now,"⁴ and the virtual worlds of analog TRPGs are an important part of the modern conception of the "fantastic."

This article offers the term 'realized worlds' as a descriptor for the rise of these fantasy spaces, explaining how these new spaces

Games. McFarland, 2006; Evan Torner and William J. White, eds. *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. McFarland, 2012; Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2010 which broadly explore how role-playing works across varying media.

2. Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, Peoples and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012; Shannon Appelcline. *Designers & Dragons*. [4 part series] 2nd edition. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2015.

3. Michael Saler. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary PreHistory of Virtual Reality*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

4. Saler, p. 3.

invigorate the discourses of *posthumanism* — the conception of the thinking subject beyond the constraints of Cartesian dualism— before detailing a few seminal TRPG realized worlds that create these spaces. Analog/digital fantastic spaces proliferating in today's highly technologized culture intervene in the discourse of posthumanism by shifting the focus from *bodies* to *spaces*. Our nature as technologized persons increasingly relies on the creation and consumption of such game settings, offering systems and spaces of narrative in addition to the narratives themselves. More narrowly, it places importance on the actual historiography of game texts with respect to the fantasy destinations we often now choose to visit. Complex campaign settings are at the forefront of my study, particularly those of the wildly influential TRPG *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*. Such spaces begin as game texts, a backdrop for the deployment of analog game systems, and expand to become imagination engines for other media: books, TV shows, video games, larps, and memes. Realized worlds through TRPGs offer a new mode of cultural production and consumption beyond the literary and the cinematic, one that is increasingly defining contemporary technologized culture through the mode of play.

MODERN FANTASTIC AND POSTHUMANIZATION

Posthumanization is a process of subject formation that mixes the analog and digital. Discourses of trans- and posthumanism have been in motion since Donna Haraway argued that the cyborg was more than a science-fiction trope. Haraway reinterpreted the standard notion of the cyborg, detailed as early as 1960 in an attempt to theorize how humans might live in space.⁵ Instead of such an instrumental approach, she challenged old dualistic separations of the

5. See Manfred E. Clynes, , and Nathan S. Kline. "Cyborgs and Space." *Astronautics* (September 1960).

Human vs. Machine, as well as influenced theorists who followed her into articulating the complex relationships humans face in today's technologized world. N. Katherine Hayles argued in *How We Became Posthuman* that imagining a self without a body is a techno-fantasy.⁶ Her target was Hans Moravec and others, who championed scenarios of radical mind uploading. Since her response, much of critical posthumanism seeks ways to challenge the Enlightenment Project's traditional categories of the human, nature, the self, and so forth through the discourse of the *corporeal* or *somatic*. One focuses on the importance of actual bodies affected by actual technologies.⁷ My approach moves away from the posthuman body toward conceptualizing the process of engineered posthumanization through fantasist spaces in which new subjectivities emerge. Thus, I alter Saler's term, 'virtual' worlds, for 'realized' worlds. 'Realized' worlds in analog terms means the democratization of agential, systemic, and creative thinking across much of humanity, changing discourses away from bodies toward those of *space*, that is: worldbuilding and play in those worlds.⁸

Modernity itself has encouraged the proliferation of realized game worlds. Stephen Toulmin suggests that the received view of the modern age was never stable, a view that insisted on the dominance of modern philosophical 'Reason' as a defining factor.⁹ Modernity's appearance and disappearance was and is a discursive phenomenon and it now exists in a less-than-dominant fashion as a

6. N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

7. See Andy Miah. "A Critical History of Posthumanism." *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*. Springer, 2009, pp. 71–94. For good introductions to the terms, see Miah; Tamar Sharon. "A Cartography of the Posthuman: Humanist, Non-Humanist and Mediated Perspectives on Emerging Biotechnologies." *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Thought* 2 (2012): 4–19; Francesca Ferrando. "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: New Relations." *Existenz: An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and Art* 8.2 (2013): 26–32. For key methodologies see Cary Wolfe. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman*. 1st edition. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2013.

8. I admit that the 'real' is a loaded discourse, but one I leverage thanks to a resurgent new materialism and realism seen across a variety of disciplines.

9. Stephen Toulmin. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

phenomenon with myriad definitions contextualized in specific cultural moments, many of which are still *superstitious* and *traditional* (the two bugbears of optimistic European rationalism).¹⁰ Our words become engineering blueprints. The modern fantastic, a discursive (*written*) and engineering (*systemic design*) phenomenon based on empirical principles of constructing worlds with fantasy qualities, now drives an inflection of modernity in which lived spaces oscillate between the real and the imaginary.

The intersection between modernity and 'realized' worlds is the discourse of posthumanism and its focus on Cartesian dualism, as well as the problems this poses for subjectivity. Just as the legitimation of science and modernity paradoxically interrogates the central doctrine of Cartesian dualism, critical posthumanism attacks Cartesian abstraction and universalism. In response, it encourages the acceptance of qualities similar to Renaissance humanists' love of particulars, skepticisms, varieties, i.e., lived individual affairs. In its most distilled form, a critical posthumanist position rejects abstracted Cartesian notions of the human, while accepting Renaissance humanism's particularism. Just as the idea of modernity reaching beyond the Cartesian definition to a literary influence a century before Descartes is valuable, if flawed, we should see the modern fantastic's form of posthumanism defined by its creation of 'realized' worlds, encouraging within them humans to be humans in a posthuman fashion.

Pre-Cartesian humanism is often rejected as a model because it retains stable ontological borders between the human and nature. If we can agree that human essentialism is problematic, that discussions of human nature are always predetermined by discourse, we see that 'realized' worlds engender a variety of humans and humanisms,

10. See Toulmin.

plenty to account for the differences that allow a plurality to thrive, without the need for a controlling definition.¹¹ Our attempts to step into our ‘realized’ worlds lets us see such details flourish. TRPGs in their current aesthetic form should please both traditional humanists and posthumanists: they encapsulate humans as social beings telling oral, ephemeral stories as well as imagining what systems and complexities transcend them. What is most radical is not imagining the limits of constructing the human and transgressing them, but in imagining new fantasy spaces in which intelligent beings can live in a multitude of forms and places.

The modern fantastic encourages creativity and agency for the broadest number of persons, as well as the expansion of realized worlds across a variety of platforms. From this vantage point, the modern fantastic emerges as a very ‘human’ process that has been occurring in detail since at least the late 19th century with the rise of the popular novel and its many fictional worlds. But if we take the long view — and this impulse is already present in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1615), the protagonist of which seeks disappearing myths in the face of disruptive change — such change is *helping* us tell our myths. Technological mythmaking speaks to my insistence that the modern fantastic’s key dynamic, *posthumanization*, must retain aspects of the human worth saving. We enter ‘realized’ worlds of our own making, wherein we leap into the enchanted present powered by stats, maps, and our capacity for narrative. This is not only an intellectual process, but an experiential one. Without venturing into these simulated worlds, we cannot know them.

REALIZED WORLDS

Situating the modern fantastic’s posthumanizing process requires a

11. One recent RPG example of this would be Cairdlynn Belle and Josh T. Jordan’s *Singularity* (2016).

brief comment on one major influence in critical posthumanism: Gilles Deleuze's¹² ontological philosophy of difference, multiplicities, flows, assemblages, forces, and intensities, especially how they relate to the abstract concept, the 'Real.' Deleuze, along with Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Lyotard, consistently consider the transcendence of Western thought (i.e., relying on external grounds such as God, Truth, the Self, etc., for rational judgment) and how this transcendent philosophy affects the conceptualization of the modern subject, as well as the discursive practices used to define it. Deleuze informs my approach to posthumanization because of his move to not just erase ingrained dualities like subject/object, but the textual attempt to corral the movement of material forces, what he calls 'flows' which emerge in a variety of forms and operate without our full cognitive understanding.

A difficult aspect of Deleuze's thought helpful in conceiving analog game texts as the basis for 'realized' worlds is his conception of the 'virtual' as a creative space for thought. Saler also chooses to treat the virtual as non-digital. He frames the virtual, though, within a historical context prior to its use defining technological virtual reality. For him, virtual worlds are "acknowledged imaginary spaces that are communally inhabited for prolonged periods of time by rational individuals."¹³ Deleuze's concept of the virtual serves the modern fantastic more completely. He expands the term even more to describe the complex process of becoming. For Deleuze, the virtual emerges out of 'actual' material life as the 'real.' Before the virtual is the 'flow' of life. With perception, we see or experience the virtual. And the virtual is needed to make the actual *real*, slowing the flow of life to actualize it into the real. Deleuze has conceived of the "virtual" in a capacious fashion, robust enough to handle the complexities of

12. Often along with Félix Guattari. Henceforth, Deleuze.

13. Saler, p. 6.

realized worlds and their various game manifestations. Embracing this realism rejects the naïve inflection surrounding most fantasy, i.e., that the fantastic only works in imaginary texts because the world is supposedly knowable in an uncomplicated and straightforward manner.

How can we expand the real beyond this naïve conception? Like Deleuze, engineers are also interested in problems directly related to material reality. And while they do use discursive tools, they are not bound by them but, ultimately, rely on engagement with the material world for reliable and verifiable results. If engineers failed to find some sense of an actual world, they would fail at their jobs too. But we have clear examples of successful results. Thus, engineering provides the ultimate challenge to naïve realism, rather than to Deleuzian thought. We should read Deleuze as pursuing the difficulties in generating human meaning and understanding thought in a world with complex systems that often yield little meaning or transcendent answers of any kind.

‘Realized’ worlds multiply by the day as game designers write, and the raw material of the TRPG constitutes part of the real, rather than simply imaginary. They are part of a massive assemblage of real and imaginary parts. Moreover, these ‘realized’ worlds undermine the actual world’s stability as simplistically real.¹⁴ Herein lies the beating heart of a Deleuzian philosophy of becoming in which the material world is empirically knowable and the virtual world key. In such an understanding, science charts the process of the actual/virtual world becoming real, and philosophers of science, engineering, and technology push back in the opposite direction so that the philosophical creation of concepts do, in fact, affect the actual/virtual (real) world in a material manner.

14. A perennial theme in science fiction, especially from Philip K. Dick onward and one to which the discourse of posthumanism is finely attuned.

Thus, I follow other theorists in using the idea of this Deleuzian force situated behind the world of differentiated matter, much like Manuel DeLanda does as a form of pre-thought, a pre-human categorical concept that allows for creativity to emerge in material ways.¹⁵ The modern fantastic follows such a trajectory with the increasing proliferation of realized worlds. Game texts and game tools, then, become part of this posthumanization process of creating realized worlds within a perennial modernity whose key attribute is continued critique.¹⁶ Ultimately, these material objects must be considered within assemblages of intensely complex networked analog/digital relationships that help in understanding today's massively connected communication systems, as well as explain how human beings fit into such a matrix of human and non-human elements like individuals playing TRPGs. Ultimately, my reading of Deleuze clarifies how something as complex as the creation of the realized worlds of, say, *D&D* functions today.

TRPG CAMPAIGN SETTINGS

Analog game texts are written manuals that give players the abilities to engage realized worlds, and to change them. The embodied materiality of the tabletop experience is critical. Physical game texts must be read, outlined, annotated, as well as understood at an imaginative level. Game tools are critical as well. The pen, paper, and dice combination, along with all of the rules and tables in the books, the maps, etc., function as material agents that augment the texts. Beyond the iconic dice, figurines on a battlemat are exemplary in providing analogues for this process, material objects that abstract what they represent. Even more so, the use of online tools and virtual

15. For example, see Manuel De Landa. *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*. London; New York: Continuum, 2002.

16. Michel Foucault. "What is Enlightenment." *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50.

tabletops (e.g., Roll20.net, Fantasy Grounds, and a host of others) further embed players into the posthuman realm where intelligent machines work in their favor. In fact, the latest version of *D&D* — 5th edition — has been noted for its rulebooks as hacking tools, as well as for their difficulty of use in that they require a DM to jump back and forth between texts (a problem complexified by the supplement of third-party resources) and one assisted with online tools.

Rich cultural products like TRPGs allow fans to expand story worlds for their own play. Buying a core rule text, tweaking it, adding material online, creating homebrew rules, collaborating with others at the table, utilizing OCR'd PDF versions, joining a virtual tabletop, adding a character-management app to your phone, and so forth, all correspond with the type of cultural transformation now informing an embodied material technoculture. What makes the TRPG unique in this process is its mix of discursive and material components. Most clearly, the texts that comprise the core products are important as guides for imagined realized worlds and characters—written records in both analog-and-digital forms. These material objects function as embodied entities deeply enmeshed in dynamic human/nonhuman relationships.¹⁷ TRPGs step beyond a reader's consumption, or even engagement via fan fiction, letters, etc., beyond what Saler details into the construction of virtual spaces. Instead, these 'realized' worlds form a microcosm of the broader social-technical world emerging today.

Imagination combined with a strict set of rules has structured the modern fantastic, posthumanization, and TRPGs since the beginning of the wargaming/TRPG industry. As both Appelcline and Peterson

17. For a detailed "experiment" (135) of how game materials function as actors, see Rafael Bienia. *Role Playing Materials*. Braunschweig: Zauberfeder Verlag, 2016. Bienia attempts to give game materials a voice, thereby adding a humanizing element to his deployment of Actor-Network theory, similar to what Latour did with his quasi 'novel,' *Aramis*.

have noted, the path to popular-cultural penetration began when the wargaming industry of the 1950s combined with the Tolkien phenomenon and fan-created scenarios of the 1960s to form a new type of gameplay in the 1970s: the fantasy role-playing game. TRPGs are a unique form of simulation-and-narrative text-based games, peaking in the U.S. in the early-to-mid '80s with the success of TSR's *D&D* and since then expanding and collapsing at different times. *D&D* had been published in a variety of forms since 1974, only in the critical year of 1977 forming into the two versions of the game that would dominate the 80s: Basic and Advanced.¹⁸ At this point, the epic fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien found its first popular imitation with Terry Brooks's far-future *The Sword of Shannara* (1977), and a host of others soon to follow in the 1980s. A curious coincidence in publication dates also sees John Eric Holmes's version of the *Dungeons and Dragons Basic Set* (1977), as well as the first offering of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* books, the *Monster Manual* (1977), both appearing in the same year as George Lucas's groundbreaking *Star Wars* (1977), a film that would thrust science fantasy into the public imagination and create an immersive story world through merchandising of licensed products. Ultimately, these gametexts comprise milestones in the modern fantastic's move toward the creation of sophisticated realized worlds.

D&D is as expansive as the human imagination, with a system ready to deploy its mechanisms on behalf of any fantasy. When Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson first collaborated on creating the new type of wargame that would become *D&D*, they called it "The Fantasy Game."¹⁹ But *D&D* itself was never so stable. In the beginning, original *D&D* was open to hybrid science fantasy, comparable to

18. While the *Monster Manual* was published in 1977, the other two books that comprise the Advanced game were published in the next two years, the *Player's Handbook* (1978) and the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1979).

19. Appelcline, p. 12.

Star Wars. Arneson's adventure "The Temple of the Frog" included "battle armor, a teleporter, and even a scout craft."²⁰ One of the early adventure modules for AD&D, *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* (1981) presents a buried spaceship that functions as a dungeon. Furthermore, *D&D* played a bridging role between these gonzo fantasy scenarios and the sober business world. *Dragon* magazine became the first professional magazine dedicated to fantasy and science fiction games,²¹ and D&D's science-fantasy influence is clearly admitted in the "Appendix N' of the *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979),"²² where references are made to the works of fantasists such as E.R. Burroughs, Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp, August Derleth, Lord Dunsany, R.E. Howard, Fritz Lieber, A. Merritt, Michael Moorcock, Tolkien, Jack Vance, Roger Zelazny.²³ The modern fantastic leans on the classic fantastic to deliver.

While *D&D* would become famous as a refined example of sword-and-sorcery tabletop role-playing, the industry would expand into all major publishing genres, hybridizing, fragmenting into a variety of systems and gaming styles. Science fantasy, though, would prove to be a favorite of later games interested in both dragons and spaceships, demons and detectives, broadswords and handguns. For example, Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) demonstrated how a change in focus from sword-and-sorcery and mythic fantasy, as well as from space-opera SF, to science-fantasy horror, changed both the mechanics and tone of a game from dungeon crawling, killing monsters, and gaining loot to investigating cosmic horrors. Such imaginative blending of supposed opposite science-fantasy tropes also defined later games like *Shadowrun* (1989) and *Rifts* (1990). These

20. Appelcline, p. 20.

21. Appelcline, p. 23.

22. Appelcline, p. 349.

23. Gyax, p. 224.

would harness both the genre mechanisms of magic and science to enhance their game worlds, as well as the player and GM imaginative possibilities. Interestingly, two of the most recent popular TRPGs—Monte Cook's *Numenera* (2013) and, along with Bruce Cordell, *The Strange* (2014)—both utilize a science-fantasy approach.

A look at some of the most content-rich fantasist campaign settings reveals an incredibly detailed series of imaginative realized worlds that far exceed those of any one writer, even Tolkien. Yet early campaign settings of *D&D* were abstract and largely numbers, a few sketches, and brief descriptions.²⁴ Gygax's company, TSR, showed an ability to branch out from its initial world, Greyhawk, with *Ravenloft* (1983), an example of a mixed-genre adventure, this one fantasy and horror, as well as an adventure that focused on problem solving instead of simple dungeon delving. This adventure module would, itself, inspire an entire setting later. The *Dragonlance* series of adventures of the 1980s are examples of the turn toward in-game narrative sophistication already seen with *Ravenloft*, not to mention the attention paid to both its campaign setting and other product tie-ins, like the very popular novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. *Dragonlance's* more cohesive approach to its campaign setting and adventures, though, were later superseded by the *Forgotten Realms*. In particular, the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (1987) "was the first TSR setting that was truly and exhaustively detailed—thanks to a line of sourcebooks, rather than just adventures."²⁵ TSR would eventually release other detailed campaign settings: e.g., *Spelljammer*, *Ravenloft*, *Dark Sun*, *Al-Qadim*, *Planescape*, *Eberron*, *Birthright*, *Mystara*, etc., a trend that now defines

24. A notable exception at the time was M.A.R.Barker's *Tekumel*, from *Empire of the Petal Throne*, a more socially and culturally detailed game world at the time.

25. Appelcline p. 73.

the industry with 5th Edition's multiverse combining all of these into one grand fictional universe.

Other companies followed the impulse to develop detailed campaign settings with extended game lore. Even a wargaming miniatures' company like Games Workshop produced massive imaginative frameworks, providing players interested in tactics and combat with enough reading material about their miniature figurines to occupy their time. We see these details exemplified with Games Workshop's *Rogue Trader* (1987), a wargame that only flirted with role-playing. The popularity, though, of *Rogue Trader's* 40K setting, as developed in the later fiction of the Black Library, encouraged the need for a full role-playing game with *Dark Heresy* (2008) and a series of other source books. Meta-plotted immersive story worlds are now standard: from White Wolf's *World of Darkness* to the licensed material of Greg Stafford's *Glorantha*, Paizo's *Golarion*, Green Ronin's *Freeport*, etc.

Such game texts, while certainly manuals for play, do more than provide rules' systems or narrative frameworks. Within the modern fantastic, they form a vast *megatext* of world-building material increasing in proliferation through engaged fantasist cultures. These cultures have moved from the margins to the center, and their virtual – 'realized' – worlds are continuing to grow. Moreover, these game texts do more than challenge traditional notions of authorship, or readership, the discreet text, the ubiquity of discourse, etc. They provide living analog-and-digital realized worlds that, more and more, now define us as technological persons. Video games and other media draw heavily on the systemic narratives fostered by the TRPG medium and its sprawling hybrid settings. The spaces in which we choose to visit, and sometimes live, provide the mechanisms for who we are and what we are.

New Spaces

The Mixing Desk of Larp

History and Current State of a Design Theory

JAAKKO STENROS, MARTIN ECKHOFF ANDRESEN,
AND MARTIN NIELSEN

People who design live action role-playing games (larps) tend to be self-taught. Although there is a long and illustrious history of shared and embodied enactments of ‘as if’ play, the tradition of larps only stretches back less than 40 years. *Larpwrights*, i.e., the larp designers, learn how to design larps by doing, by collaborating, and by attending community events. However, this pioneer path is no longer the only one. The first series of actual courses on larp design have been established during the last decade, in academia and outside it. One of the earliest, the Larpwriter Summer School, started operating in 2012.

However, although there was significant debate and some literature on larp design, no holistic approaches to teaching design were found at the time. To fill this void, the main organizers of the Summer School put together a now renowned tool that originated in the Nordic larp community: *The Mixing Desk of Larp*.

The Mixing Desk is a frame for organizing thought, a thing-to-think-with, that helps grasp the design space of larps. It is a metaphor

that attempts to communicate that the larpwright is able to play with different elements in larp, just as a technician is able to control light and sound in a concert. It is not optimized for precision or analysis, but for supporting the ideation of a designer, and helping teach larp design to people new to the practice.

This article first explains how the Mixing Desk emerged and contextualizes it as a design theory in relation to discourses in Nordic larp and game studies. Next, we explain the Mixing Desk and the ideals and reasoning behind it. We then spend most of our time with description and reflection on the thirteen faders of the current Mixing Desk. We conclude with some reflections and criticism of the faders.¹

HISTORY AND TRADITION

Martin E. Andresen and Martin Nielsen created the very first version of the Mixing Desk of Larp as a tool for teaching larp design at the first Larpwriter Summer School (LWSS). At the time, there was no coherent, unified model for understanding or teaching larp design. Although larp design had been debated, discussed, theorized about, and researched for years,² comprehensive approaches to larp design did not exist.

1. This article is based on the individual “Fader Talk” lectures given at the Larpwriter Summer School in 2016 and the latest version of the introductory document to the faders given to participants: Martin Nielsen & Martin Andresen “The Mixing Desk of Larp”. 2016; Bjarke Pedersen. “Introduction to the Mixing Desk of Larp.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Bjarke Pedersen. “Representation of Theme Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Bjarke Pedersen. “Mechanics Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Grethe Strand. “Character Creation Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Grethe Strand. “Culture Creation Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Johanna Koljonen. “Pressure on Players Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Johanna Koljonen. “Loyalty to World Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Jaakko Stenros. “Character as Mask Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Jaakko Stenros. “Environment Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Maria Raczynska. “Runtime Direction Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Maria Raczynska. “Openness Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016; Magnar Grønvik Müller. “Player Motivation Fader Talk.” Presentation at Larpwriter Summer School 2016. Ruta, Lithuania, 2016.
2. For example, see: Henrik Summanen & Tomas Walch. *Saga mot Verkligheten. Att arrangera levande rollspel*. Stockholm, 1998; Hanne Grasmø. *Levande Rollspill Laiv*. Oslo: Gyldendal Fakta, 1998; Mike Young, ed. *The Book of LARP*. Vienna, Virginia: Interactivities Ink, 2003; Marie Denward. *Pretend that It Is Real!: Convergence Culture in Practice*. Doctoral dissertation. Malmö: Malmö University, 2011; Markus Montola. *On the Edge of the Magic Circle*. Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games. Doctoral dissertation. Tampere: University of Tampere, 2012.

Larpwriter Summer School is a weeklong course on larp design, organized by the NGO Fantasiforbundet (Norway) and Education Center “POST” (Belarus), and funded by the Norwegian government. It is aimed at participants who have had very little or no experience organizing larps. The course is taught by larp designers, pedagogues, and role-play professionals mostly from the Nordic countries (and later from Belarus). The first LWSS took place in 2012, and it has been organized annually since then. By 2016, the course had been attended by approximately 250 people from approximately 20 countries.



A lecture at the Larpwriter Summer School 2015. Photo by Anatoly Kazakov.



Preparing for the larp *New Voices in Art* at LWSS 2015. Photo by Anatoly Kazakov.

Before the first summer school, Andresen and Nielsen presented the *Mixing Desk* to the teachers. Each one were to take responsibility for a fader to present and teach to the students. In the planning session before the first LWSS and during the summer school the *Mixing Desk* was overhauled as the teachers, many of whom had designed, analysed, and published on larp design, went over it in detail. During the first LWSS each aspect of the *Mixing Desk* continued to be debated. The first iteration was published a year after the first LWSS.³ Work on the *Mixing Desk* has continued over the years, and it has been developed, fine-tuned, and contributed to by huge number of larpwrights, mainly at LWSS.⁴ One way to keep the faders fresh and to bring in diverse perspectives and improvement has been to assign different teachers to specific faders each year, enabling them to stand on the shoulders of previous speakers and adding their own

3. Martin Andresen & Martin Nielsen. "The *Mixing Desk* of Larp." *Crossing Theoretical Borders*. Karete Jacobsen Meland & Katrine Øverlie Sveta, eds. Oslo: Fantasiforbundet, 2013.

4. Check the Acknowledgements section for a full list.

perspectives. Andresen and Nielsen have remained central in the development of new iterations, acting as keepers of the Mixing Desk, although the framework now belongs to the community.

The Mixing Desk was not conceived in vacuum. There is a long history in relation to role-playing games and larp of enthusiastic players developing and debating emic theories of what role-playing is, what kind of players participate, how to design better experiences, and what is the best way to role-play. This history stretches back to not only the beginning of the publication of role-playing games with *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, but before that. *Dungeons & Dragons* emerged from the wargaming community, which already had a vibrant culture of newsletters.⁵ The theorizing has continued for decades, even if the discussion fora have changed (e.g. APAs, zines, magazines, newsgroups, web forums, blogs, books, social media).⁶ Some of the emic theories are very widely spread in role-player communities, influencing design, playing, and self-understanding. For example, much of the key terminology relating role-playing games (e.g. gamism, dramatism, simulationism, immersion) emerged from the discourses of the player communities.⁷ Indeed, even the term ‘role-playing game’ emerged from player discussions.⁸

As a model, the Mixing Desk is divided in two. First, the model is the idea that larp design can be broken down into faders. Second,

5. Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World. A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012.

6. Paul Mason. “In Search of the Self. A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory.” *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, eds. Helsinki: Ropecon, 2004; Emily Care Boss. “Theory Roundup.” *Black and Green Games*, Oct 2, 2014. Online at <http://www.blackgreengames.com/lcn/2014/10/2/theory-roundup>

7. John H. Kim. “The Threefold Model FAQ.” 1998. Online at <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/>; Mike Pohjola. “The Manifesto of the Turku School.” 2000. A 2003 version is available in Morten Gade, Line Thorup & Mikkel Sander, eds. *As Larp Grows Up. Theory and Methods in Larp*. Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003; William J. White, Emily Care Boss & J. Tuomas Harviainen. “Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play and Discourse of Immersion.” *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. Evan Torner and William J. White, eds. Jefferson; McFarland, 2012.

8. Peterson.

there are specific faders that have been chosen as the content of the Mixing Desk. The content, as taught in LWSS, builds specifically on the tradition of Nordic larp.⁹ There is an international community of larpers and larp designers who come together at a the Knutepunkt conference, organized annually since 1997.¹⁰ An evolving tradition of larp design, playing, and thinking has emerged that has not only produced numerous role-playing games and larps, but also an annual English language publication of thinking on larp. The Nordic larp community gradually became more international over the years, as reflected in the LWSS. The community has produced quite a bit of thinking on larp and larp design, ranging from manifestos¹¹ to challenges of auteurism,¹² and from design analysis¹³ to doctoral dissertations.¹⁴ While a coherent design theory had not emerged prior to the Mixing Desk, there was a growing body of shared terminology, canon of key works, and a history of discourse on ‘hot’ topics. Many of the key figures in these discussions have been invited to teach at the summer school. The Mixing Desk, while shepherded by Andresen and Nielsen, is a joint effort by the community – and the joint production of the Mixing Desk forced people to critically examine their own theories in order to build some kind of a coherent whole. This work has, of course, fed back into the

9. See: Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola, eds. *Nordic Larp*. Stockholm: Fëa Livia, 2010.

10. The name changes based on which of the four countries that event is held that year: Knutepunkt (Norway), Knutpunkt (Sweden), Knudepunkt (Denmark), and Solmukohta (Finland).

11. E.g. Eirik Fastrand & Lars Wingård. “Dogma 99. A Programme for the Liberation of LARP. International version.” 1999. A 2003 version is available in Morten Gade, Line Thorup & Mikkel Sander, eds. *As Larp Grows Up. Theory and Methods in Larp*. Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003; See also: Pohjola.

12. Martine Svanevik. “The Collective’s little red book, A step-by-step guide to arranging larps the collective way.” *Dissecting Larp*. Collected papers for Knutepunkt 2005. Petter Bøckman and Ragnhild Hutchison, eds. Knutepunkt; Oslo, 2005.

13. Andie Nordgren. “High Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond.” *Playground Worlds. Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, eds. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2008; Johanna Koljonen. “The Dragon Was the Least of It: Dragonbane and Larp as Ephemera and Ruin.” *Playground Worlds. Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, eds. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2008

14. E.g. Montola; J. Tuomas Harviainen. *Systemic Perspectives on Information is Physically Performed Role-Play*. Doctoral dissertation. Tampere: University of Tampere, 2012.

Knutepunkt tradition both through theory discussions and the larps designed by LWSS alumni.

Over the years, much of the terminology from the Knutepunkt tradition has crossed over to academia – even if the connected theoretical structures can be explicitly questioned. Role-playing studies continues to be a small field, and most of the scholars working in the area have a background as players. It would be foolish to ignore the knowledge and analytical tools amassed by the real experts of that field, the players and designers. Furthermore, game studies more generally has been open to contributions coming from game designers.¹⁵ In role-playing games and larps, where each gamemaster and larpwright has tremendous impact on the shape of the experience in which players participate, the line between an expert player and a designer is particularly blurry.

The Mixing Desk of larp is above all a design theory. We can contextualize it via game design theory in game studies. While larps are not strictly speaking just games,¹⁶ for example, they can be studied *as* games, and the long history of breaking games down into elements and identifying patterns in game design can be illuminating. Similar to the *characteristics* of games,¹⁷ the Mixing Desk has mostly been created by designers, and it emerged as a tool for teaching. Game design *lenses*¹⁸ are similar in the sense that they attempt to get the designer out of their comfort zone and consider new aspects of the design space. However, the ever-expanding game design

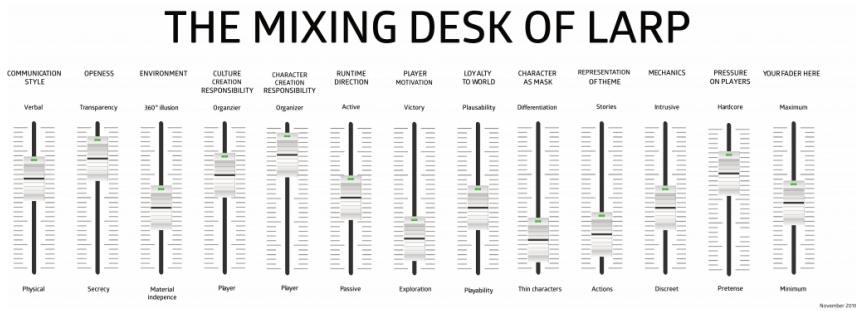
15. Marinka Copier. "The Other Game Researcher. Participating in and Watching the Construction of Boundaries in Game Studies." Level Up: DiGRA 2003 Conference Proceedings. Utrecht: The Netherlands, 2003; Jaakko Stenros. *Playfulness, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach*. Doctoral dissertation. Tampere: University of Tampere, 2015.

16. Jaakko Stenros (2010): "Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art and Game". *Nordic Larp*. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, eds. Stockholm: Fëa Livia, 2010.

17. George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield & K. Robert Gutschera. *Characteristics of Games*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012.

18. Jesse Schell. *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*. Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufmann, 2008.

patterns paradigm has much more affinity with this one, aiming for comprehensiveness and accuracy.¹⁹



The Mixing Desk of Larp. Image used with permission by the authors.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MIXING DESK

Originally, the Mixing Desk was developed to serve three main purposes: to raise awareness of the spectrum of design opportunities inherent in larp, to help designers be more conscious of the design choices they make, and to help teach design vocabulary.²⁰ Over the years, the Mixing Desk of Larp has developed into a formulation and a visualization of a design ideology, dressed up as an easily understandable metaphor. It is a thing-to-think-with for the larpwright to help map out the possible design space and to make design choices concrete.

In experience design, such as larp design, anything and everything from the temperature of the space to the costuming and from interaction codes to calorie intake, is a *designable surface*. The Mixing Desk seeks to visualize the most important considerations to take into account when making these choices in an approachable manner. Since the surfaces that can be designed will be present in a larp

19. Staffan Björk & Jussi Holopainen. *Patterns in Game Design*. Hingham: Charles River Media, 2005. See also: J Li and Jason Morningstar (n.d.) *Pattern Language for Larp Design*. Online at <http://www.larppatterns.org/>

20. Cf. Andresen & Nielsen.

anyway, not making a conscious choice as a designer simply means leaving that choice to the participants, the tradition – or to happenstance.²¹ The Mixing Desk is driven by the idea that *design is about making conscious choices*. Understanding the design space and the surfaces available is important – as in understanding what options are available. Choosing one thing means that something else is left out.

The Mixing Desk is not just about designing the runtime of a larp, but inclusive of considerations of the lead up to the runtime and the debrief and post-larp period. A comprehensive design will consider not only the larp runtime experience, but the experience of participating in a larp in a wider sense. Thus, the events leading up to the runtime and the structured interactions following it are also designable surfaces, with important implications not only for the experience as a whole, but the community of larpers who are participating. Design choices become motivated by the kind of implications it will have on the player community.

The Mixing Desk aims to be a tool applicable to all kinds of larp around the world. However, dividing all possible designable surfaces into a dozen areas requires making choices. Thus, the thirteen faders taught at LWSS offer a very specific filter, expressive of a moment in time in primarily Nordic larp discourse.²² Another way to interpret the origin of the included faders is as a residue of what has been debated and developed in discussions and actual designs in Nordic larp in the last decade. The descriptions of the faders show bias as well; they are meant to be neutral, and they continue to be developed with that as an ideal, but the background and personal preferences of the developers show through nonetheless.

Even so, the Mixing Desk enables designers to see beyond their

21. See the 2016 videos by Johanna Koljonen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXjEHDBjrXE>) and Bjarke Pedersen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYAZupokjEw>)

22. Jaakko Stenros. "What Does 'Nordic Larp' Mean?" *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*. Jon Back, ed. Stockholm: Knutpunkt, 2014.

own tradition, and what lies beyond their ‘default fader positions’. These default positions are likely not questioned within small, homogenous larp traditions. However, when players and designers from different traditions meet, such differences in default positions are impactful, opening up possibilities for misunderstandings and disappointment when expectations do not align.²³ For example, a larp need not be six hours long, the characters might be only able to communicate nonverbally, and all characters need not be written by the larpwright. The Mixing Desk has helped in developing shared vocabulary on larp design, enabling more nuanced discussion about larp design, and it has shifted discussion from ‘good’ and ‘bad’ design to the benefits and drawbacks of different design choices.

The *philosophy* behind the Mixing Desk of larp is more important than the descriptions of the faders. It is a-thing-to-think-with, and can be useful in analysing design, but it is not a quantitative metric. The Mixing Desk is not intended as a tool for discussing the outcome or the experience of the larp, but rather how it is composed. It does *not* support reducing larp design to numeric values on the scales (i.e., faders). In the event one would like to use the Mixing Desk to compare larps, it would at best be possible to do so on an ordinal scale of measurement. Indeed, the Mixing Desk is a *metaphor*. At times, the metaphor breaks down, however, since the choices being represented do not map onto the metaphor perfectly. Furthermore, since the goal of the model is to teach larp design to beginners, the Mixing Desk has prioritized *legibility* at the expense of *precision*.

FADERS

The current Mixing Desk contains thirteen faders that can be

23. For examples, see Lizzie Stark. “Mad About the Techniques: Stealing Nordic Methods for Larp Design”. Wyrld Con Companion 2012. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, eds. Los Angeles: Wyrld Con, 2012. Appl, Filip, et al. Content Larp Manifesto. Online at: <http://manifest.larpy.cz/en/>

independently “controlled.” Each fader has two ends, the so-called “minimum” and “maximum” positions. Both ends express design ideals. The faders are meant as descriptive, outlining the possible design space. Neither end is seen as better or worse on the level of description – although different local traditions obviously do value certain sets of choices more than others.

The two ends on the faders represent false dichotomies. The maximum and minimum positions are, purposefully, not each other’s logical opposites. For example, transparency and secrecy are in some ways oppositional, but not each other’s opposites. Both are active choices.²⁴ For the same reason, the descriptions are also not meant to be comprehensive.

When discussing a larp, the faders encompass the aggregate design choices for the larp as a whole. Of course, different design surfaces can have different design – for example, characters can be transparent while events are secret. Sometimes it will be useful for the designers of a larp to use the Mixing Desk approach to examine only a particular part of the larp.

The Mixing Desk is a pedagogical tool to help teach larp design and a design aid, a way to conceptualize design choices, and a specific filter to help sort out the endless design space into understandable chunks. The credo when creating the Mixing Desk has been to focus on clarity, not precision. Thus, in practice, the Mixing Desk is neither a complete, nor a completely coherent model. However, it does prove useful in practice.

Each of the thirteen faders covers a topic where design choices are needed. Both ends of the fader are expressive of design ideals; not choosing usually lands the design somewhere in the middle, depending on the larp tradition. However, one end does not

24. This has been criticized in Nathan Hook. “A Critical Review of the Mixing Desk.” *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*. Jon Back, ed. Stockholm: Knutpunkt, 2015.

necessarily exclude the other, albeit employing both ends requires some work. The larp need not be uniform in its design; it is possible for the faders to be in different positions in different parts of the same larp, and to design differing elements according to different design ideals.

While the faders are theoretically conceived of as being independent of each other, in practice choices relating to one fader can have important implications for another. For example, opting for secrecy in design usually implies that the organizers will handle responsibility relating to character or culture creation, or that they have an active runtime direction style. Furthermore, some of the faders can be locked due to external reasons: The venue may be set, the time available limited, or the budget fixed. Similarly, it may be possible that diverting too much from the local design traditions is difficult.

The choice of relevant faders, at least in theory, is independent of the Mixing Desk model. In the following, the thirteen faders that are currently covered at LWSS are described. Of course, other selections of faders are possible.

OPENNESS: SECRECY AND TRANSPARENCY

The openness fader is about deciding how much the players know in advance about the larp in general and events during the larp specifically. Should they already know the genre and setting? What about plot twists and events? Should they have access to all the written material, or only what their characters might know? Should the players be encouraged to share information about their characters that they have made up themselves?

At the *secrecy* end the players only know what they absolutely need to know. This means that they do not need to wade through endless

briefs looking for relevant information. In some ways, this means that the larp is beginner-friendly, as the amount of information needed to digest is manageable. The larp can be controlled, up to a point, through controlling the information. In some ways, larps that rely on secrecy are building on surprise; as characters uncover something new, the players are also surprised. Emotions like excitement and wonder may be stronger as a result leading to an overall stronger experience. One way to apply a very high level of secrecy is by the use of random events. If the outcome of an event is decided randomly, not even the organizers will know what will happen, and it will be impossible for the players to predict the outcome using meta-information about the larp.

On the other hand, surprises stop players from planning and steering their own larp;²⁵ they cannot orchestrate their own experience if they do not know, even broadly, what the relevant elements are. This means that they cannot decide when to confront another character, when to push for more intensity, and when to ease up and give room for others. In addition, spontaneous reactions are not always the best. Can you really pretend to be brave when you do not feel brave in a context where you may be surprised at any moment? Surprises may also infuriate players, for example, if the genre of the larp shifts.²⁶ In larps with a high degree of pressure on players, a high level of secrecy will create further pressure and increase the risk of player fatigue. Finally, surprises and secrets may never become known; if a character has a secret, they may keep that secret until the end of the larp.

Transparency is the opposite design ideal. In its pure form it means

25. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, Eleanor Saitta. "The Art of Steering: Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together." *The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book*. Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted, eds. Copenhagen: Rollespils Akademiet, 2015.

26. Evan Torner. "Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games." *Wyrd Con Companion 2013*. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, eds. Orange: Wyrd Con, 2013.

that each participant has all the information about the larp and thus enables control. For example, everyone knows all the darkest secrets of all the characters – not only what the organizers planned, but also all of the players own inventions – even run-time inventions (which are, of course, nearly impossible to transmit continuously). Transparency shifts focus from *goals*, such as finding out a secret, to *process* — how that happens in an interesting way. Transparency helps players prepare better as they know what to expect. They can also shoulder more responsibility relating playing together and constructing a story, since they know all the moving parts.

The flipside is that too much information creates information overload. Passively making information available does not automatically translate to a high level of transparency. By facilitating the transmission of information actively through a workshop, the level of transparency increases. In such a workshop, the players can also share their own inventions. While sharing of information usually takes place before runtime, it can also happen all throughout the larp. Players can go out of play and share information. Larp mechanics that increase the transparency during play are called *meta-techniques*. Finally, radical transparency can be boring after a while, since the player already know everything ahead of time.

Both approaches require trust. Transparency requires that the larp designers trust the players to not abuse the power given to them over the overall design. For this reason, transparent design usually works best with larps designed for exploration as player motivation (see below). Secrecy requires that the players trust the larp designers' judgement that they do not do anything too drastic or ill fitting by surprise.

MECHANICS: INTRUSIVE AND DISCREET

This fader is about determining how disruptive the mechanics the players use during runtime are. Disruptiveness can be understood as an aggregate estimate of how frequent the mechanics are, how much attention they attract, and how well they are aesthetically adept to the larp at hand. At one end of the spectrum the larp where players only carry out the exact same actions as their characters; at the other end we find larps that have explicit tools to shape the experience. Designers can give different kinds of tools to the players: rules (implicit and explicit), replacements (objects and actions standing in for other that are impossible or unwanted), and meta-techniques (formal techniques that play around with the linear, coherent larp fiction).



The vampire larp *End of the Line* had fairly discrete mechanics for sex, violence, drinking blood. Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

At the maximum end of the fader we find *intrusive* mechanics. They

are used to start and stop play, for replacing actions or objects, and to consciously play with the character-player division. Intrusive mechanics often interrupt the flow of the larp either at a specific place or even in the whole larp. They are very visible, draw attention to themselves – and thus can be used to focus the playing – and are hard to ignore. Without intrusive mechanics, what happens in the larp is limited to what the players and organizers are able to carry out in the real world, and the players have no way of giving or receiving other input than the fiction itself during runtime.

On the other hand, intrusive mechanics disrupt the flow of the larp. They may not fit the fiction – and it can be impossible to opt out of them since they are so demanding of attention (for example, if someone ‘stops time’ in a whole room).

At the minimum end, there are the *discreet* mechanics. Ideally, a larp with discreet mechanism actually has no tools in use aside from starting and stopping (and safety precautions), but such a larp would have to be very naturalistic in setting and characters. Some mechanics are always needed, but they should feel natural to the story and fit the fiction. They should support immersion and engagement as they do not interrupt the flow. When successful, such mechanics are almost invisible and only address a few players. Discreet methods are easier to ignore and opt out of.

When methods are discreet, the seams of the experience are hidden. This means also means that there is less transparency, stepping out of character (within the mechanics) is harder, and safety issues may be harder to see.

Both the amount of mechanics in use and frequency of their use influence this fader, but also to which extent they are aesthetically adapted to the larp, and whether the mechanic can suspend play for

many or all participants, or if it only applies for those who opt-in themselves.

ENVIRONMENT: 360° ILLUSION, CLARITY, AND
MATERIAL INDEPENDENCE

The environment fader determines how similar the physical surroundings of the larp are to the fiction. Is the larp designed to be played in a fully realistic medieval castle, in an empty room with a few specific props, or in any random room? Although in practice environment design usually boils down to the visual and audible environment, environment includes everything the players can sense (e.g. scenography, sounds, temperature, smells, tastes). In this fader, the cheating by combining false dichotomies on the same continuum is particularly noticeable. This fader is actually two connected faders in one: The absence of non-fictional elements (“noise”), and the presence of fictional elements. The fader is best understood as the aggregate environmental impact of noise undermining the vision of the larp and fictional elements supporting the vision. Some larps focus on the physical surroundings or scenography to support the vision, while other larps introduce few or no elements of scenography. Simultaneously, some larps strive to remove unwanted elements or visual noise, while others place no requirements on this.

At one end of the fader there is the ideal of a *360° illusion*, where there is high fidelity between the fictional location and how it is produced in the larp. There is no visual noise and everything looks and works in the real world just like would in the fiction. A (visually) coherent world is easy to understand, especially as everything is functional, useable, and playable. The environment feels real, encourages subtle and non-verbal activity, and looks very good in photographs afterwards. Often a 360° illusion requires access to a

very specific environment; some environments are easier to find (a conference centre) than other (a medieval castle).

However, when everything is perfect, the player can feel out of place. They may feel that they are the one thing that is not perfect – or that their co-players are, as their familiar faces can be a reminder of the outside world. A 360° illusion also enforces real world behaviour as the players are only able to do the things they are physically able to do. Thus it can be less imaginative and less co-creative. Finally, setting up a picture perfect environment is potentially very expensive and labour-intensive, and playtesting ahead of time can be thus impossible.

Midway on the aggregate fader there lies the ideal of *clarity* – where both fictional and non-fictional elements are at a minimum. As in 360° illusion, there is minimal visual noise in the form of elements that do not fit the fiction, but there is also very limited amount of fictional elements. A black box larp with only a table, two chairs, a spotlight, some music, and a handwritten letter could be an example. Such a design has very sharp focus; only those elements that are necessary, are included. The environment is just as designed and curated as in 360°, it is just easier to start with a controlled, empty, black room and only bring key props. As the black box is a type of room that is found in theatres and other cultural space around the world, this design ideal is a solution to for designers who want a sharp design of the environment without compromising its ability to be re-run too much.

With limited scenography, the few items that *are* there usually attract more attention and acquire deep meaning. Playtesting remains important; even a minimalist larp can end up with messy levels of association with physical objects.

Finally, there is the ideal of *material independence*. Here, it does not

matter what the environment is like. There can be all kinds of noise and only very few fictional elements represented with specific props. The emphasis is on the ease of staging: a pure example of materially independent larp would actually be tabletop role-playing. Such role-playing can be conducted anywhere since the surroundings — outside a table and chairs — do not matter to the design. This is great for shorter scenarios and convention larps, as the staging is easy. It also encourages verbal (and social) interaction, as the collective fiction does not rest on the environment, but the players actions. Thus, it requires more from the players, but when successful, it brings focus.

On the flipside, a coherent world is harder to sustain with larger groups and longer larps if everyone needs to imagine everything. Similarly, nuanced non-verbal actions are hard to signal when they are happening without props or environment. In addition, materially independent larps just do not look as impressive.

Using one's environment actively can add significantly to the experience of the larp, but strict requirements on the play environment also mean that it will be harder to find a venue for the larp. Designing for material independence means finding a venue is easier and there is less hassle with props and costumes.

CHARACTER CREATION RESPONSIBILITY: PLAYER AND ORGANIZER

Not all the fader ends reflect unique design ideals. For example, this fader and the two that follow are quite similar. These three faders are about dividing the power and the labour between the players and the designer. The competing design ideals in this trio of faders are the ideal of using larp to bring to life a curated and controlled designer vision, and the ideal of egalitarian co-creation.

This fader is about deciding how the character creation responsibility is distributed. Do the designers create very specific briefs about each character, or do they just provide the players with the tool or the inspiration to create their characters? Of course, ‘a character’ can take many forms. It can be a written description, a character sheet with skills, attributes, and special abilities, or something more symbolic or lyrical like an image or a song. However, usually a character includes the background of a persona, as well as their goals, dreams and fears, most important relations, available special actions, and the functions they perform (such as baker, assassin, and father). When players create their characters, they usually do so for a sandbox setting, by following a specific rule system and often with a set number of points. When the larpwrights create characters, in many traditions they are usually presented at least in a written format, as a brief life story. There are also numerous traditions where the character is created through some collaboration between the larpwright, the players, and possibly other players as well. For example, groups of players can create character groups based on designer’s brief, a player can flesh out a character based on a sketch by a larpwright, or a whole player group can create their characters in a tightly organizer-facilitated workshop prior to the larp.

When the characters are created by the *organizers*, the most obvious benefit is control. The designers have a full picture of all characters and how they relate to each other. They can be sure of the consistency of story, of quality, of vision. This also enables them to achieve any kind of a balance between different characters of groups. When characters are created by the organizers, the players have a stronger *alibi*²⁷ to play in deviant ways: After all, the player did

27. In the Nordic discourse, those things that enable a player to act in ways in the larp that would not be acceptable outside the larp are called *alibi*. For example, a player can, as a character, pretend that they are stupid, or violent, or lustful, without that

not dream up the character. Organizers can also consciously create characters that counter stereotypes and genre tropes.

On the other hand, creating each character fully is very time consuming. Not only need everything be created, checking the interlinking between characters is a big task. Conveying the complexity of relations is also difficult with words. When players have little influence over the character and its relationships, it will be necessary to invest more time in the methodology for conveying the relations and calibrating the understanding of them among the players. Finally, the downside of having control over this part is that it disregards player creativity and participation.

When the responsibility for creating characters rests with the *players* the size of the larp can easily be scaled up or down. Once the process for character creations is set up, quantity of characters need not be an issue. Players will have more ideas and — as they have created their own characters — stronger ownership and connection with their creations. Yet if the players lack experience with larp design, they might easily end up creating characters that lack playability unless skilfully guided.

Yet, when the organizers only set the frames for character creation, they lose all control over what the characters are like. The genre and setting need to be clearly articulated to ensure that the characters fit the same world. Popular tropes often manifest, usually *calibration* amongst the players is still needed,²⁸ and connections between

performance reflecting too much on their out of larp persona. There are numerous such legitimization strategies that give alibi, for example, playing ("It's not me, I'm just pretending"), written characters ("I would not create such a person, but the larpwright did"), and explicit theme ("I'd never do that, but since we are exploring this topic").

28. Calibration means "the many explicit and implicit ways that players have to negotiate playstyle, play intensity and sometimes things like genre". Johanna Koljonen. "Toolkit: The OK Check-In". Posting in Safety in Larp: understanding Participation Designing for Trust. 2016. Online at <https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/toolkit-the-ok-check-in/>. There are numerous specific calibration mechanisms, for example for negotiating playstyle intensity during runtime, or ensuring a reasonably harmonious interpretation of a culture. Martin Nielsen. "Culture Calibration in Pre-Larp Workshops." NordicLarp.org. 2014. <https://nordiclarp.org/2014/04/23/culture-calibration-in-pre-larp-workshops/>

characters need to be set up (or a process for setting them up should be created).

A larpwright can combine the two methods, for example, by facilitating the players' character creation. Such a process is great for when aiming for coherence and specific theme and setting while harnessing player creativity for new ideas and increased ownership. For example, characters can be created in a facilitated workshop. A good facilitator can help the players thinking out-of-the-box. Furthermore, the workshops are time-consuming for the players, although it can save the organizers time. Finally, even though character creation is guided, some designers may still feel that there is not enough control.

CULTURE CREATION RESPONSIBILITY: PLAYER AND ORGANIZER

This fader is about determining how the responsibility for creating the culture is divided. This fader is very similar to the previous one, and many of the issues that should be considered are the same. The basic question is if the culture should be organizer-created or player-workshopped. Culture is here seen as meaning the interaction patterns, norms, values, customs, beliefs, laws, and morals of the character groups.

If the fader is at the extreme end at "organizer," then, as with the previous fader, the most important benefit is control. The organizers can assure consistency of vision, quality of the content, and can prevent defaulting to well-known patterns. Such patterns are less interesting to play, and can even be exclusionary (e.g., unintended misogynist, racist, homophobic). When the organizers are in control, they can avoid any such unwanted patterns, but also make sure that they are present when that is the subject at

hand (e.g. a larp dealing with prejudice might deliberately apply a culture full of prejudice). Organizer-created culture is particularly fitting for educational larps, where the fidelity of the simulation is important. But, again, this disregards player creativity, and results in less ownership. A culture created by just a few people can also end up monotonous.

At the other end of the fader there is culture created by players, usually in a workshop. The obvious benefit is that the players know the culture intimately and own it. There can be creative bliss when brainstorming a culture – and a culture created by a host of people can be more diverse. When creating culture in a workshop, it allows the calibration of the cultural understanding to be integrated into the creation process, while an organizer-created culture will need separate calibration exercises. However, often a joint workshop yields the most obvious of ideas, especially in the beginning. The players, especially if unexperienced, will need guidance when creating a culture to ensure that the culture fits the overall vision of the larp (i.e., is plausible), that it is interesting, playable, and safe – and that it is sustainable in the sense that the playability of the culture does not wear off during the larp.



In *Halat hisar*, the plausibility of the setting (the occupation of Finland) was pivotal. However, playability was still important to consider when bringing in complex systems such as the international media. Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

Of course, even if the responsibility lies with the organizers, they need not create a culture. They can simply curate it. They can choose an existing larp setting and system (such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*) or adopt a well-known fictional world, such as *Harry Potter* or *Firefly*. It is even possible to do mash-up (such as combining *Hamlet* and *Sons of Anarchy*). Even when the culture and setting comes pre-packaged, some translation and adapting is still needed, as well as calibration among the players.

Finally, even if the organizers create the culture completely, as runtime begins, the players will take it over. Players will always improvise stuff, and most likely they will tend to fill gaps in the culture by bringing element of their own culture. The organizers only ever create the starting point for the players.

RUNTIME DIRECTION: ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

This fader accounts for how much the larp organizers influence the larp during runtime. For some organizers and designers, the work is done when a larp starts, while for other the active shaping of the actions during runtime is a key part of the design.

An *active* runtime direction style means that the organizers keep control of the larp at all times. They can, for example, control the pacing, bring focus, drive the plot, and adjust challenge to fit individual players. This design choice is common for scenarios following a set story where the players generally only influence *how* things happen, not *what* will happen. Having someone clearly in charge can add to feeling of safety for the players.

The challenge is that if runtime direction is too active — too railroaded — then the players lose agency. The organizers becomes the centre of attention. The larp is more about them and their vision than anything else. Player involvement and immersion are at risk.

A *passive* style basically means handing the larp over to the players when it starts. The players have a high level of freedom to play in the sandbox of the larp. This enhances involvement, immersion, and ownership. Beforehand it is impossible to predict how the larp will develop — which can be a positive or a negative result.

Most larps are somewhere between the extreme ends. Runtime direction can take many different forms. There are discrete ones, like adjusting the mood through changes in lighting and music, guiding play through instructed players, having planned events, and introducing new characters halfway through. The more intrusive ones interfere with the play more directly, such as stopping the larp and instructing the players to do a scene again differently, doing time jumps, or swapping characters.²⁹ When the players do these things,

29. The freeform tradition has been particularly good at coming up with these. See Tobias Wrigstad. "The Nuts and Bolts

they are called meta-techniques; when the organizers do it, it is active runtime direction.

Since very active direction is disruptive, it is common to delimit it to a specific area. This area, *a meta room*, is set aside at the larp location for the purpose of playing flashbacks, dreams, and anything that cannot happen in the main timeline of the larp. The players choose to go there to have strongly directed scenes often set by an organizer.

LOYALTY TO THE WORLD: PLAYABILITY AND PLAUSIBILITY

This fader addresses the level of simulation that the larp is trying to achieve. In any simulation choices need to be made as to what is represented and how. The ends on this fader are plausibility (the world of the larp should be simulated as well as possible) and playability (the larp should run as smoothly as possible). These ideals can be in conflict; sometimes what is best for playing makes no sense within the fiction.

For example, it might be plausible that female characters in some historical settings have less agency, but it might not be very playable for contemporary players. Portraying a military hierarchy in a realistic fashion can also strip many characters of agency. On the other hand, if exploring a specific world or situation is key to the larp, then removing important aspects of that, even if they are boring to play, would detract from that central goal.



There is no story in *Täydellinen ihminen* (The Perfect Human). The characters excitedly sit in one meeting after the other, telling each other that their ideas are great, for the whole of the larp. Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

The fictional world of the larp can simulate (an aspect of) the real world, simulate an existing fictional world, or it can be built from scratch. In larp worlds based on existing worlds, the players will have a notion of what is plausible. When a new world is created, nothing is implausible at the beginning. However, as the world is built up, a ‘fictional realism’ and plausibility of that world is established. However, just as with characters, players tend to fill the gaps in the world with their understanding of the real world and of genre fiction.

If the fader is set all the way to maximum on loyalty to world, there is *plausibility*. The larp world is coherent and makes sense. There is a sense of believability and (contextual) realism. Plausibility is associated with such ideals as authenticity, realism, and immediacy.

Plausibility can be difficult to maintain. A simulation is always a simplification — otherwise it is not a simulation, but the real thing — which means that plausibility cannot be complete either. Plausibility

also places tight restrictions on the overall larp design – and it can lead to boring play.

At the other end of the fader there is *playability*, boring play can be removed and all kinds of fun possibilities can be implemented. It is also easier to be surprising and break stereotypes, when fidelity to the world being simulated is not a requirement.

On the other hand, deviating from simulative relationship with the world being portrayed can make the larp harder to understand. The coherence of the world suffers when the realistic and effects of certain causes no longer automatically follow, just because they are boring or otherwise unattractive to the players.

PRESSURE ON PLAYERS: HARDCORE AND PRETENCE

If the larp invites the players into situations where their physical or social comfort will be challenged, then there is pressure placed on the players. This fader visualizes how much pressure there is. Two questions help positioning this fader: Does the larp tackle challenging issues from the real world? How close is the player experience to the character experience when things are hard?

If the larp addresses real world issues, perhaps even difficult personal issues, this increases the pressure on players.³⁰ The pressure can, however, be modified by replacement mechanics. An example would be substituting a metal swords with boffers or sex with a backrub. Indeed, the most obvious examples of this are violence, drugs, and sex, but the list also includes bullying, racism, loss, shame, grief, oppression, self-doubt, and pressure to perform. When replacement mechanics are applied, the level of pressure is mostly determined by the nature of the replacement mechanic. For example,

30. Two common reasons for having replacement mechanics are for simulating things that are impossible for the players (like magic) and things that the players feel uneasy doing. The former is not relevant for this fader, but the latter is central.

if beating someone down is replaced by firmly pushing someone to the ground, there is still a certain amount of pressure in the replacement mechanic. If the replacement mechanic for beating someone is clapping your hands, the pressure is low.

Pressure also rises, if the players are not given protection against dealing with these issues; for example, thin characters and weak alibi add pressure. So does uncertainty about what will happen next.

Playing around with creature comforts without replacements — e.g. hunger, sleep deprivation, exposure to the elements — can also up the ante. Finally, player agency is also relevant for this fader: if players can calibrate their characters, opt out of certain tasks, actions, or parts of the larp, the pressure is lowered.

At one end of the fader there is *hardcore*. When the pressure is high, the players' experience is visceral, it engages all senses intensely, and it is thoroughly embodied. The separation between experiences of the player and the character is thin – and feels more authentic. Hardcore also allows for nuance in engagement with hard topics, as there is less simulation. It is also visually clear; scenes are legible and easier to engage with also from afar.

On the minus side, severe pressure undermines the player ability to role-play, and be playful; it is serious and requires commitment. The experience may not actually be that authentic either, and it can seem like slumming or grief tourism. Hardcore design also can encourage risky behavior, especially if it is combined with peer pressure. This is particularly destructive, if the design contributes to the idea that being able to withstand intense play is “cool”.

Hardcore pressure may also push players to steer away from the difficult content; without simulation they may not want to engage with certain activities. For example, in a larp without replacement mechanic for fighting, the threshold for violence is much higher

than in a larp with latex swords. While reducing the likelihood or frequency of a high-pressure action, the pressure would be higher should a fight still occur.

If the a key goal of the design is to have many people experience a particular action, the designers need to consider the combined effect of the pressure and the frequency in which people will opt in to experience it.

Playing with high pressure places an extra responsibility on the organizers to make sure the players have actively opted in on what they are going to experience. At the other end of the fader there is *pretence*. The players now only pretend to do the actions that they are signalling, and there is less fidelity in relation to the world around the larp. Pretence is about role-playing, not about an extreme sport. There is much more playability as actions and stories are available for all players. A player does not need to be able to do acrobatics to play a circus performer. Power is also distributed differently, as endurance, steadfastness, strength, and control are not the most important base requirements. Indeed, consequences of the larp can be ignored. Where hardcore is uncomfortable and intense, pretence is safe and playful.

However, the playing does not feel as real as there are no consequences. Lacking viscerality, the players may only access the larp on an intellectual level. Also, the participants need to learn the replacement mechanics and other rules – and they do focus the larp somewhat. Whatever you have rules for, that is what the players will do.

This fader moves easily by accident, either through incompetence or bad luck. Logistical failures, hostile weather, bad safety or calibration systems, unreliable people, and weird drama amongst the

participants all tend to add to the pressure. Such things may be difficult to predict, but they can be prepared for.

PLAYER MOTIVATION: VICTORY AND EXPLORATION

What is the driving motivation of the players to take actions inside your larp? This fader tackles what is known as the *pre-lusory goal*, the state of affairs a player wants to reach while playing.³¹ Are player playing to win, do they want to explore the setting, the characters, or the world – or do they have some other goal in participating in this larp? While design of the fiction is important for the level of competition in a larp, the key criterion for this fader is whether the *players* are encouraged to strive to achieve the goals of their *characters*.³²

Some larps are competitive and game-like. There are clear goals and objectives for each character. Usually there are also finite resources; all players cannot reach their goals at the same time (i.e., the larp is a zero-sum game). In these larps, there will be a high level of competitiveness when the players are encouraged to strive to reach their characters' goals.

This ideal is called *victory*. Extreme game-like larps can be won. Game-like larps tend to make available actions very clear. They are also beginner friendly for people who have a background in games or are competitive.

Competition is a great motivator – at least for some people.³³ Competition leads also to disappointment and

31. Bernard Suits. *The Grasshopper. Games, Life and Utopia*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1978.

32. This is similar to the how "gamism" is conceived of in the classic threefold model and the creative agenda "step on up" has been discussed. This fader places gamism at one end and simulationism, narrativism, and immersionism at the other end. The thinking here is that at the core of all the other approaches aside from gamism is a player motivation to explore something, be it character, world, or narrative. See Kim; Ron Edwards. "Gamism: Step On up." *The Forge*. 2003. Online at <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/21/>

33. There can also be competition outside the larp fiction, such as implicit competitions over the coolest gear or best costume. That is not what this fader is about. However, it is possible to encourage or discourage such behaviour with larp design and community design.

disagreements. Haggling over rules can distract from the playing of the larp, especially if the larp becomes all about winning. One cannot have winners without losers, and with highly competitive larps, cheating may be a real problem.

At the other end of the fader there is *exploration*. Collaboration can take the place of competition. The focus is now on the experience, the world, the themes, the system, and the characters, and not on winning — and egos. A satisfying story is a goal in itself. Failing at achieving your character’s goals is not losing; it is a tragedy. Note that it is possible for characters to compete in a larp that values exploration — as long as the winning is not the driving goal for the players.



The responsibility for culture creation lay mostly with the organizers, although players had input in Landsväg (Country Road). Pictured here is a *gast* (ghoul), a superstition come to life. Photo by Johannes Axner.

Exploration requires something to be unknown. Since role-play is often character driven, that unknown is often present in the form

of some ‘other’ or some unknown experience. Exploration tends to associate more with collaboration and thus building trust is important. When successful, this creates a foundation for strong stories and creates room for sincerity. At the same time, it removes risk — and the excitement that risk brings.

A common design is a middle position on this fader. The players are encouraged to try to reach their characters’ goals – or at least not discouraged from it – but there are also worlds, stories, and characters to explore. The players chose themselves whether to play competitively or not. If the organizers does not make sure the players calibrate their playing style, it can lead to conflict and ruin the experience.

This fader was earlier called “Story Engine” and end points were competition and collaboration. The difference in emphasis with that was either playing to win or playing to lose. Playing to lose is Nordic shorthand for playing for maximal drama, which sometimes means that you should have your character fail, to be defeated, or to allow your characters secrets to leak out.

CHARACTER AS MASK: DIFFERENTIATION AND THIN CHARACTERS

This fader is about the distance between the player and the character. Is the character completely different from the player, something alien they do their best to portray? Or, is the character identical to the player, do they play the character as if they themselves were transported into a fantasy world? Obviously, a big part of this is up to the player to determine. However, it is also a design decision. As a designer, do you use elements from the players’ real lives in the larp, or do you deliberately try to maximize the distance between the character and player?

The player and the character can be similar or different in many ways. First, there is the body of the character. Do the player and the character share the same ethnicity, skin tone, height, weight, shape, ability, voice, gender, sexuality, and age? Second, personality and experience come into play. How alike are personal history, name, education, love life, traumas, phobias, financial situation, religion, values, and goals with that of the player? Third, how similar are the social roles, such as occupation and class, of the player and character?

Having a clear *differentiation* between the player and the character is for many people the heart of role-playing, acting ‘as if’ someone else, walking in their shoes and seeing experiencing the world through someone else’s eyes. It supports escapism, and taking a vacation from your everyday self. Emphasis is on empathy. Furthermore, clear differentiation gives the player a stronger alibi during play. They can explain their actions as arising from that character. Larps with clear differentiation are also easier to cast since there is no need to find players who are similar to the characters created.

The downside is that if the characters are clearly different from the players, then there is more work, since those differentiated characters need to be created. For players, it is probably harder to play characters that are different from them, creating possible believability issues. In the end, total differentiation is an illusion.

Having *thin characters*, which is also referred to as “playing close to home,” is the opposite strategy. Here the idea is to use the players’ personal experiences or background to create a strong emotional experience. Thin characters can be a useful way to shift focus from the character to situation. For example, if you want privileged school children to experience what it is like to be a refugee, you can create characters that are similar to the players in all aspects except that they are refugees. Of course, thin characters also work very well as power

fantasies: If a player wants to try out what it would be like to be a charismatic superhero.

Thin characters are more ‘complete’; since the player’s life up until now is what the character is based on, the characters are complex and believable. However, the alibi to play will be weaker, when actions are seen as arising more from the player than the character. If many larps use thin characters, that can lead to players being typecast.

Strong emotions can be created either way. When using clear differentiation the aim is to help the player experience the world from a different point of view. Design with thin characters replicates and amplifies the players own emotions by removing some of the protective shield of the character. It brings the larp closer to reality, or ‘transports’ the player to a strange place (i.e. lets the player play themselves in a fantastic situation).



The Lovecraft-inspired *Mare Incognitum* had a fairly active runtime direction style. Atmosphere and events were controlled through the radio (pictured), the soundscape, lighting, and the ship’s crew — made entirely of NPCs slowly degenerating into cultists. Photo by Jonas Aronsson.

When the emotions or opinions of the player affect the character it is often termed *bleed-in* (indeed, this fader was originally called the bleed-in fader). When the character's emotions or opinions affect the player, it is referred to as *bleed-out*.³⁴ Accidental bleed from player to character happens when the character is similar to the player without it being designed on purpose.

It is possible to create thicker characters that deliberately are close to the player on specific areas. For example to bring in elements from the players' love life in the love life of the character (while the character in other aspects is very different from the player). Such design requires the organizers to have knowledge of the players' backgrounds, or to design workshop techniques to extract such knowledge and enter it into the character creation. This approach makes the character look thick at first glance. However, as long as the "thin spots" are designed to fit the subject of the larp, this will for most of the time have the same consequence as thin characters.

COMMUNICATION STYLE: VERBAL AND PHYSICAL

People can communicate in many ways. What kinds of communication styles does a larp design encourage? Co-located humans tend to communicate through both verbal and body language. Both can be encouraged, discouraged, and shaped through design.

Verbal communications is more precise than just using body language. It encourages very clear signaling, and leads to fewer misunderstandings (if the players have sufficient language skills). If a harmonious understanding of the fiction amongst players is valued, verbal communication is a very useful tool. However, emphasizing

34. On bleed, see Markus Montola. "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing." Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2010.; Sarah Lynne Bowman. "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study." International Journal of Role-Playing 4. (2013).

or allowing only verbal communication limits other communication forms, and limits emotional engagement. It is easier to stay detached when only words are used. In addition, a shared language is obviously required amongst the players. An extreme emphasis on verbal communications would be a tabletop role-playing game, where even hand gestures are uncommon.

Physical communication, for example through body language and touching, fosters a stronger emotional connection between players and can be more playful. There is a strong emphasis on embodiment. However, physical communication is much more imprecise. Larps that emphasize physical communications may even do away with a shared fiction, and work in a more metaphoric way. A shared spoken language is not needed, although also the meaning of specific physical interaction is culturally tied. An extreme example is a larp where language does not exist.

Most larps use both language and body language. Words are spoken, hands shaken, and shoulders shrugged. Yet both kinds of communication styles can be developed and designed. Specific terms and phrases often have special meaning in a larp. Similarly, glances, movements, patterns of touching can be imbued with specific meaning, although this usually requires workshopping before runtime to ensure that players have an equifinal enough understanding.

REPRESENTATION OF THEME: STORIES AND ACTIONS

This fader asks the question: How is the theme of the larp represented and actualized during runtime? Do the organizers have a story in mind that will prompt the actions? Or does the design focus on embodiment, actions, and movements of the players, in order for the players to co-creatively enact the theme?

The theme of a larp is its topic, subject, or core question. A theme is not the same as genre or setting, although certain genres or settings have stereotypical themes they often address. Larps do not need explicit themes, but if one is not consciously picked out by the designers, one may very well emerge during play. Of course, it is possible for the players to hijack the theme of a larp — for example, a larp about oppression could become a larp about the rise of democracy — but that is harder when there is a clear theme to begin with. A central theme brings about coherence; when a larp is clearly about something, it is easier to design for it and play with it. The larpwright can attempt to enact the theme of the larp through designing stories, but also through designing actions.

At one end of the fader we find *stories*. Now, life is not a story, and neither is a larp. Both feature things happening one after another, and afterwards they are narrativized by the players. These events are turned into a story. In practice in larps, a story is how and why our fictional characters interact. A designer may focus the design on the background stories of the characters, the world of the fiction, and scripts for events to happen in the larp, but leave it to the players to figure out the actions.

At the other end, there are *actions*. They are in the moment; an action is the process of doing something. Of course, once an action is connected to a doer, or a reason to act, a story starts to emerge. The designers of a larp can focus on instructing, nudging, or encouraging the players to take certain actions. With this approach, the theme will be enacted. Stories may emerge in the minds of the players, and possibly a common understanding of a story emerges among the players. A larp that is close to the extreme action end of the fader gives the players solely input on actions to be taken.

Obviously, larps feature both stories and actions. This fader

addresses the distribution of input from the organizers to the players. Are the players given stories as input to figure out the actions, or actions that will prompt them to make up a story? This is traditionally the hardest fader to grasp, perhaps because larps driven by actions (dance, movements, gestures) are uncommon, and often seen as overly artsy. Perhaps it is helpful to compare this fader to the previous one. That one maps verbal and physical communication, but since that fader emphasises *communication*, it tends to alight more with story than action. In this fader the action end can be thought of having actions for their own sake.

Stories are intellectual. The mind sorts the events into a sequence and assigns meaning to it. They are easy to verbalize, which means a shared understanding is easier to produce and generally emphasising stories requires very little workshopping. They are both beginner friendly and adult friendly – because they are less playful. Also, larp stories also tend not to be fully coherent, but they are coherent enough.

Actions are embodied. They are associative; there is a logic of their own in them. Emphasising actions obviously creates a stronger alibi for physical interaction. Emphasising actions is playful, and kid friendly. There is no requirement that things need to make sense. Thus, there is more room for personal interpretation. Building a theme from actions requires workshopping, and it may still be hard to understand the meaning of. If successful, it can re-encode behaviour, and stays in the body for a longer time. It is not so much rational as lyrical.

YOUR FADERS HERE

There are twelve set faders on the Mixing Desk used for teaching at the Larpwriter Summer School. The last one is marked “Your

Fader Here” in all of the iterations. In some ways this faders is the most important as it clearly communicates that the twelve faders do not capture the whole of larp design. Anyone using the Mixing Desk is encouraged to add their own faders, ones that can help them understand their design practice better and helps them see new design opportunities, as well as remove faders that does not make sense to their particular larp design process.

Originally, there were only eleven faders used at the Larpwriter Summer School. One has been added since then, namely the culture creation responsibility fader. Numerous new faders have been discussed over the years. These ones have come up in LWSS over the last few years:

Technology dependence fader would account for the amount of technology need to make the larp (and its props) work. That fader would stretch from ubiquitous to simple. Larps with *ubiquitous* technology have automated what they can and sufficiently well-crafted technology is indistinguishable from magic. A *simple* larp would be easy to set up and move (“fits in a plastic bag”) does not require fancy gadgets, software updates, specific equipment, let alone unique prototypes. This fader has been suggested numerous times by Russian larpers since technology, and how it is handled, is particularly important in some of their larp traditions.

In France, the Mixing Desk is sometimes used when describing upcoming larps. In the French version³⁵ there is an additional story fader that places experiencing a day in the life (simulationism) and experiencing a story (narrativism) at each end.

Indeed, the new fader proposals tend to be tied to the discourses that are going on in the larp scene. For example, the proposed *stimulation* fader, which accounts for how much the design prompts

35. Baptiste Cazes and Leïla Teteau-Surel. “La table de mixage du jeu de rôle Grandeur Nature.” Electro-GN. 2012. Online at <http://www.electro-gn.com/248-latabledemixagedujeuderolegrandeurnature>

the players during runtime, is clearly tied to the discussion on brute force design.³⁶ The fader would run from *serene* (no stimulation, possibly boring) to *abundance* (brute force design). Similarly, the discussion on labour at larp led to talk about a fader on character function.³⁷ Does the character mainly exist as a *role* (e.g. guard, warrior, butler, wife, priest), or as a fully realized *persona*, with wants and need outside the roles they perform?

Finally, there is a group of proposed *metafadars* that describe the choices and motivations that underlie the concrete design choices. These metafadars are useful when comparing educational larps, long running campaigns, and thematic one-shots, but they fit better on a Mixing Desk of Organizer Motivations than a Mixing Desk of Larp. For example, there is the *organizer motivation* fader. At one end, there is the larp as the expression of the *designer's vision*. Anything and everything is in the service of expressing this.³⁸ Midway on the fader there is community vision, i.e. coming together to co-create something. At the other end there is customer service; the designer is creating a larp for a customer based on their specifications. Another metafader that has been proposed is *political purpose*. It would run from outright *revolution* to *playfulness*. Alternatively, perhaps, from *social justice* to *separatism*. Different variations have been discussed.

As discussed above, a fader can be in different positions in different parts of a larp and different designable surfaces in a larp can be approached according to different design ideals. Alternatively, a team of designers using the Mixing Desk in their creative process can split faders, and the design domains they represent, into smaller pieces. For

36. Eirik Fatland and Markus Montola. "The Blockbuster formula: Brute Force Design in The Monitor Celestra and College of Wizardry." The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book. Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted, eds. Copenhagen: Rollespils Akademiet, 2015.

37. Katherine Castiello Jones, Sanna Koulu and Evan Torner. "Playing at Work." Larp Politics: Systems, Theory, and Gender in Action. Kaisa Kangas, Mika Lopenen and Jukka Särkijärvi, eds. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2016.

38. Indeed, this is fader is colloquially known as the "number of fucks given" fader.

example, a larp can apply transparency through meta-techniques but not through sharing character background before the larp starts. A design team wanting to use the Mixing Desk as a tool to discuss these design choices could apply a *mechanics transparency fader* and a *pre-larp character transparency fader*.

The twelve faders used by the Larpwriter Summer School represent one way to divide the design space of larp. They are a starting-point for thinking about larp, not an exhaustive statement. Indeed, the metaphoric form and the underlying philosophy of the Mixing Desk are more important than any specific fader.

In addition to alternative faders, there are examples of the entire model inspiring applications of the metaphor in other fields. For example, Anni Tolvanen made a Mixing Desk of sound design and Ingrid Galadriel Aune Nilsen has made a Mixing Desk of museum communication.³⁹

DISCUSSION

The end positions of the twelve faders are all tied to design ideals. As ideals, they are unachievable. Actual larps always exist somewhere between the ends, combining elements in an interesting fashion, and balancing not only the many ideals, but trying to protect those ideals in the harsh conditions of the reality of larp organizing. The Mixing Desk helps in visualizing those choices, which hopefully also helps in communicating them to the prospective players.

The faders have evolved quite a bit since they were first introduced – and still continue to do so. Even if the terminology would not have changed, the interpretation has. In the development of the Mixing Desk, discussion has helped it evolve, but more importantly new larps

39. Anni Tolvanen. "The Fundamentals of Sound Design for Larp." Presentation at Solmukohta 2016, March 11, 2016, Finland; Ingrid Galadriel Aune Nilsen. "Dissemination in museum – Mixing desk for museum workers." Presentation given at Sør-Trøndelag Folkemuseum, April 15, 2016. Part of the series Culture for everyone". On non-material cultural heritage and lifelong learning.

have been designed that have questioned or solidified the wisdom expressed in the Mixing Desk.

For example, there used to be a fader called *scenography*. The name was changed, as the term is very tied to theatre. Words are particularly important, as the Mixing Desk is a teaching and heuristic tool. The terms chosen are hopefully understandable and precise. References to other domains, such as theatre and games, are particularly thorny, as they are easily understood, yet they often have the wrong emphasis, or underlying power structure. The scenography fader is now known as the “environment” fader. Larps’ sites are not just a visual backdrop, but full environments where most things can be touched and used. Environment is thus more specific and accurate, while still being understandable.

Furthermore, the environment fader originally went from 360° illusion to minimalism, reflecting the strongest design ideals in Nordic larp at the time. Over the years, minimalism has morphed into clarity, as that is a more specific (and less limiting). In addition, material independence was added as a third ideal to account for all the convention larps being run — and to underline that choosing to place very little focus on the environment is also a valid design choice with clear and concrete benefits.

Many of the faders also seem to cover similar questions, just from slightly different angles. Thus, most design choices will affect multiple faders simultaneously. This is the nature of larp itself. The Mixing Desk attempts to render the design questions specific to larp visible. In the final analysis, the Mixing Desk could be boiled down to two key dichotomies, two tensions that drive all larp design.

Foremost for the larprawright, player creativity is the negative space of larp design. Everything else is put in by the designer, yet without that negative space, there is nothing to see. Larp, as a form, is co-

creative. The larpwright can do much with design, but in the end, the players must have agency over their experience. Finding the right balance between control and freedom, collaboration and leadership, design and improvisation is challenging in every larp. Indeed, this division of labour is at the heart of larp design. This is the reason why so many of the faders aim to make sense of the numerous choices in being *organizer-lead or player-driven*.

The second key aspect is the negotiation between, on the one hand, naturalism, plausibility, immediacy, and authenticity, and, on the other, structure, curation, predictability, and artificiality. The larp experience should be as real as possible – without having the drawbacks of reality, such as being boring for long stretches of time, being very exclusionary based on skills and appearance, and being not only dangerous but often devoid of meaning. Indeed, it is important to remember that realism is an “-ism.” It is an artistic movement dating back to the 19th century. Similarly, simulation is never complete, or it stops being a simulation. This is the other balance that many of the faders help striking, the balance between *wanting to be real and wanting to be meaningful*.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mixing Desk has served as a teaching tool at the Larpwriter Summer School five times, and each year the faders have been iterated and the philosophy behind the model sharpened. Writing down a detailed account of the Mixing Desk implies that it has reached maturity. A consensus about the form of The Mixing Desk appears to have been reached, and adjustments at this point are minor. They are more about fine-tuning and updating, than overhauling and rethinking. Yet this account of the model is not meant as final, but as a snapshot. While the form of the Mixing Desk may not need

overhauling very often, the contents should be reviewed regularly to keep up with the discourse. This constant updating also hopefully prevents the model from turning into a dogma. The Mixing Desk is a thing-to-think-with, a tool for the designer. As a tool, it fits certain jobs better than others.

The Mixing Desk was created to help raise grasp the design space of larps, to empower designers to be more aware of their choices and default positions, and to contribute to the development of larp design vocabulary. As a design theory, it has proven to be useful both in practice and in analysis.



Students listening to a lecture at LWSS 2015. Photo by Anatoly Kazakov.

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Emergence or Convergence?

Exploring the Precursors of Escape Room Design

SCOTT NICHOLSON

Escape rooms are a gaming trend that has spread around the world over the last few years. There are thousands of rooms in Asia and hundreds in Europe and North America, and they are emerging in popular media such as the *Big Bang Theory* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brian*. In these analog games, teams of players are challenged to find hidden objects, solve puzzles, and accomplish tasks in about an hour with the goal of escaping a room. As is common with many phenomena in gaming, the question of “what was the single starting point of escape rooms” is one that many in the press desire to answer for their stories.¹

The concept of the Escape Room is not the revolution that marketers and reporters claim that winked into existence in Japan in 2007. Instead, it is a convergence of other games and interactive media. As part of a survey I conducted last year, the owners of escape

1. While Wikipedia (and the Wikipedia echo chamber) points to several rooms in 2006 (“Real-life Room Escapes.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real-life_room_escape), the sources that Wikipedia points to for these facts no longer provide any information about these rooms; those in the escape room community have yet to discover any first-hand accounts or further details about these claims. The earliest well-documented activity calling itself an “escape game” was from the publishing company SCRAP, known as the Real Escape Game. It was run in Kyoto, Japan, in July 2007 as single room game for teams of 5-6 players.

rooms were asked what their inspiration was to start an escape room.² About 65% of the survey respondents said that their inspiration came from playing in or learning about another escape room; common organizations named were *SCRAP* from Japan, *Parapark* in Budapest, *Hinthunt* in London, and *Escape the Room* in New York City.

The rest of the respondents were not aware of other escape rooms when they started. Their inspiration came from a variety of sources. Therefore, there is not one single origin for escape rooms; they are a convergence of other games and media. Instead, inspiration grew from a variety of genres such as live-action role-playing, point-and-click adventure games, puzzle hunts, interactive theater, and haunted houses that created the spark in someone's head to create an escape room. It is the purpose of this paper to explore six precursors to Escape Rooms that emerged from these survey responses and then present escape rooms as an exemplar of the problem in the current divide between digital and non-digital games in game studies.

2. Scott Nicholson, "Peeking Behind the Locked Door: A Survey of Escape Room Facilities." 2015. White paper available at <http://scottnicholson.com/pubs/erfacwhite.pdf>. This essay is a revised portion of the open source white paper linked here.



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PRECURSOR 1: POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE GAMES & ESCAPE-THE-ROOM DIGITAL GAMES

One game genre in which escape room roots can be found is interactive fiction games and their graphical implementation, point-and-click adventure games. Text-based interactive fiction games, most popular in the 1980s, require players to explore locations, find and combine items, and solve puzzles by giving textual commands to a computer. As mice and computer graphics became commonplace, this underlying game concept transitioned into point-

and-click adventures; these two-dimensional games required players to explore settings to locate items, combine these items in unusual ways to overcome barriers, solve puzzles, and occasionally engage in insult sword-fighting (as in *Monkey Island* [1990]) to continue the story and explore the world. *Myst* (1993) was a popular puzzle-based game that took these games into a rich 3-D space; some describe escape rooms as “Live-action *Myst*.” One direction that the genre moved into was web-based games (and now mobile apps) where players were trapped in a room and had to discover and combine items to solve puzzles and escape. These games became known as Escape-The-Room games, and some of the creators of today’s physical escape rooms were inspired by these digital games.

This point-and-click design concept – locate and combine key items in interesting ways – creates two challenges in escape rooms: inventory management and red herrings. In a digital point-and-click game, key items that are discovered were placed in the player’s inventory. When players were attempting to solve a problem, they could look at their inventory and try putting different items together until a solution was found. Players knew they were on the right track because the two items would fuse into a new renamed item. In addition, red herrings were not frequently used, so players had an expectation that if something could be picked up and put into the inventory, it would be important at some time in the game.

Escape rooms do not offer either of these aids in solving puzzles. There is no indication in the room as to what is important and what is not, so in poorly-designed rooms, many red herring items exist to “dress the set” but end up confusing and frustrating players. With no indication what is important and what is there for theme, players can end up spending valuable time exploring books, posters, and other items that have nothing to do with the game. In addition, there

may be no feedback that a player is on the right track in combining two items; it is important that escape room designers ensure players either have information available to confirm that two items need to be combined, or a feedback mechanism so that players know they are on the right track.

PRECURSOR 2: PUZZLE HUNTS AND TREASURE HUNTS

Another game genre that has been an inspiration to escape room creators was puzzle hunts. In a puzzle hunt, players work in teams to solve a series of puzzles, many of which are paper-based or digitized versions of paper-based puzzles, which then lead to other puzzles, typically with a goal of solving a meta-puzzle that the other puzzles feed into. The puzzle hunt genre has been around for decades, with the *MIT Mystery Hunt* being one of the best known traditions where the prize for winning is the honor of creating the hunt for the next year. There continues to be a growth in puzzle hunts, some of which center on pubs and the social experience while others provide incredibly challenging and complex puzzles. The puzzles in escape rooms are usually simpler than those found in challenging puzzle hunts, but the team-based experience of solving puzzles is the same. Many escape rooms are structured after puzzle hunts, but with a focus on physical puzzles in a limited space for a single team.

A related activity is the treasure hunt or Schnitzeljagd (in German), where players follow a series of clues in order to discover a treasure. These clues may be puzzles or riddles, and players work together to overcome the challenges and win the game. Modern versions of these treasure hunt games include geocaching and letterboxing, where players either are given GPS coordinates or must solve puzzles to discover coordinates and then, once at the location, search for a

hidden box. The same combination of hunting and puzzle solving goes on in an escape room, but in a confined space.

Large-scale escape games, such as the games produced by SCRAP for hundreds of people, use “Escape from the...” in the title, but are actually puzzle hunts with an escape theme more than an escape room model. As such, players expecting the type of activities they normally do in an immersive escape room are disappointed to be handed a pack of pen-and-paper puzzles to work through as quickly as they can, so they can turn in an answer and get more puzzles. Puzzle hunts tend to focus more on players working independently in parallel tracks, so they create a very different play experience than having an escape room designed with large-scale puzzles that groups need to work together to solve. Designers creating “escape room games” for home and classroom use should be aware of the importance of creating group challenges that everyone needs to work together on instead of using the puzzle hunt model to create escape room-themed puzzle hunts.

PRECURSOR 3: ADVENTURE GAME SHOWS AND MOVIES

A third precursor to escape rooms is televised game shows and reality shows that put players in situations where they have to work in teams to solve puzzles and escape a situation. One of the earliest shows from the 1980s in the UK was *The Adventure Game*, where small teams performed a series of physical puzzle-based tasks to get out of rooms much like today’s escape rooms.³ *Nightmare*, another series from the UK from the mid-80s, put children in teams where one player wore a helmet and wandered around in front of a blue screen and interacted with props and actors while teammates watched a rendered version

3. Labyrinth Games. “The Adventure Game.” UK Game Shows.com. http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/The_Adventure_Game.

of the activities and provided advice.⁴ *Fort Boyard* and *The Crystal Maze* and were both team-based game shows started in the 1990s that combined physical prowess and mental agility,⁵ but lost the narrative that the earlier shows relied upon.

These early game shows were a precursor to the reality shows that followed, starting with *Survivor* (2000) and *The Amazing Race* (2001). Many of these reality shows had large-scale games and puzzles that players had to work together to solve, thus providing inspiration for escape room creators to develop the sense of spectacle that these shows provide. The popularity of these shows raised the cultural awareness of the activity of working together to solve a series of puzzles and accomplish tasks in a physical world.

Movies that portray adventures also have inspired some creators of escape rooms. Matt Duplessie was inspired by the *Indiana Jones* (1981–2008) franchise to start his 5 Wits Productions, as he wanted to create the opportunity for the player to live the adventure.⁶ Other escape room proprietors pointed to horror adventures like *Saw* (2004) and *Cube* (1998) as inspiration for escape rooms, as players are trapped in a space and have to rely upon their wits to escape. This concept has come full circle with *Race to Escape*, a 2015 six-episode series where three-player teams competed in identical rooms to see who could get out first.

PRECURSOR 4: INTERACTIVE THEATER AND HAUNTED HOUSES

The growth of interactive theater runs parallel to the growth of escape rooms. In both cases, participants are invited to engage with

4. Tim Child. "A History of Nightmare." *Nightmare*. July 5, 2009. <http://www.knightmare.com/home/history>

5. Graeme Virtue. "After 25 years, It's Time to Reboot The Crystal Maze." *The Guardian*. February 13, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/feb/13/25-years-time-reboot-crystal-maze>.

6. See Matt Duplessie. "Go Analogue." *TedXBoston*. (2013). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTcl510Wbzk>.

their environments in an interactive space that allows them to take an active role in their entertainment. Some of the creators of Escape rooms mentioned *Sleep No More* (2011) and *Then She Fell* (2012), two interactive theater experiences in New York City, as inspirations for their escape rooms. Haunted houses are closely related to these interactive theater experiences, as small groups of participants move from space to space engaging with actors and exploring a story. Many flock to horror-themed escape rooms that combine elements of haunted houses with puzzle hunts where players are trapped in the dark, taunted by chained-up zombies or shackled to walls. These lines will continue to blur with interactive haunted houses, such as *Trapped* at Knott's Berry Farm, where players take on tasks and solve simple puzzles to find their way out of a haunted house.

The haunt industry is moving into the escape room space quickly, as escape rooms provide another way for those who produce haunts to have themed experiences that are of interest to customers during the off season. The large haunt conferences in the United States are adding escape room tracks, and it is expected that there will be a growth of vendors who supply the haunt industry to add versions of their products created explicitly for escape rooms. Many of the electronics and set pieces used in haunted houses could be easily adapted for escape rooms, and the horror genre is one of the more popular settings for escape rooms. This will also create more haunted houses that integrate puzzle-based experiences to heighten engagement and tension.

What is interesting about this combination of these two industries is that it will come out of North America where the haunt industry is much larger than around the world. While the larping approach, detailed below, may be stronger in Europe where larp is more widely accepted, and in Asia with the more common acceptance of cosplay,

the haunt-based escape room approach may overtake the much smaller puzzle-focused escape room industry in the North America. It will be interesting to what influence the North American haunt market has on escape room design worldwide.

PRECURSOR 5: LIVE-ACTION ROLE-PLAYING

Another game genre that feeds into escape rooms is role-playing games and, more specifically, live-action role-playing games. As the popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons* grew, gamers wanted to experience their tabletop fantasies in more immersive settings. In the 1980s, a number of national organizations, such as the *New England Role Playing Organization (NERO)* and the *International Fantasy Gaming Society (IFGS)*, provided rulesets and scenarios for players to dress up in costume, arm themselves with foam-covered weapons, and engage in scenarios that combined role-playing, puzzle solving, and combat.⁷ Some of these escape room precursors had players searching for clues and solving puzzles to escape from locked rooms made of tarp-covered frames out in the woods. *True Dungeon* took these concepts from live-action role-playing and created an event for Gen Con in 2003 where players worked through rooms solving puzzles under a time limit. Each player had a character, and fought monsters through a shuffleboard system, but there was no live-action combat. The focus was on mental skills and using class abilities instead of role-playing, and continues to be one of the most popular events at Gen Con.⁸

When I presented this idea of escape rooms as being a part of live-action role-playing to online communities of owners and designers when discussing the results of this survey, many from North America

7. David Simkins. *The Arts of LARP: Design, Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015.

8. "True Adventures." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Adventures.

were vocal in disagreement in connecting Escape Rooms to role-playing games. Owners responded that they believed it would hurt their business if potential visitors of these rooms believed there would be role-playing involved by the players. Part of this is cultural; larp is not seen in a positive light in North America, but it is more openly accepted in European countries, and is closely related to cosplay, which is accepted in Asian cultures. The implication of this appears in the design of these rooms, where many designers tack on a superficial narrative layer onto a series of themed puzzles instead of using the puzzles to convey the narrative. Using larp design concepts would encourage room designers to create player roles that matter in the story instead of relying upon stories where the players happened upon a situation. If players are not given the chance to immerse themselves into the narrative, then these rooms will continue to feel like a series of themed puzzles instead of offering rich narrative explorations. Offering players meaningful choices that emerge from exploring narratives is a future step in creating more engaging escape rooms.

PRECURSOR 6: THEMED ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Finally, escape rooms are at the intersection of games and themed entertainment, which creates a challenge for those planning and running escape room games as a business. Escape rooms are not the first commercial enterprises built around live-action puzzles. A few precursor businesses for escape room-like activities were Entros, a restaurant founded in Seattle in 1993 but no longer open, where diners participated in mystery games that took them throughout the restaurant, solving physical puzzles while others continued to dine.⁹ Wits is a US franchise which first opened in 2003 and has

9. Deloris Ament. "Entros satisfies both the mind and the stomach." *The Seattle Times*. (August 5, 1994). <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19940805&slug=1923767>.

teams working together to solve physical puzzles in an immersive environment within a certain amount of time to escape to the next room. *MagiQuest*, a feature of the Great Wolf Lodge franchise where players go on a scavenger hunt for items powered by a book of riddles and an electronic wand, debuted in 2006.¹⁰

The themed entertainment industry also could be a place where the escape room industry could find a home, which would provide a way for escape room designers to work with amusement and theme parks to create more opportunities for group puzzle-based experiences outside of standalone experiences. However, there would be some challenge to this partnership, considering that activities in amusement parks need to be able to handle hundreds of participants an hour and that activities for smaller groups of guests usually require a significant upcharge and/or booking well in advance. Several large theme parks have already integrated analog/digital scavenger hunt activities into its parks, where guests travel from station to station solving simple puzzles built into a narrative, which results in the physical environment responding to the player. While simple, these puzzle-based challenges represent interest in the industry of creating interactive challenges that engage the minds of the guests and involve them in active roles instead of treating them as passive observers of an attraction.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no single origin point for Escape Rooms; they are a convergence of many other interactive activities and media. The search for a single point of origin of a new phenomenon is dangerous as it can blind people to the influence that different elements had in converging to create the phenomenon. This creates the copycat

10. Creative Kingdoms. "Great Wolf Lodge celebrates Millionth Magiquest Wand Sold." Creative Kingdoms: Imagination Meets Reality. 2012. http://www.creativekingdoms.com/120124_millionth_wand.

situation that we see in many current game design streams where designers look for one thing to copy and modify instead of looking at a variety of games, play, static, and interactive analog and digital experiences for inspiration.

Understanding the variety of precursors to Escape Rooms is valuable for Escape Room game designers, as it greatly increases the toolkit that these designers have in creating more engaging rooms. Too many escape rooms designers are cloning what they see in other rooms and relying upon tropes such as padlocks and black lights instead of trying new things, and looking to these precursors for inspiration can help. In addition, there are opportunities for those with experience in escape room design to bring these concepts to improve haunted houses, live-action role-playing, and the themed entertainment industry to keep live-action puzzle-based entertainment evolving. Examining escape rooms as a hybrid of design concepts from analog and digital games as well as other forms of media highlights a problem in the way games are typically considered in both scholarly and recreational circles. Game shops, gaming web sites, and game studies conferences tend to have an explicit focus on either digital or analog games. This divide makes it challenging to recognize the influence that each has on the other, even in this growth period of analog/digital games, such as digital game implementations of tabletop games and tabletop games with digital components. Do escape rooms, with their point-and-click video game design concepts married with the live-action analog space implementations belong in either community, and where in scholarship do they fall?

When scholars are deciding in which area to publish, they can be heavily influenced by the venues that are available. If most venues for publication and communities have *Digital*, *Video*, or something

similar in their titles, these budding scholars will be less likely to explore analog or live-action games. Thus, while there has been considerable growth in the non-digital game industries and the related design space in the last few decades, few scholars are exploring these areas. Behind the scenes, many publications and conferences will consider a piece focusing on analog games, but to someone entering the field, the appearance is that digital game studies is the only feasible route. As new game-based activities emerge from the hybrid space of analog and digital games, the boards of large scholarly and professional organizations are encouraged to recognize the importance of dropping the *Digital* or *Video* names from their titles to encourage a broader exploration of all types of games and to stop discouraging young scholars from selecting a focus on a form of game that is not explicitly supported by the academy.

Urban Codemakers

Decompiling the Player

STEVEN CONWAY AND TROY INNOCENT

“[G]ame designs are attempts at making players think and act abnormally. This is fundamental to every medium in a way, and part of what can make any one of them compelling.”¹

MELBOURNE 2010: LOCOJETRO, CODEMAKERS, FINAL
SCORE = 45

The discovery of the alternate reality game (ARG) *Urban Codemakers* is half of the game itself. Midway through the game’s first iteration in 2010, *Urban Codemakers* were traversing the streets of Melbourne when a man on the street—who turned out to be an ARG player (LocoJetro)—asked to take a “selfie” with them. He continued on to explain how he had become aware of the game. The man had been walking home on his usual path when something caught his eye: he had found one of the *Urban Codemaker* “codes” and decided to keep it.

The next day, he examined the code again, finding a web address on the back. The knowledge from this website transformed the man’s

1. Ken S. McAllister & Judd E. Ruggill. *Gaming Matters: Art, Science, Magic, and the Computer Game Medium*. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2011, p.73.

found object from a piece of plastic into a game token, and with it he transformed from Social Actor into Operator Player.² Retroactively, the site at which he found it was transformed into a game space; ground zero for further exploration.

LocoJetro's story outlines the designer's favored way into the alternate reality of the *Urban Codemakers*, an ARG that has been played in Melbourne and Sydney since its inception in 2010. It is played in urban spaces and thematically concerned with cities. In the game players choose one of three guilds, each with their own agenda, either to revert, renew or remake the city. The game's mechanics are simple. In order to score points, players collect codes that mark sites, transforming them into readymade game spaces.



LocoJetro posing with the Urban Codemakers in Melbourne, 2010. Copyright Troy Innocent, 2010

2. Steven Conway and Andrew Trevillian. "Blackout! Unpacking the Black Box of the Game Event." *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 2.1 (2015): pp. 67-100.



An Urban Codemaker code. Photo courtesy of <http://urbancodemakers.net/blog/>

Each code is photographed *in situ* and logged online. To claim the code, players must find its location using clues found online and “collect” it. On the reverse side of each code is a sequence of letters and numbers used to unlock it and claim it for the player. The game is played over several weeks and some codes are worth more than others—these special codes unlock fragments of narrative that expand the stories of the three guilds. Individual scores are logged on a leaderboard alongside overall guild scores. In the first iteration of the game, the LocoJetro’s guild won the right to rezone the city via play.

This anecdote illustrates a central tenet of ecological psychology, perhaps best surmised as a mantra: knowledge creates perception, perception creates action, action creates new knowledge, and so the cycle continues.³ Simply put, LocoJetro’s newfound literacy vis-à-vis *Urban Codemakers* offered a new way of seeing the environment:

3. Jonas Linderoth. “Beyond the Digital Divide: An Ecological Approach to Game-Play.” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 1.1 (2013): pp. 1-17.

ludic affordances, previously hidden due to a knowledge deficit (“what are these plastic things?”), became not only visible but conspicuous once the social actor took it upon himself to learn the game. Graduating from Social Actor (“John”) to Operative Player (LocoJetro), this switch instantiated an entirely new sense of being-in-the-world: in LocoJetro’s world (as opposed to John’s) the environment is filled with playful possibilities, ludic affordances in the form of tokens, points and leaderboards. This epistemological shift propelled new perceptions, new actions, changed the gamestate, and generated new knowledge for the wider *Urban Codemaker* community’s assimilation and response.

This essay considers the pervasive game *Urban Codemakers* as a theoretical exemplar of the complex ways that players, objects, and environment interact.

BACKGROUND

Urban Codemakers draws upon the design principles of pervasive games in its strategies for engaging the public. Equal parts treasure hunt and urban adventure, its core fiction as an ARG is centered on the activities of Guilds of Urban Codemakers originating in the Micronation of Ludea. Pervasive games “expand the contractual magic circle of play spatially, temporally, or socially.”⁴ These three cornerstones define pervasive games for Montola, Stenos, and Waern. Spatially, this expansion occurs through opening up the field of play first of all from being not exclusively screen-based, then to include aspects of the everyday – such as Melbourne streets and laneways. Temporally, games such as *Urban Codemakers* are active all the time, with this particular run lasting for four months. Players may

4. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenos, and Annika Waern. *Pervasive Games Theory and Design*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2009, p. 12.

shift in and out of the game at any time. This time shifting means that socially, the game is embedded in the players' daily lives, or may activate their social life through playing with friends or strangers. Finally, as the game takes place in the city, members of the public are engaged as spectators or perhaps cross over into the game frame to become players themselves.

Most accounts mark 2001 as the birth of pervasive game design. The first ARG, *The Beast*,⁵ was unleashed on the public at this time, and Blast Theory staged *Can You See Me Now?*,⁶ the first iteration of their take on street sport. However, one of the earliest deployments of play in urban space was staged by the situationists as early as 1955. Readers of Johan Huizinga, Guy Debord and his contemporaries used play as subversive strategy to upset the rational design of public spaces.⁷ Stewart Brand and Bernie De Koven had a similar agenda in founding the New Games Movement in the 1970s.⁸ They used play for the sake of play, so as to create public spectacles and engender play communities through collaborative, rather than competitive, game design. Of course, beyond this outdoor play has been part of public life for centuries.

Jane McGonigal has recently re-confirmed the potential of play to engage people with the world around them. Her provocative assertion that "reality is broken" sets up a rhetorical double move.⁹ First of all, it draws attention to the world around us as a playground, and second, asks us to see that world in terms of the rules and systems that we are familiar with in digital playgrounds. Like the situationists, she sets up a set of rules for engagement with reality that enable

5. Jordan Weisman, Elan Lee, Sean Stewart, and others. *The Beast* aka "The A.I. Web Game", "The A.I. Web Puzzle". Microsoft, 2001.

6. Blast Theory and University of Nottingham Mixed Reality Lab. *Can You See Me Now?* Various locations, 2001-2005.

7. Guy Debord. "Theory of the Dérive." In *Situationist International Anthology*. Edited by K. Knabb. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1958.

8. Bernie De Koven. *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

9. Jane McGonigal. *Reality is Broken*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011

the design and development of games that play with its “infinite affordances”. Making claims such as “reality is too easy” and “reality is lonely and isolating” highlights opportunities for game design to step in and modify one’s inter-(and intra-)personal relationships.

In a relatively short period, pervasive game design has developed a set of core principles and strategies for engaging the public that enable new ways of being-in-the-world.

THE PROCRUSTEAN PLAYER

Players are often forced into the bed of Procrustes through theoretical constructs that present for the reader an orderly, discrete analysis at the cost of the player’s ontological wellbeing: Huizinga’s magic circle¹⁰ delineates a highly bounded space-time for play; Roger Caillois¹¹ divides types of play into four rigid categories – *agon*, *mimicry*, *ilinx*, and *alea* – existing across a bipolar spectrum between *paidia* (free play) and *ludus* (structured play); even later scholars such as Alexander R. Galloway draw definitive boundaries between levels of fiction experienced by the player, e.g. as diegetic/non-diegetic.¹²

Yet the moment of play also extends across time and between spaces. Consider the office worker sitting in her cubicle, thinking about the best way to defeat last night’s end-boss, searching forums and altering character equipment on her mobile device. Games, both digital and analog, shift between Caillois’ boundaries from moment to moment, such as the footballer kicking the ball (*agon*), the ball interacting with a sudden gust of wind as it sails through the air (*alea*), before finally settling in the back of the net; the player may then

10. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London, UK: Beacon Press, 1971.

11. Roger Caillois. *Man, Play and Games*. Urbana, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

12. Alexander R. Galloway. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. London, UK: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

imitate the celebration of Real Madrid's Gareth Bale (mimicry), a love heart formed between both hands.¹³

In the midst of a session of role-play gaming, the user may jump out of character to consult the rules on how best to proceed; a phenomenological shift that Galloway would class as movement from diegetic to non-diegetic (and thus a kind of fourth wall break). Yet for the player this is all part of a fluid, shifting experience within the overarching game frame (as discussed by Gary Alan Fine¹⁴ and, later, Mia Consalvo¹⁵): the traditional phenomenological shock of a fourth-wall break is most certainly not the average player's experience as she consults a rulebook to work out the finer points of a combat encounter in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Finally, much theory assumes the player is knowingly involved in a game and cognizant of the rules, which, as demonstrated by our opening account, must also be questioned, especially in the light of ARGs and pervasive games. Overall the player is often caricatured as some transcendent subject that exists above, on the side, or inside the game; in any sense, the player is always some kind of separate, sovereign entity. Yet what if, when we decompile the concept, "player" was a fluid network of objects affording ludic enactment, enabling the emergence of a "player" mode of being? Though important milestones in the formation of game studies, the theories outlined above are blunted when applied to the experience of games *as an ecosystem that affords player subjectivity*.

Therefore, we wish to point towards a more nuanced framework for understanding the space, time and identity of play, beginning from the ground up, i.e., taking the hermeneutic agency of the person and the affordances of the immediate environment as critical

13. It looks exactly as silly as it sounds.

14. Gary A. Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. London, UK: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

15. Mia Consalvo. "There is No Magic Circle." *Games and Culture*, 4.4 (2009): pp. 408–417.

to the comprehension of games.¹⁶ We therefore view games not firstly as static material artifacts but, to borrow the term from Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology,¹⁷ as *a particular kind of Dasein supported by an ecosystem*. That is to say, the essence of the human is ontological: to question, to interpret, to generate meaning through embodied engagement with one's world is inherent in our being. "World" here is not some cartographical qualification or physical mass, but used in the phenomenological tradition to designate a network of meaningful relations that pertains to a specific milieu, e.g. the business world, the world of Korean BBQ, the world of JRPGs, the world of *Urban Codemakers*, and so forth. Erving Goffman describes games as:

[... a] matrix of possible events, and a cast of roles through whose enactment the events occur, constitute together a field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself, different from all other worlds except the ones generated when the same game is played at other times... Games, then, are world-building activities.¹⁸

From this standpoint, it is the player who unconceals, comprehends and maintains a gameworld, often incorporating all kinds of objects into her understanding, as we will see. It should be highlighted however that, for a game event to occur, the objects must allow this *incorporation* (literally into one's sense of being); certain objects may obstinately refuse, falter or outright fail to afford ludic possibility. As scholars of Actor-Network Theory have frequently illustrated, the human agent is rarely the primary (and indeed never the solitary) causal agent.

16. See also Miguel Sicart. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

17. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008.

18. Erving Goffman. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin University Books, 1972, pp. 24-25.(19)

Building our epistemology upwards from a phenomenological understanding of player action, we are able to reconcile what, from the clinical view of much top-down, text-centric theory, may seem paradoxical, dissonant and antithetical to immersion. Blending this comprehension of play with Erving Goffman's sociological concept of frame analysis,¹⁹ we come to define games as a consensual organization of social reality that structures and acts as a hermeneutic framework (the game frame). In doing so we are able to comprehend the player experience as a dynamic, shifting, engrossing mode of engagement with a suite of objects across three phenomenological worlds.

By the incorporation of a modified version of Goffman's concept of "keying," phrasing each key as a "world", we can articulate shifts in the player/s Dasein; their sense of being-in-the-world. For example, I am watching friends play a game of *Coup* (2014); I join the game and my sense of being-in-the-world shifts; my friends later leave and I load *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015) and once more my sense-of-being-in-the-world alters as I begin to care for the game characters even as I never lose comprehension of the fact, even as it resides tacitly in the background of my understanding, that they are pixels upon a television.

The lowest key is traditionally the most inclusive frame, and as actors "upkey" the frame it becomes further specialized in terms of requisite knowledge. For example, an "in-joke" between close friends at work is an upkey, an altering of the social situation that few other participants within the frame will understand. Applying this to games, as Gary Alan Fine showed,²⁰ is highly productive. Crucially, Fine articulates upkeying and downkeying as movement between

19. Erving Goffman. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1986.

20. Fine.

different frames; Consalvo offers an excellent summation in regards to digital games:

[R]ather than a player up-keying from daily life to a simulation, the player up-keys from daily life to the world of game rules and game structure, which is simply another frame (and the player might then very quickly down-key back to daily life if her mobile phone rings).²¹

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman make a similar point, as the player often is “shifting from a deep immersion with the game’s representation to a deep engagement with the game’s strategic mechanisms to an acknowledgement of space outside the magic circle”;²² Laura Ermi & Frans Mäyrä have similarly articulated three types of immersion (sensory, challenge-based, imaginative).²³ The player, in Actor-Network Theory terminology, is thus a “black box”: a complex network of objects condensed into a simplified, singular actant. We hold that this is insufficient, and thus the black box requires opening, the player requires decompiling.

In an effort to understand this decompilation, we have previously outlined a model for game analysis based on this blend of phenomenology, sociology, and Actor-Network Theory;²⁴ we christened it the SOC model (Social // Operative // Character).²⁵

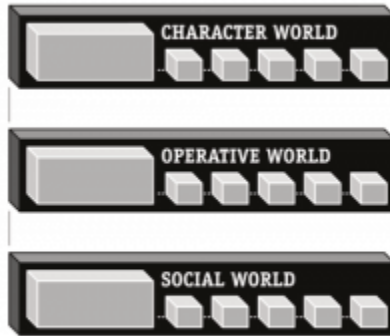
21. Consalvo, p. 414.

22. Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, p. 455.

23. Laura Ermi & Frans Mäyrä. “Fundamental components of the gameplay experience: Analysing immersion.” In *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*. Edited by S. De Castell & J. Jenson. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007.

24. Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

25. Conway and Trevillian.



The SOC Model

In this model the lowest, most fundamental phenomenological world is the Social World (the Social Actor within the everyday); the middle frame is the Operative World (the Operator Player views and speaks of the game as a world of rules, challenges, point systems and mechanics); the highest frame, the one most difficult to sustain, is the Character World (the Character Player, requiring the participant to speak and act as a character consistent with the game's narratological features). Let us now look at a few case studies of this model in practice, and how players may rapidly move between all three worlds.

SYDNEY, 2013: FAUXPOLGA, DÆMON, FINAL SCORE =
289



fauxpolga with her tag collection in Sydney 2013. Copyright Troy Innocent 2010.

Players from the Sydney game were asked to describe their experience in play. The second-highest scoring player told a story about her immersion in the game in which people became objects while she was exploring a park in Newtown. As is a pre-requisite for upkeying to the Operative World, she gave these otherwise simple plastic tiles an inordinate amount of attention as she moved around spaces – and people – in her search to find them; by upkeying to Operator Player, she upkeyed these plastic objects to instead *Urban Codemaker* “codes”; they in turn had a significance for her not shared by spectators, whom were still within the Social World, not sharing in her world of Operative meaning.

It was only after she had collected a number of codes a realization occurred: she had invaded the personal space of a number of people occupying the park (people who were now eyeing her quite contemptuously). Her perception of her city was irrevocably

modified through knowledge of *Urban Codemakers*, the codes' visual patterns foremost in her perception, even whilst riding her bike (which she adopted as part of her Operator Player strategy to quickly traverse from one location to the next).

Gamers are familiar with digital game worlds – atmospheric lighting, urban detritus, architectural keylines, signs of habitation – used by designers to create a sense of place. In the physical city, as game designers, we receive such phenomena for free; we borrow the wealth of years of habitation. What we *don't* receive are the boundaries and constraints that can be engineered within a digital space. To create a readymade game space is to play with the often rigid affordances of the physical environment to make it, transforming an everyday site into a location for ludic action; for *Urban Codemakers* the insertion of carefully designed plastic tokens (the “codes”) achieve this goal. Once placed on a wall or other surface they claim that site as gamespace, offering the potential for metamorphosis, from Social World to Operative World, and even Character World, as we will see.

Once more, fauxpolga's experience highlights the hermeneutic agency of the players in changing the space around them – in their own mind and in the perception of others that observe their upkeyed behavior. The spectators see the player in action and may decide to join the game, i.e. upkey to the Operative or Character World, perhaps satisfying their curiosity by engaging in conversation, or offering their own reading of player behavior.

The site is thus upkeyed from Social World to Operative or Character World, and while the game is in play the city is similarly upkeyed – each space players enter, not only when playing overtly, but meeting friends to see a film, traveling to work or otherwise outside their home, becomes potential gamespace to score points.

This expectation may be heightened as new codes are announced via social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are common sites for upkeying), or players often recognize another player on the hunt, transforming the space again into a site of play. The Melbourne Central Business District (CBD) and villages in Sydney were chosen for their urban character and history, making them rich as readymade game space, ripe for upkeying. In Sydney (Zydnei) the locations of Newtown (Renewtown), Darlinghurst (Zalinhast) and Chatswood (Zhatswud) were also renamed to further accentuate the affordance of upkeying such sites.

SYDNEY, 2013: BRINGTHERUCKUS, CODEKOS, FINAL
SCORE = 522



Urban Codemaking in action. Melbourne 2010. Copyright Troy Innocent 2010

Another player who developed a unique strategy was the most successful in the Melbourne and Sydney games. He worked with an assistant who collected and held codes once located by him. While

his assistant, fauxpolga, was immersed primarily as Character Player, bringtheruckus engaged primarily as Operator Player to score the most points as quickly as possible. This strategy was very successful as in the Sydney iteration, bonus points were awarded for collecting the most tags in the shortest amount of time. This mechanic was not announced to the players but left to be discovered. Moving quickly through the readymade game spaces, he would tag codes with his own cipher so that his collaborator could collect whilst he moved on to find the next target.

This brings to light another important phenomenon overlooked by the formality of Huizinga's and Caillois' frameworks; though playing within the same *rules*, many players (and indeed – as demonstrated above – spectators) are not inhabiting the same *world*. Bernard Suits illustrated this point well in his discussion of triflers, cheats and spoilsports: triflers respect the rules but not the goal, cheaters respect the goal but not the rules, and spoilsports respect neither.²⁶

Let us push Suits' insight to its logical conclusion following our deduction that players may exist on different levels of the game frame: phenomenologically, it is not the same game for each player. Bringtheruckus was concerned purely with the goal-oriented material of the gamespace: the codes planted by the game designer. His Dasein was oriented towards points, rankings, overcoming the mechanics of the game and his opposition. Conversely, fauxpolga was concerned with the fictional worlds of Zydnei, Zalinhus and Renewtown, etc.; the Character World afforded by the network of objects within each environment, carefully chosen by the design team.

In the above iteration of *Urban Codemakers*, bringtheruckus

26. Bernard Suits. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.

respected the goal to the detriment of the rules' spirit; his Operator Player approach caused consternation amongst the community, who were concerned with the destructive impact his dominant strategy had upon those existing within the Character World, where "points" and "winning" had only an abrasive, intrusive impact upon their mode of being-in-the-game-world.

CONCLUSION

Gamespaces, especially in the case of ARGs and pervasive games, are literally *playgrounds*: grounds for play, built from the ground-up by *collusion*²⁷: the designer works with the ludic affordances of the environment to encourage the Social Actor's reframing of the situation, i.e. to enter the Operative or Character World. Keying up from the world of Social Actor to Operator Player and Character Player, the participants of *Urban Codemakers* turned the cities of Melbourne, Sydney, and their surrounding villages into spaces filled with playful possibilities, and in doing so organized a different social reality, a different phenomenological world: a gamespace. For onlookers, Social Actors perceiving the world through the lowest key of the Social World, the "everyday", such behavior may be jarring, suspicious or indeed bewildering.

Yet all objects, human and non-human, may at any point be upkeyed into the space of the game, as quickly as they may be downkeyed once more. In founding our epistemology on the phenomenological understanding of play, the social organization of reality vis-à-vis Goffman's frame analysis, and the nuanced, broad understanding of agency via Actor-Network Theory, we may understand games and play without drawing arbitrary, static boundaries, and therefore excluding an enormous collection of

27. From 'collude', i.e. to play together. See Seth Giddings. "Events and Collusions: A Glossary for the Microethnography of Videogame Play." *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media* 4.2 (2009): pp. 144–157.

objects, ideal and material, that may enter the space of play. Indeed, particularly for analog games, the space of play is simultaneously entered and enacted via the creative instantiating and upkeying of affordances within the immediate environment: in many senses the player *becomes*, in symphony with a network of amenable objects, the codemaker.

Affective Structuring and the Role of Race and Nation in XCOM

EVAN W. LAUTERIA

...in light of the recent extraterrestrial incursion, this council of nations has convened to approve the activation of the XCOM project. You have been chosen to lead this initiative to oversee our first and last line of defense. Your efforts will have considerable influence on this planet's future. We urge you to keep that in mind as you proceed. Good luck, Commander.¹

So begins *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, a 2012 turn-based strategy game² in which the player takes on the role of the Commander of XCOM—short for “Extraterrestrial Combat Unit”—an international paramilitary organization responsible for defending Earth against an invading extraterrestrial force. To do so, the player must command and lead multiple teams of soldiers from 29 different nations³ to

1. XCOM: Enemy Unknown. Firaxis Games, 2012.

2. XCOM: Enemy Unknown was released for PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360, and is a remake of the 1994 PC and Amiga game UFO: Enemy Unknown.

3. XCOM soldiers hail from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Russia, Scotland, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the USA. In *Enemy Unknown*, soldiers may also originate from Saudi Arabia; in the later *Enemy Within* release, soldiers from Poland take their place.

defend against this new threat while simultaneously managing and supervising the more bureaucratic tasks of research and development, communications, construction, and funding and expenditures. XCOM is supported and funded by “The Council”, a UN-like entity comprised of 16 nations⁴ from around the world, and the Commander must complete their tasks while trying to keep these nations appeased by reducing their “panic,” a measure inversely related to the amount of satellite, aerial defense, ground force protection, and services afforded to a given country. In the tutorial mission, “Devil’s Moon,” the player is introduced to XCOM’s Chief Scientist Dr. Vahlen, whose native fluency in German allows the Commander to attempt to speak to a mind-controlled, alien-enslaved German recon team before witnessing their own ground team of four XCOM rookies—an American, a Russian, a Japanese soldier, and an Argentinian—overrun by the enemy. Upon returning to the base, the player views a short exchange between Central Officer Bradford, Chief Scientist Dr. Vahlen, and Lead Engineer Dr. Shen, that concludes with Vahlen’s final remark to Shen, “...I’d say our work is cut out for us, Doctor.” The racial and national diversity of the characters, and the narrative emphasis on their working together as citizens of Earth thus inform the player that even in the face of the planet’s annihilation, working towards unification across national, ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences is key to humanity’s survival and proliferation. The defense of Earth is a distinctly multinational, human-oriented endeavor.

This emphasis on multinational collaboration, however, is absent from the game’s recent board game adaptation, *XCOM: The Board Game*.⁵ In fact, references to individual nations at all are replaced with

4. The Council is comprised of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the USA.

5. Eric M. Lang. *XCOM: The Board Game*. Roseville, MN: Fantasy Flight Games, 2015.

more generic identifiers; in lieu of The Council's funding countries, the players must concern themselves with panicked continents, and instead of soldiers being recruited from various nations, all soldiers come from a single, a-geographic "recruitment pool". Even Dr. Vahlen and her XCOM peers Dr. Shen and CO Bradford—presumably Taiwanese and American, respectively—are absent, as the game's players themselves now act as the bureaucratic managers of varying resources for XCOM. Without these characters, the board game version is also more heavily focused on the administrative functions of the game, as players must make rash decisions that are bound to a strict budget and even stricter countdown clock, oftentimes negatively impacting their peers as they cooperatively yet self-interestedly vie for strategic monetary support against the incoming alien onslaught. If the player is reminded of the multinational efforts needed to deter the alien invasion in the *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, *XCOM: The Board Game* instead reminds players that all organizational labor, even in the face of apocalypse, is formally institutional, intimately tied to capital, and dehumanizingly bureaucratic.

Ostensibly, *XCOM* the video game and *XCOM: The Board Game* are games "about" the same thing: "an escalating alien invasion" and "the tension and uncertainty of a desperate war against an unknown foe."⁶ Various scholars in game studies invite us to explore, however, the ways in which games produce meaning in ways particular to the gamic form, from Ian Bogost's⁷ concept of "procedural rhetoric," the persuasive power of algorithmic and formal processes, to Alexander Galloway's approach to informatic control critique over the

6. "XCOM: The Board Game." Fantasy Flight Games. <http://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/xcom-the-board-game/>.

7. Ian Bogost. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

ideological. Gonzalo Frasca's oft-cited "Simulation versus Narrative"⁸ serves as prime evidence of the work to establish games as producing meaning not through traditionally representative features, as would normally be accounted for by traditional literary theory. And fundamentally, Espen Aarseth's⁹ notion of games as "ergodic," requiring "non-trivial effort to traverse the text," highlights the importance of examining the gamic form as interpolating and hailing the player-as-subject differently than other forms of media. To this end, game studies has historically privileged the mechanical and rule-based features of games as the foundational site of meaning-making and subject construction.

The notable differences in how the video games and the board game treat race and nation, however, invite us to explore their functional roles in facilitating and producing play, despite neither being accounted for fully in the process- and rule-based structures of the games. And scholars such as Adrienne Shaw¹⁰, Shira Chess¹¹, and many contributors to *Analog Game Studies* have articulated the need to look beyond the mechanical and algorithmic features of games, particularly around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Based on play sessions of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* and *Within* and *XCOM The Board Game*, this paper suggests that games scholarship, in order to accurately address nation and race, must grapple directly with the *affective* role of race and nation, despite often being ignored in more formal and mechanical accounts of games and game design. I take the video game and the board game as interesting comparative cases, given their distinct similarities yet glaring differences, to explore the

8. Gonzalo Frasca. "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology." In *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Edited by M.P. Wolf and B. Perron. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 221-236.

9. Espen Aarseth. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

10. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Game Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

11. Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw. "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* Volume 53, no. 1 (2014): pp: 208-220.

means by which scholars can explore more affective dimensions of play as inherently built in to the structures of games themselves. Nodding at sociological scholarship on organizations and culture, I argue that games operate beyond their calculable, formal rule sets and employ “affective structuring”¹² informally to facilitate play through cueing and priming of certain emotional responses and the interpolation of certain relational subject positions in players. Given our contemporary socio-cultural and geo-political landscape, I argue that such affective structuring in games is imbued with and built upon raced concepts and ideas. Even an absence of racial demarcations signals certain modes of race logics, from the deracialized modern bureaucratic logic of *XCOM: The Board Game* to the liberal multiculturalism of *XCOM: Enemy Within*. This suggests a necessary rethinking of games as a combination of formal rules and informal affective structuring, wherein race and nation figure largely in the organization of human-player activity.

THE VIDEO GAME

In *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* and its 2013 DLC expansion *XCOM: Enemy Within*,¹³ the Commander is responsible for the administrative and bureaucratic upkeep of the organization, the on-the-ground assault of alien facilities and defense of humans at abduction and terrorism sites, and the orbital and aerial defense of funding nations. The game divides its time progression into months, and at the end of each month, the Commander is given a report card summarizing XCOM’s successes and failures for that month. As part of this report,

12. I offer this new term, “affective structuring,” in an attempt to simultaneously build upon and differentiate this process from Arlie Hochschild’s notion of “feeling management” and “emotion management,” which describe explicit processes to alter emotional states inwardly, often influenced by external actors. In lieu of actors, I wish to suggest that emotional responses are also cued and guided by non-actors, such as space, sound, and role construction. This is described in further detail in my conclusion.

13. *XCOM: Enemy Within* is a bundle of additional/downloadable content (DLC) for *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* that expands the core mechanics by adding new missions, new classes, etc. Although sold as a separately packaged game for consoles, *XCOM: Enemy Within* is, for most purposes, the same game with additional content.

funding nations that have become too panicked can withdraw their support from the organization. Allowing eight nations to withdraw ends the game. Preventing this outcome through defensive maneuvers and support, while overcoming the alien onslaught through direct assault of their bases and landed ships thus form the primary objectives for players.

To meet these goals, players oversee the bureaucratic functioning of XCOM during “base management” and engage in direct combat during the “squad-based tactics” phase. Mechanically, race serves no inherent ludological, rule-based role in the design of the game. Despite being racially diverse, XCOM’s soldier base does not gain race-based statistics; all statistics are determined by equipment, classes, and military rank. Similarly, nations serve as mostly aesthetic frames for the funding, mission sites, and Council-based mechanics. But these aesthetic frames are very important to the structuring of players’ affective relationship to the game. For instance, witnessing a nation withdraw from XCOM—and it appears to visibly fall to the alien incursion thereafter—produces an affective drive in players to reduce panicked outcomes as much as possible.

The game primarily does this through three techniques: producing interpersonal commitments between the Commander and XCOM’s multinational staff and soldiers; illustrating the one-ness of the globe through modular representations and sites of engagement; and positioning XCOM’s approach to global multiculturalism in contrast to competing ideologies. That is, the player is driven to feel connected to XCOM’s staff through their racial and national differences, but de-emphasizes those differences as *actually* mattering in any formal, rule-based manner. Players have to invest heavily in the training of their soldiers to ensure they can compete with increasingly difficult enemy encounters, and, in doing so, begin to

develop a shared experience on missions that can build a sense of relationship between players and their soldiers. And, as each soldier represents their countries via a flag emblazoned across their upper backs, the relationship between players and soldiers microcosmically represents and emulates the Commander's relationship to the countries of the world. Indeed, the game includes a "memorial" for deceased soldiers, reminding players of the harsh realities of war but also treating soldiers as real people with real origins and national ties. In this sense, players are simultaneously accountable to the funding nations themselves and to individuals from those nations in their employ, facilitating an affective, emotional tie to the cause that is rooted in tight social connections and shared experience on the battlefield. It's not solely a matter of the rule-based funding mechanics that drive the player; the sense of urgency around saving entire nations of people results in a desire to save more than the bare minimum of nine nations or partial squads.

The Commander is, thusly, accountable to a multicultural XCOM just as the player is accountable to a globally interconnected Earth. This approach is then verified as proper through the lack of local specificity of mission sites and the racial and national ambiguity of escort mission NPCs. That is, Corporation warehouses can be located in Lagos, Sapporo, and Kansas City; diners can be found Sydney, Beijing, and Bloemfontein. Escort targets, such as Anna Sing and Hongou Marazuki, have names that are ambiguously global, due to the use of surnames common between languages with slight errors or variance in Romanization or Anglicization. At its core, the modularity of mission sites and NPCs yields a sense of one-ness of Earth that continues to tie players to its shared struggle against the alien invaders. In contrast, the aliens and the "human traitors" that join the pro-alien organization EXALT come to represent

competing, failed racial ideologies; the aliens emphasize highly eugenic forms of racial caste ordering and hierarchy, while EXALT, whose membership is exclusively white and male, represent the Amero/Euro-centric and white supremacist problems of color-blind post-racial futurity. These three techniques—of simulated interpersonal accountability, representative verification, and external comparison—structure and produce the necessary affective response from players necessary to traverse the game-as-text appropriately.

THE BOARD GAME

Whereas the single-player *XCOM* video game positions players in the role of Commander, *XCOM: The Board Game* is designed for up to four players, with distinct bureaucratic roles for each.¹⁴ The original Commander responsibilities are still central to the game play, but are now divided between the “Commander,” responsible for budgetary and aerial defense, and the “Squad Leader,” whose primary role is combating ground units and alien invaders in the XCOM base. The video game’s CO Bradford and Dr. Vahlen are replaced in the board game version by players as the “Central Officer,” who communicates responsibilities to other players and manages satellite coverage, and the “Chief Scientist,” who researches new technology for players to improve their abilities when confronting alien threats. Dr. Shen’s responsibilities are either absent or offloaded onto the Chief Scientist’s R&D work. All four roles are tasked with defending Earth against alien threats by working collaboratively to improve and build upon XCOM’s resources and capabilities. The board game is divided into two phases—a “timed phase” and a “resolution phase”—which are managed by a digital app usable on mobile devices or computer. During the timed phase, players make rushed, snap

14. If played with fewer than four people, players must take on more than one role in XCOM’s bureaucratic structure, as per the game’s instructions.

decisions under strict timed limitations about their respective bureaucratic spheres of influence—which items to research, which continents to aerially defend, etc.—oftentimes competing for resources despite sharing the ultimate goal of protecting the planet from the incoming assault. Those decisions are then “resolved” through dice rolls and player intervention during the resolution phase.

As with the video game, race and nation do not figure into the formal rule mechanics defending Earth. Unlike the video game, however, they also do not visibly figure into the aesthetic and subsequent affective structuring of the game, either. Without voiced and animated NPCs or explorable global mission sites, the emotional cueing and priming found in the video game that attempts to guide the player to a particular affective space is absent, unreplicated in textual or visual form in the board game’s format. Perhaps more importantly, however, the framework of funding nations and diverse teams are erased, as well. In lieu of nations, players defend entire continents without regard to their geopolitical states. Soldiers do not enter the game through recruitment from supporting nations, instead occupying a central recruitment pool for later purchase. Overall, the game foregoes the multinational, “shared humanism” ethos of the video game to instead focus more heavily on the bureaucratic management of the base and the probability risks of confronting alien threats.

In this regard, the board game employs a much different affective structuring to elicit player engagement. The timed phase replaces the sentimentality of the video game with an intense panic over lack of time, disrupting the players’ capacity to thoroughly strategize and communicate, despite demanding it of them. And, indeed, players will panic. The timed phase does not offer substantial time for

decision making, and one of the primary differences between difficulty levels on the app is the amount of pauses afforded to players during this phase. The sense of constant threat and dire circumstances, and the necessity of rapid efficiency and proper time and resource management as a result, are the primary affective drives of play for the board game. While both the board game and the video game rely on fierce urgency to drive action, it manifests differently in its execution. The fierce urgency of bureaucratic efficiency replaces the fierce urgency of shared humanity's salvation. And in that sense, *XCOM: The Board Game* doesn't necessarily *not* include race, but rather adopts a racial logic in its affective structuring akin to bureaucratic management. That is, that racial difference doesn't matter formally; technical expertise and efficiency do.

But, like in bureaucratic organizations, the formal dimensions of technical and corporate relations are but half the story. As sociologist Charles Perrow writes,

The development of bureaucracy has been in part an attempt to purge organizations of particularism. This has been difficult, because organizations are profoundly "social," in the sense that all kinds of social characteristics affect their operation *by intent*.¹⁵

Indeed, the emergence of the "human relations" school from the late-1920s to the 1940s, and the subsequent professionalization of "management" with a distinct focus on "good leadership" as a central role in organizations is testament to the profound importance of social relations in organizational labor. And nationality and racial difference shape and influence otherwise highly bureaucratized role relations. The same can be said of other forms of social categorization and identity. Indeed, in business and leadership scholar Rosabeth

15. Charles Perrow. *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. 3rd edition. McGraw-Hill, Inc: New York, 1971, pp. 7.

Moss Kanter's pivotal study *Men and Women of the Corporation*, she illustrates "how relative numbers—social composition of groups—affect relationships between men and women (or any two kinds of people)" and how gendered behavior in organizations is not psychosocial or inherent in given job responsibilities, but a "response to the problems incumbents face in trying to live their organizational lives so as to maximize legitimacy or recognition or freedom."¹⁶ In an effort to purge particularism, bureaucratic technologies merely positioned identitarian categories of persons and the social relations they influence in the latent, informal dimensions of organizational life rather than its overt, formal dimensions. Organizational rules alone do not fully encapsulate the work of and the work within bureaucratic organizations.

AFFECTIVE STRUCTURE AS INFORMAL GAME STUDIES

I wish to suggest that we take *XCOM: The Board Game*'s adoption of bureaucratic technologies and deracialization therein as a metaphorical launching point for engaging with the question of how to better account for nation and race in games and play. As in bureaucratic organizations, which, like games, are highly formal rule-based systems designed to facilitate and guide action, nation and race are rendered absent in formal logics while they surface continually in the informal and otherwise unaccounted-for social relations between actors. These social relations can range from direct discursive engagements to much more ephemeral affective sentiments in the workplace. Formal organizational rules only tell half the story of a given bureaucratic system, partially in the service of

16. Rosabeth Moss Kanter. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Basic Books: New York, 1977, pp. 5-6.

occluding the informal, latent organization driven by affect, emotion, and meaning between social actors.

The same, perhaps, should be acknowledged regarding race in games. Rather than focus analysis on the formal rule-based dimensions of games, we must understand those rule-based dimensions as working simultaneously alongside an affective structuring that guides players to certain sentiments, even if subjectively variable in its execution. In this regard, games can be understood as necessarily raced, as embedded in their affective structuring logics are some presumption about both the player as a human subject and about social relations more generally. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* positions its relationship to race as one of shared humanism akin to multiculturalism, wherein all peoples of the world can work together in harmony and embrace difference without acknowledgement of internal conflict. *XCOM: The Board Game* adopts the deracialized, color-blind logics of bureaucratic control and management, seeking to erase difference in the service of efficiency. Both are highly raced logics.

To account for such racialization, and for affective structuring as a key element of game design and play, I wish to suggest we engage with games not as formal texts—as is often the case in the humanities fields—but instead as complex organizations. Erving Goffman, in his 1974 *Fun in Games*, described games as “situated activity systems,”¹⁷ that emphasize and highlight certain forms of meaning-making through their construction of “largely what shall be attended and disattended” (i.e., producing a hierarchy of meaning and relevance) and as “world-building activities” rooted in their social dimensions.¹⁸ And while games are about the production of explicit

17. Erving Goffman. “Fun in Games.” In *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, INC., 1961, p. 19.

18. Goffman, p. 27.

fictional worlds,¹⁹ sociologists account for the production and management of emotion and affect beyond formal rule structures in organizations, often addressing such issues as sound and music,²⁰ spatial relations,²¹ and performance²² and affective role adoption²³ spawning out of developments from Arlie Hochschild's²⁴ early work on feeling and emotion management. Embracing these analytic strategies and research approaches, I believe game studies will be able to better account for nation and race as visible and functioning in game spaces even in the absence of formal game mechanics around race, such as the highly eugenic logics of *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) or *Skyrim* (2011), and in the absence of explicit, visual racial representations, as we might find in *Puerto Rico* (2002) or the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997–2013). Nation and race operate also at the level of informal affective structuring, a scaffolding of meaning beyond the formal rules of play. Thinking about nation and race as inherent components in the informal structuring of engagement with games, we can begin to uncover and unravel the racial logics that guide affective responses from players through informal, non-rule-based structuration by identifying their playable allegories, their “algorithms.”²⁵ Acknowledging that, even in the absence of their explicit presence in formal gamic rules, we can see that “win states” are not devoid of social meaning or of symbols like nationhood and race.

19. Jesper Juul. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
20. Tia DeNora. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
21. Patricia Lewis. 2008. “Emotion Work and Emotion Space: Using a Spatial Perspective to Explore the Challenging of Masculine Emotion Management Practices.” *British Journal of Management* 19, issue supplement s1 (2008): pp. 130–40.
22. David Orzechowicz. 2008. “Privileged Emotion Managers: The Case of Actors.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2008): pp.143–56.
23. Steve Lopez. “Emotional Labor and Organized Emotional Care: Conceptualizing Nursing Home Care Work.” *Work and Occupations* 33, no. 2 (2006): pp. 133–60.
24. Arlie Hochschild. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983.
25. Alexander Galloway. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Navigating Haptic Space in Video Games

EDDIE LOHMEYER

With a release date of August 2016, considerable hype within the last year has been situated around the space exploration-survival game *No Man's Sky* (2016) by indie developer Hello Games. The game allows players to explore an open-ended, procedurally-generated universe with approximately 18 quintillion planets that each includes native plant and animal life. This type of free play in which a player could roam the gamespace for years and never land on the same planet twice, demonstrates how certain operations of gameplay allow for possibilities of interaction to unfold. In *No Man's Sky*, this describes when a player navigates, explores, trades, and combats with alien species across self-generating galaxies. Yet, this free play is also inhibited by mechanics and rules embedded in the game system that determine, for instance, the physics of flying spacecraft, firing weaponry, or how and when a player can harvest certain mineral resources to build items.

Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space to examine these uninhibited and

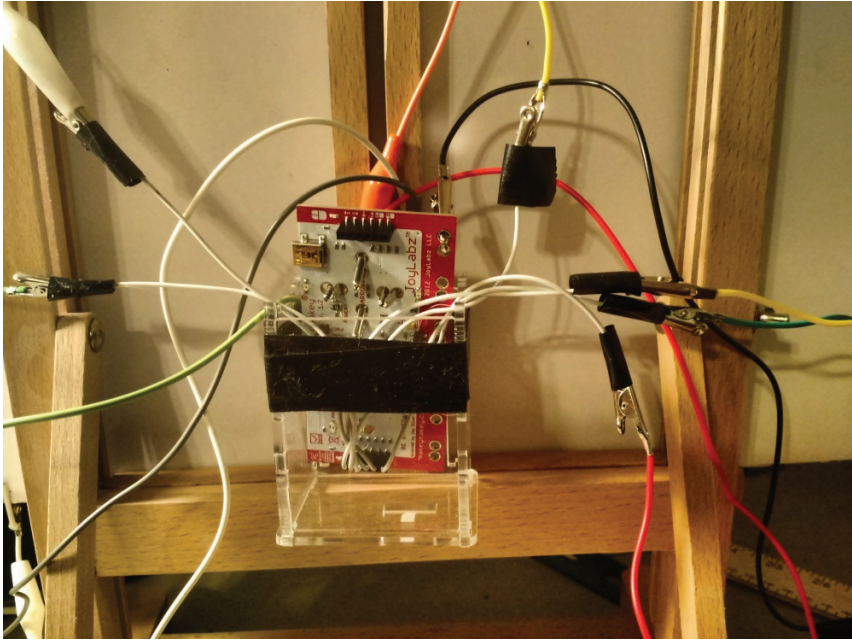
constraining modes of play, this essay considers how smooth play works as *a resistive force outside of normative configurations of play conditioned by operations of striation that work on the body*. As a gaming intervention, I look at my own art installation *SmoothSketch* which uses a microprocessor to create a controller that functions as a “canvas” allowing players to draw freely while simultaneously controlling in-game agents. I argue for a non-representational approach to rethinking gameplay as the push and pull of various operations of play, or rather smooth forces that resist and de-territorialize beyond striated configurations of power through a continuum of affective intensities. Using *SmoothSketch*, I explore this through the installation’s spatial assemblage of play in which a continuum exists between the smooth space of the game and its transference of affective energies onto an analogical control peripheral whose continual generation, through the energy of drawn lines, unfolds simultaneously with the player’s actions. Here, smooth play can be understood as a synthesis of visual and haptic sensations that resists striation by working on a player to rethink presupposed ideologies and gestures associated with gameplay. This installation and essay consider the significance of affective sites of play that move beyond representational models in game scholarship by examining how play works on and organizes our bodies through relationships between power and resistance.

WHAT IS SMOOTHSKETCH?

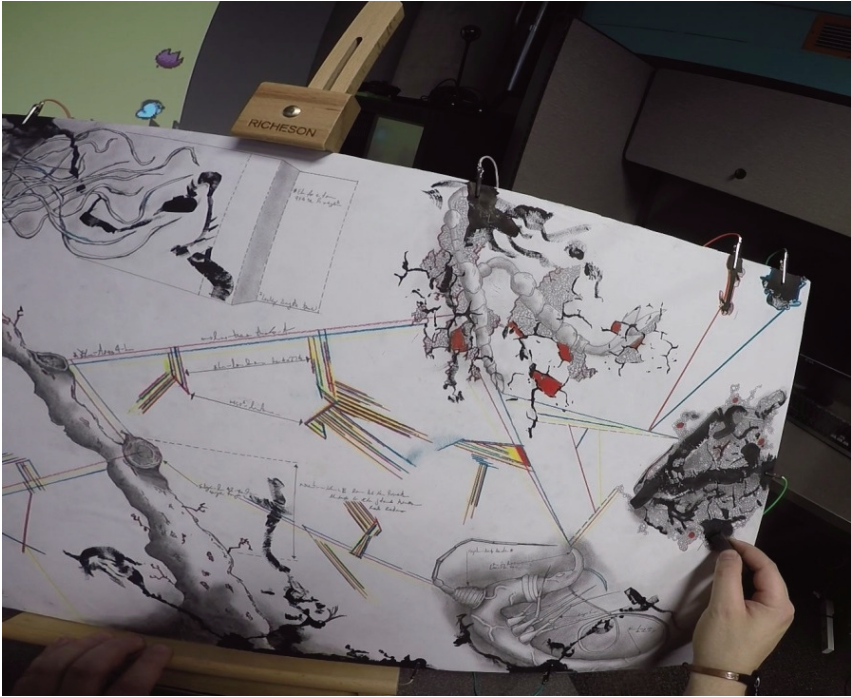
The initial idea of building *SmoothSketch* came to me while playing through the 2006 game *Ōkami* for the Playstation 2 during October of 2015. In *Ōkami*, the player moves through landscapes from Japanese folklore and interacts with the game using a calligraphic brush controlled using the analog stick on the PS2 controller. The

player can essentially turn the cel-shaded environments of the game into a canvas where their digital brushstrokes perform specific actions. As I continued to use this gesture-based system, I began to think what it would feel like to play through *Ōkami* using a control system that allowed the player to physically draw onto paper instead of merely using a joystick to replicate the strokes of a calligraphy brush. This begged the question of what other games might provide a unique gameplay experience if controlled by drawing on a surface.

SmoothSketch consists of a Makey Makey microprocessor that utilizes resistive sensing to turn a drawing into a control pad connected to *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* (1995), which is projected onto a wall. Utilizing alligator clips, the microprocessor is programmed so that each control for the game is assigned to an individual drawing located on a large paper surface. On this surface I have composed various drawings of rhizome-like organisms and creatures in dark graphite pencil, whose offshoots spread across the surface yet never touch. These drawings are accented with areas of black conductive paint that extend to the edge of the drawing board and provide a conductive point of contact with each alligator clip that functions as a control output from the microprocessor. Once the player wears a conductive copper bracelet that grounds their body, they are able to draw upon the existing drawings with heavy sticks of graphite that act as natural conductors, as a means of controlling the avatar in the game. The drawing board itself is secured into a wooden easel in front of which the player is poised, blending the manner in which an artist sits and sketches *en plein air* with the way a gamer is positioned at a game console.



Reverse view of SmoothSketch canvas and microprocessor. Photo by Eddie Lohmeyer and used with permission of the author.



A player interacting with *SmoothSketch* in the Circuit Research Studio at North Carolina State University. Photo by Eddie Lohmeyer and used with permission of the author.

Of importance here is the analog set-up of *SmoothSketch* that uses graphite and a drawing surface as a controller. The inclusion of this analogical drawing controller in which player interaction is expressed as scribbles and lines, resists normative structures of play through a visual and tactile awareness of the materiality of drawn lines on a surface. Instead of using fingers to pressing buttons on a typical controller, the drawing of lines produces a continually generated animation that evolves with each play session. This analogical relationship between player actions and line introduces new visual and tactile sensations with the perplexity of moving the eyes and hand across both the projected game and drawing surface. I

specifically use *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* because its colorful graphics, animated worlds, and game physics provide an appropriate vessel for the analogical transference of affective forces onto the drawing surface as abstract line.

PLAY AND RESISTANCE

The non-representational philosophy of Gilles Deleuze lends itself well to an analysis of video games and in particular, the relationship between possibilities of interaction and play conditioned by rules and mechanics. One such concept that can help articulate these forces at work during gameplay is Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of smooth and striated spaces. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they suggest that a smooth space resembles an environment in which affects and intensities are generated freely through sensory encounters and events. Conversely, they refer to striated space as the organizing and controlling effects of institutions of power in which free movement is partitioned and affects are captured and worked into social and political configurations.¹ Here, we can think of smoothness and striation as forces of resistance and power that are constantly at work on each other.

Akin to Deleuze and Guattari's smooth/striated spaces, other theorists have positioned resistance as a form of self-expression that pushes back against cultural hegemony. In their work on youth groups in British culture, Stuart Hall et al. argue that the solidarity of certain subcultures (e.g. mods, rockers, skinheads, and rastas) expressed through stylistic rituals—fashion, music, and speech—allow people to adapt to and live with their oppositions to dominant culture by creating imaginary relationships to the social conditions in which

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. See Plateau 14: 1440: The Smooth and the Striated, pp. 474-500.

they reside.² As an example of this resistance through ritual, Dick Hebdige examines the styles of the “mod” subculture, particularly the way they appropriate and semantically reconfigure mass commodities such as “sharp” clothes, scooters, and amphetamines, in order to parody and to cause rupture with the parental social groups from which they emerged.³ Similarly to the way these cultural theorists consider stylistic expression as a ritual of resistance, Stephen Duncombe considers the underground publication of fanzines by punk subcultures in the 1980s as an expression of authenticity that worked against dominant culture. These zinesters, who published for and within a network of other self-identifying punks, used fanzines as a way to resist mainstream society by providing critiques of it while also building their identity and an understanding of what it means to live authentically.⁴ Just as these theorists provide us with ways to consider resistance as cultural expression, Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of smooth and striated space likewise observe how resistance works within existing hegemonic formations. Yet, in this essay I specifically draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts because they better articulate how the material and affective capacities of these expressive forces might operate within existing social structures and particularly within operations of conventional gameplay.

As Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts relate to gameplay, smoothness unfolds through the affective potentialities of play and the possibilities for what a player can do within the space of the game, whereas striation is the capture and transference of this latent potential back into the fixed programming and constraints dictated by the system.

2. Stuart Hall, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts. “Subcultures, Cultures, and Class.” In *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures Through Post-War Britain*. Edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 35, 54–57.

3. Dick Hebdige. “The Meaning of Mod.” In *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures Through Post-War Britain*. Edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 73–77.

4. Stephen Duncombe. *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. London: Verso, 1997, pp. 40–42.

The emergence of smooth play can be thought of as certain precepts, affects, and intensities that flow throughout the striated grid of the game system when a player is taken up with the game. For the importance of this essay, the smooth space of a video game describes an operation of resistance that works around, between, and outside of the controlling forces of striation in which technical constraints determined by the game system channel and modulate affects into the socio-cultural organization of a player subject. Striated play operates through relations of power between player, developer, and the gaming industry that govern the player within a homogeneous, coded site of play that communicates social ideologies embedded within the game. This disciplining of the body also bleeds into social structures within our everyday lives: how we work, manage time, stay productive, and move throughout capitalistic regimes. In other words, smooth play functions as a resistance to striation that conditions the player to operate within the confines of a rational, representational, and predominately occularcentric space of play. The game system disciplines the player to adopt certain embodied gestures to strategically advance, to continue to play, and to continue to be worked upon by power at large.

AFFECT AND GAMEPLAY

In spaces of play that resist dominant culture, an understanding of affect allows us to consider how smooth space works around striated forces through the emergence of new sensory-perceptual experiences that intervene in the normative disciplining of the body by the game system. Recent theory in game studies has taken interest in affect as a way to examine the embodied experiences of games and look at how play resists discursive formations of power that shape a player's body in both gameplay and everyday life. I use the concept of affect

as it is explained by Brian Massumi through the work of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze as an intensive force that cannot be framed through representational, linguistic, or semiotic frameworks. Instead, affect as a sensory experience is socio-culturally coded and qualified as particular emotions (e.g. fear, anger, joy, sadness) through the resonation of action-feedback circuits; an experience impacts a body and affect imprints itself upon the psyche, conditioning the body through a process of becoming.⁵ The body is in continual transformation through the way affects build up and change its capacity to act and be acted upon. Affect is an embodied, felt experience that emerges from the spaces between something acting upon the body and the mind's conscious rationalization of it.

Working within Massumi's understanding of affect, Eugénie Shinkle suggests that affect describes the "feel" of a video game and the bodily sensations that "make a game come alive" when the player experiences a blending of the haptic and visual in a synesthetic event.⁶ To Shinkle, this synesthesia withstands certain ideologies that are concealed within the Cartesian perspective of the game space, which constructs player perceptions of socio-political reality and "invites a particular spatialization of power".⁷ Just as Shinkle considers the affective *feel* of a game as a site of resistance, Aaron Trammell and Anne Gilbert also consider specific dispositions of play as resistance and power through their terms *scheme* and *slack*. The authors suggest that *scheme* relates to the technical components of the game system that engineer the player's experiences and how they perceive social structures in their day-to-day lives, while *slack* is an uninhibited mode of play "without aim or activity, and without

5. Brian Massumi. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 26-27.

6. Eugénie Shinkle. "Corporealis Ergo Sum: Affective Response in Digital Games." In *Digital Gameplay: Essays on the Nexus of Digital Game and Gamer*. Edited by Nate Garrelts. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005, pp. 22-23, 25-26.

7. Shinkle, pp. 30-31.

allegiance...which collapses and works around the ‘Powers That Be.’”⁸ In this sense, we can think of the intensities experienced within certain moments of play as operating around the schematic processes that condition player understanding of the game and real life.

Similar to Trammell and Gilbert’s disposition of *slack*, Aubrey Anable looks at the affective rhythms of casual games as a type of free play, or zaniness without productivity that works “outside of the discursive boundary lines of work, home, or our social lives—say, the moment of the commute between work and home, on public transportation, daydreaming, tapping at our mobile phone screens playing a game to pass the time.”⁹ As Anable makes clear, free play also works around temporal flows that dictate the organization of bodies within social infrastructures. Just as Anable positions play as a site of resistance to living within a capitalistic economy, Anne Allison argues that in Japan’s current “J-cool” economy, branded on immaterial labor and consumers’ affective relationships with video games and toys, youth obsession with playing Pokémon games collapses the social logic of familial and corporate institutions inherent to post-war Japan. As Allison suggests, play within this post-industrial economy functions as both a palliative cure for stress, job insecurity, and social withdrawal experienced by youth in this new economy, yet simultaneously reinforces these social structures through negative affects.¹⁰ Where Trammell, Gilbert, and Anable see uninhibited play, slack, or zaniness as a countermeasure to the opposing forces of society, Allison conversely indicates that these affects can be channeled and actualized with negative repercussions that prompt activist responses in return. Following the work carved

8. Aaron Trammell and Anne Gilbert. “Extending Play to Critical Media Studies.” *Games and Culture* 9.6 (2014), pp. 397, 400.

9. Aubrey Anable. “Casual Games, Time Management, and the Work of Affect.” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 2 (2013). <http://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-anable/>.

10. Anne Allison. “The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26.2-3 (2009), pp. 100.

out by these theorists on affective modes of play as forms of resistance, I use *SmoothSketch* as a case study to explore affective processes of play as they unfold in an intervention that works outside of normative gaming practices which schematically arrange player experience through novel sensory experiences that emerge from a non-conventional drawing controller.

SMOOTH-STRIATED PLAY: THE SYNESTHETIC ENCOUNTER

As I have mentioned, smooth space emerges within the installation through a visual-haptic sensory encounter that works to reorder the player's body and resist forces of striation as impositions of power that condition a player toward rational, strategic, and productive modes of play. To return to Deleuze and Guattari's explanation of the smooth and striated, both spaces are always in coalescence with each other. Smooth space is transposed and converted into the striated, while striated space is overtaken and transformed back into smooth. Deleuze and Guattari mention types of smooth spaces—the ocean, the desert, the icy tundra—filled with affective potential that circulates freely. However, these spaces are also continually territorialized by striation—trade and navigation routes, metropolises, exchanges of capital—that organize and limit affective potential into an enclosed grid.¹¹ As an example, they discuss the city whose traffic grid, architecture, planning, and commerce resemble striation, or ordered social structures. Yet, smooth space still flows throughout the organization of the city as affective possibilities generated from the nomadic movement of bohemians, artists, criminals, and pockets of the homeless that work around these power structures.¹² Or, take for instance a simple game of hide and seek where the ordered rules of

11. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 480.

12. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 500.

play—the seeker counting to ten, their ability to tag someone out, or the spatial boundaries and time limits for where and for how long one can hide—function as forces of striation. Conversely, the possibilities for where and how players can hide within an environment and their free, unconstrained movement within the rules of play become a smooth space.

Relational bodies at work during gameplay also exhibit this imbrication of smooth and striated space. In his work on the mechanics and rules of play, Miguel Sicart describes a mechanic as a particular action carried out by a player, while rules describe technical attributes of the system itself. A game mechanic is constrained by the system rules that govern the properties of the game, yet mechanics employed during gameplay also dictate possibilities of interaction within the gameworld.¹³ The possible range of intensities that a player experiences through the mechanics of play suggests a smooth space, while the limitations imposed by the game rules describe striation. In *Super Mario World 2*, smooth spaces are the sensations experienced when a player calls upon Yoshi and Mario to flutter, fly, jump, swim, stomp, and launch eggs at enemies. Striation is composed of the technical boundaries of the gameworld programmed by Shigeru Miyamoto in which these mechanics can be performed. These are the places Yoshi-Mario cannot navigate within or the actions they cannot perform within a certain part of game. Yoshi-Mario can only transform into a mole tank and dig through specific sections of dirt when the player has interacted with a morph bubble. Striation also takes the form of time limits or player health. When Yoshi takes a hit, baby Mario floats away in his bubble and he must be collected within ten seconds or he is kidnapped by toadies and the player's life ends.

13. Miguel Sicart. "Defining Game Mechanics." *Game Studies* 8.2 (2008). <http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>.

These striated forces are the flows of power that attune the player to a prescribed way of playing established by the developer and industry.

When a player uses graphite in *SmoothSketch* to draw onto the peripheral and control Yoshi-Mario, they enter into an affective topology through which smooth space is emitted in a blending of the visual and haptic that resists and works around the striation of the system. The drawings of creatures and rhizomes on the controller's surface provide anything but an intuitive interface. The placement of drawings in graphite and conductive paint, through which the player interacts, comes as an initial sensory-perceptual shock as they scramble to assess where they must draw to make Yoshi-Mario jump across a crevasse or launch eggs at enemies. The player moves through what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *haptic space* that forgoes the use of rational, Cartesian perspective to assess Yoshi-Mario's movement in the game space and suggests that the eyes may work through a "nonoptical function"¹⁴ This haptic space works beyond the striation of the game system when synesthetic intensities present during play are transferred to the controller surface as abstract line. The eyes and the gestures of the drawing hands work in a sensory crosswiring; the eye becomes the expression of the fingers, hands, and line onto the paper as the player navigates the smooth space of the game.

14. Sicart.



The emergence of the synesthetic encounter in SmoothSketch. Photo by Eddie Lohmeyer and used with permission of the author.

In his work on the painter Francis Bacon, Deleuze discusses haptic space felt through the sensation of viewing a painting “by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed.”¹⁵ To Deleuze, the spectator experiences Bacon’s paintings in varying domains of affects that exist within the same “pathic” instance of sensation and communicate among the sense organs.¹⁶ This unity of the senses is relayed through a sensory domain experienced by way of a vital *rhythm* that undulates

15. Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. London: Continuum, 2003, pp. 35.

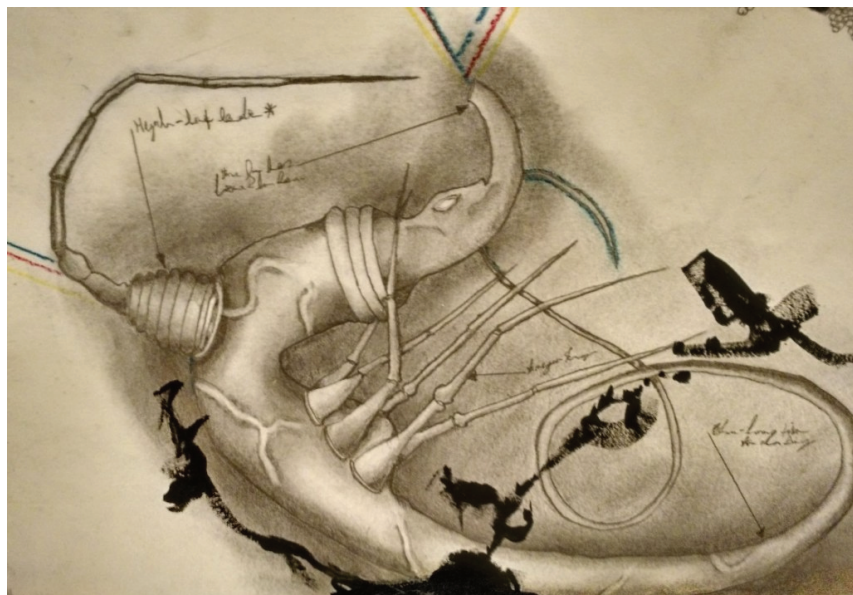
16. Deleuze, pp. 41–42.

freely throughout each sense.¹⁷ To the viewer, Bacon's paintings express the *visual* domain of sensation felt through a rhythmic unity in which the senses harmoniously partake in the qualities of each other. In this way, Bacon's paintings are experienced through a *seeing-feeling* in which colors, line, and shape become tangible, exuding sensations of volume and density explored through a synthesis of eye and hand. Instead of disciplining the player to identify and measure an avatar's movement through Cartesian space, *SmoothSketch* considers how this optical perception is disrupted through a rhythmic unity of the senses. Similar to Bacon's paintings, the spatial assemblage of player, Mario-Yoshi, graphite sticks, copper ground, and conductive paper surface work through a vital rhythm that emerges between bodies and through multisensory involvement. When the player frantically launches eggs at a boss or glides around with a cape as Superstar Mario, the intensities experienced through the interaction with game mechanics transpose themselves onto the controller surface as an affective residue of marks and lines, an expression of a haptic, "nonoptical" perception of the eye-hand working in unity. In their discussion of smooth and striated spaces as an aesthetic model, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that abstraction "is what draws smooth space. The abstract line is the affect of smooth space, just as organic representation was the feeling presiding over striated space."¹⁸ In *SmoothSketch*, the abstract line presents itself as the rhythmic unity of the senses generated from drawing onto the controller. Each mark becomes an intensive tracing of gameplay as affects are produced from the cooperation of the eye and hand through seeing-touching from which smooth space emerges. This synesthetic experience allows the player to "go smooth" within the gamespace, simultaneously collapsing striated forces that work to

17. Deleuze, p. 42.

18. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 499.

discipline a player toward a coded space of play. Yet it is also how smooth space evolves and moves freely within spatial configurations of play that push back on striated operations.



A drawing on the surface of the controller. Photo by Eddie Lohmeyer and used with permission of the author.

A CONTINUUM OF SMOOTH SPACE: THE SPATIAL ASSEMBLAGE OF PLAY

In *SmoothSketch*, smooth space works around the striation through a synesthetic encounter in which intensities flow freely throughout an affective topology of bodies at work on each other. When a player is taken up in an assemblage of gaming bodies—Yoshi-Mario, graphite, interface, Boo Guy, power-up—smooth space is produced within a field of affective possibilities that emerge from the gestures of play that resist an understanding of three-dimensional, Cartesian space and the scalar and perspectival relationships between objects

in the physical world. Felicity Colman has referred to this intensive formation of space as the *play-place*: an area composed from the spatial modalities of play, woven together by the continuous unfolding of affects. In the *play-place* the player is always in becoming through sensory possibilities, dissolving the concept of the player-subject as possessing a well-constituted cogito.¹⁹ In *SmoothSketch*, the spatial formation of the *play-place* results from the generation of abstract lines onto controller surface by the becoming player. The lines that grow through squiggles, marks, and dots from the player reflect an unraveling of intensities that continually alter the haptic dimensions of play. Each new mark is a continuation of a circuit through the conduction of new graphite that is drawn onto the surface. This is apparent when the player draws new circuits for each control, adding to the composition and expanding the possibilities of play. As Colman notes, the affective dimensions of the *play-place* are also transformed through physical gestures imprinted upon the body from previous gaming experiences that the player brings to the act of play.²⁰ In *SmoothSketch*, these previously learned gestures are seen in the way new circuits are drawn closer to each other so as to minimize the distance a player has to reach across areas of the drawing surface to operate the controls. The player expects the installation to work based on their coded experiences of play with a Super Nintendo console, or other Mario games that operate by tapping buttons mapped closely together on a small controller. Yet when *Smoothsketch* initially shocks the player through a novel sensory-perceptual experience, they are prompted to re-coordinate the eye and hand, resisting these coded gestures of play. As the player continues to play

19. Felicity J. Colman. "Affective Game Topologies: Any-Space-Whatever." *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, 13 (2008). <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2008/05/21/affective-game-topologies-any-space-whatevers-felicity-j-colman/>.

20. Colman.

and their coded gestures are taken up in the *play-place* as they draw new circuitry, we can consider these striated forces that have shaped their previous experience of play *as transforming into the smooth space of the game by opening up new possibilities by continually altering the affective dimensions of the installation*. Thus striation is resisted through its very transference into the smooth space of play.

Of importance to *SmoothSketch* and the circulation of smooth space is Colman's use of Deleuze's term *any-space-whatever* drawn from his philosophy of cinema, or what Deleuze refers to as an affective site for possibilities to emerge, a "virtual conjunction" that in gameplay describes a player's navigation of smooth space through the free play of a game.²¹ Colman proposes several operations of play as *any-space-whatevers* that point to the possibilities present within the uninhibited free movement of play that I apply to playing *SmoothSketch: Surfaces, Thresholds, and Passageways*. *Surfaces* form the interface of *Super Mario World 2* and the surface of the paper that acts as a continuum between player interactions and their transitions into abstract line. *Thresholds* in *SmoothSketch* refer to the sensations produced from the hand and graphite that make contact with the conductive points on the controller and relay affects between surfaces. *Passageways* take shape through the possibilities of directions lines can take as new circuits are drawn and the act of play is continually changed. These *any-space-whatevers* assembled from the possibilities of play, allow us to think about the experience of playing *SmoothSketch* as working around and traversing the striation of the system through an unconventional arrangement of gaming bodies from which smooth space emerges.

21. Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 105. See also "The construction of any-space-whatevers," pp. 111-122.



The emerging play-place through thresholds and surfaces. Photo by Nick Taylor and used with permission of the author.

CONCLUSION

As I have discussed in this essay theorizing *SmoothSketch*, resistance operates within the installation's space of play through the generation of smooth space via a sensory-perceptual shock that prompts the player to interact with a game in novel ways using a drawing peripheral. It is this synesthetic encounter that unfolds through the affective possibilities within the space of play that collapses a striated disciplining of the body by reordering the player's visual and haptic involvement with the system toward a type of sensual, carefree, fanciful play void of strategic aim or mastery.

As a final consideration of smooth space as a resistance to the dynamics of striation that discipline a player's body, I would like to reinforce that these forces are not a binary construction. As Deleuze

and Guattari tell us, they are always asymmetrically expanding and contracting, blending, and giving rise to each other. Even *SmoothSketch* as a gaming intervention produces striated forces through the procedural nature of play. Game rules in *Super Mario World 2* still pre-determine when a certain mechanic can be employed. After the initial sensory shock of interacting with *SmoothSketch*, striation does impose itself on the player's body as they attempt to proceed through the game space more efficiently and are territorialized into a productive gaming subject that plays with the purpose of mastering the game. Yet, the significance of *SmoothSketch* as an intervention is the way in which operations of play, as both resistance and power, act upon a player's body within a spatial assemblage. As Deleuze and Guattari note, the importance of examining the relationships between smooth/striated spaces is in the transitions, continuations, and combinations between the two.²² In game studies, it is this focus on the imbrication between smooth and striated space that allows us to think about not what a player is, but *the possibilities for what a player can do* when navigating the haptic space of a video game.

22. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 500.

Interview

“A Lonely Place”

An Interview with Julia Bond Ellingboe

KATHERINE CASTIELLO JONES

Steal Away Jordan is a game that asks players to take on the role of an African-American slave. When it was first released, it generated strong reactions, both positive and negative.¹ Because it deals so explicitly with slavery in America, one reviewer wrote that *Steal Away Jordan* “received some attention for tackling a serious subject in a medium usually used for lighter entertainment.”² While some praised it for tackling this issue, or for putting slaves (rather than white abolitionists) at the center of the narrative,³ the game also received critiques that it wasn’t a game at all.⁴ Even those who had not played the game expressed their opinions that a game about slavery could not be “fun.”⁵ Because not all games receive this caliber

1. Negative reviews of the game on RPGnet claimed that *Steal Away Jordan* was more of an educational exercise than a game. One reviewer, Christopher Richeson argued that “I also feel like the subject matter is highly depressing and just isn’t the sort of fun I look for in the games I play.” Christopher W. Richeson. “Review of *Steal Away Jordan*.” RPGnet. September 14, 2007. <http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/13/13270.phtml>. Other, more positive reviews on RPGnet, like Matthijs Holter’s, took issue with the graphic design and dice mechanics, but praised the game for exploring slavery in a fun and interesting way. Matthijs Holter. “Review of *Steal Away Jordan*.” RPGnet. September 14, 2007. <http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/13/13279.phtml>.

2. Holter.

3. See Sarah Darkmagic’s essay “Exporation Through Games: *Steal Away Jordan*.” Sarah Darkmagic. July 25, 2013. <http://www.sarahdarkmagic.com/content/exporation-through-games-steal-away-jordan>. Also see Clyde L. Rhoer’s post “[Gen Con][*Steal Away Jordan*]Clyde, Racism, and the threat of sex. (adult)” *The Forge*. August 21, 2007. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=24603.0>

4. Richeson

5. Chauncey DeVega. “Of Follow the North Star and *Steal Away Jordan*: Would You Play a Roleplaying Game Set

of critical attention, I interviewed its designer, Julia Bond Ellingboe, to see how she wrestled with America's fraught relationship with racial politics as a designer.

For those readers who have not yet played the game, *Steal Away Jordan: Stories from America's Peculiar Institution* is a tabletop role-playing game in which players tell the collective stories of enslaved people. Written in the spirit of neo-slave narratives like Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the game is set during the United States' antebellum period. Each session focuses on the struggles of a group of slaves to achieve their secret goals. These range from large goals like killing the overseer, to smaller goals, such as keeping a family member from being sold away, learning to read in secret, or getting a pair of shoes. Players have to work together to achieve their goals, but the game also forces characters to make hard decisions about when to prioritize their own goals over the needs of other characters. Does one make a break for it during a moment of conflict or stand up for another slave as they are interrogated about missing goods?

As a frequent collaborator with Ellingboe in game design, I have always been curious about her reaction to *Steal Away Jordan's* reception. In this interview she shares with me how her experience differs from that of other white, male game designers. She incisively relativizes debates about whether *Steal Away Jordan* is a game or an educational tool. This discussion helps to reveal several important boundaries in the RPG community including who can be a game designer, what kinds of role-playing games are acceptable, and what counts as a "fun" experience. This type of borderwork⁶ allows for

During Slavery in the Antebellum South?" Indomitable: The Online Home of Essayist and Cultural Critic Chauncey DeVega. September 7, 2010. <http://www.chaunceydevega.com/2010/09/of-follow-north-star-and-steal-away.html>

6. Borderwork is a term coined by Barrie Thorne in 1993 to examine cross-gender interactions, is a form of interaction that affirms group boundaries. Barrie Thorne. *Gender Play*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

policing without overt expressions of racism or sexism. It lets designers from marginalized groups know that they are only allowed into the community if they follow certain rules. As has become clear from discussions around diversifying games, there is a worry by the dominant majority (often white males) that new, diverse players, designers, or critics will “ruin” games. By policing the boundaries of “fun,” role-playing games, and game designers, the majority group also attempts to protect their hobby from the intrusion of new folks who want to open these boundaries.

As Julia’s first game, *Steal Away Jordan* shaped her future as a game designer in fundamental ways. At the same time, however, her experience serves to illuminate some important points about tokenism, marginalization, and intersectionality in the gaming community.

Katherine Castiello Jones: So tell us a little bit about your game *Steal Away Jordan*.

Julia Bond Ellingboe: Well, it was the first game I ever wrote. When I wrote it I hadn’t been role-playing for very long. Looking back on it now, I would say it is a very naive game.

When I was writing it, I was asking myself: “Who are the heroes?” As a new role-player, the fantasy stuff wasn’t that interesting for me. I wanted to try my hand at something different. And so it is a game about that. Discussions of slave life were very common in my family because my mother is a history professor and used to teach high-school history. My parents were also around during the Civil Rights era and so they cultivated an awareness of our roots. The game is a celebration of what kind of people are important enough to have games written about them.

KCJ: Can you give some more details about the game for people who may not have played it?

JBE: So one thing about how the game is played: you roll a lot of dice. If you stripped away the antebellum setting and the theme, the mechanics would be easy to use for some other thing. One thing I want to emphasize is that it's a game. When *Steal Away Jordan* first came out, many people wanted to define it as a historical exercise. But it's a game. It is a role-playing game. It is designed to be fun. It is full of epic, embellished stories. A lot of fantasy stories have these same elements. One thing I wanted to show in this game is that slaves had a lot more agency than is commonly recognized. In this sense, it is really a game about the triumph of the human spirit. The characters in it are working to achieve something against all odds, much like in other role-playing games.

You're there to tell your story. It's not meant to make people feel bad. So when people told me

they would feel guilty if they played the game I have to say: maybe that's what you're bringing to the game, because that's not what the game brings.

It is really interesting how the game works out statistically. The more dice you roll, the better the chance that you will fail. There are times in the game when you're facing someone with many more dice than you, but there is still a potential to succeed. The Master can still fail.

KCJ: So when the game first came out how do you react to some of the initial responses?

JBE: It was my first game. So the positive responses made me really happy. I never expected the game to be perfect. I was honestly just glad people tried it.

As for the negative responses, at the time I was very defensive and hurt by them. The negative responses seemed to fall into two camps. First, there was a lot of critique of its production values.

And yes, the production values of the game weren't very good. It was basically an Ashcan. I did all of the design and layout work myself. I wasn't familiar with the design software either, so I was learning as I did it. That being said, many other games with similarly bad production values are published without aesthetic critique. In hindsight, critiquing the production quality of games seems like a way to criticize the game without being a jerk.

The second camp of critiques were about how *Steal Away Jordan* wasn't a game. People would say things like, “It's more of an educational exercise.” And then they would say, “It's just not my thing.” There was a really defensive quality to it. Like, the game is not your thing, that's fine. But it was almost like they were saying: “Why couldn't you make it my thing?”

Some people even said, “I'm afraid to play this game.” Those were the ones that really bothered me, because there are other games with difficult content that weren't treated in the same way. Like, why are you trying to be so nice? Why do you have to prove it's not your thing? Jason Morningstar's game about child resistance fighters, *Grey Ranks*, came out around the same time. People said the same kinds of things, but not with the same tone of apology.

Some people said to me: “I'm afraid of getting it wrong.” There are a lot of assumptions that go into that statement. First, it assumes people are going to play a stereotype. It assumes that black people are so vastly different that you can't understand their experience—these are the same people who can play an elf for days. I personally don't know any slaves. I also don't know any elves. But I can pretend. You're always bringing yourself into the game, into your character. If you've ever wanted to accomplish something and the odds were against you, you can understand the experience of these characters. You may not know what it's like to be whipped, but we play people

inflicting violence on each other all the time in fantasy games. I've never heard someone say, "Well I can't play this paladin, because I don't really have an experience as a paladin, and I'm afraid of getting it wrong." But there are actual black people out there, so it raises the question what do you think black people are? Aren't they human beings?

KCJ: Can you talk a little bit about how your identity as an African American woman game designer influenced the response to *Steal Away Jordan*?

JBE: Well, at the time there were certainly other women and other African-American game designers. But there were a lot less of them in the "indie" scene. I think people responded to who I was when making the critiques. They would say things in their reviews like "but she's a really nice person," which you wouldn't say about a male game designer. I started to prefer people that just canned the game, because that felt a lot more honest.

There's this idea that in places like the South if you're confronted with racism or sexism you know what it sounds like, but at other times and places racism and sexism are much more subtle. It is disguised with politeness.

At times I felt like this weird unicorn. Some people defended me by saying, she's qualified to write this game because she's African American. But, can women and African Americans only write their own experiences? I find that this same standard isn't applied to white men.

KCJ: Where do you think some of the critiques that *Steal Away Jordan* is "not a game" came from? Why this boundary policing?

JBE: I think a lot of it comes from the subject matter. There is often an idea among gamers that a game has to be "fun." The definition of "fun" is something that gets policed. There is an idea

that games have to be fantastical. That a game shouldn't make you think beyond what pleases your character.

People talk about pushing boundaries and going outside their comfort zones, but it is clear there are some boundaries people are not prepared to push. Some of these boundaries are good, like when someone doesn't want to play a game that deals with rape. Unfortunately, some people claimed that *Steal Away Jordan* had a subject matter that could only appeal to certain people. I think that attitude has changed a lot in the last five years. You have a lot more games that address social themes finding a solid audience.

KCJ: How did has your experience with the response to *Steal Away Jordan* shaped your current and future game design?

JBE: When it comes to the games I'm designing now I'm much more interested in games that play with gender. I don't really feel like talking about race any more. The reception of both me and the game was so racialized, I don't want to go back to it.

I recently heard a piece on NPR about the first African-American woman in the National Wildlife Service.⁷ She said that people consider her a pioneer. Although I'm not a pioneer, I was one of the first and only in my circle of game designers. She said: “Being a pioneer is a really lonely place.”

Now that people of color and women game designers are better appreciated, but at the time I was in too much of a lonely place. . I still want to push buttons and push boundaries, but I want to do it in different ways. I want to write about things that are less visible when you meet me.

I write games that come from my heart and my psyche. And I would like to continue to do that, but for things that are not necessarily obvious. Like sexuality and gender.

7. Michel Martin. “From Fishing With Mom To Becoming A Top Fisheries Official” NPR.com. July 14, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/07/14/421141198/from-fishing-with-mom-to-becoming-a-top-fisheries-official>

When talking about womanhood one of the questions I ask is who do you include and who do you exclude? The idea of “ladyhood” wasn’t really available, and in many ways still isn’t available to African American women. Just look at the way that people talk about Serena Williams, in terms of her appearance and playing style. She is constantly being compared to a man, or described as masculine, both in positive and negative ways. As a tall African-American woman with a deep voice, that says something to me about how black women are perceived. There is still a different way people have of speaking to my womanness. And this is something I have also found with friends and family who are trans*, this denial of womanness.

KCJ: So why have you moved away from games that deal with race, but still feel comfortable writing games that explore themes of sexuality and gender?

JBE: Although I can find other women game designers in the scene, I see a scant few black designers. It’s hard to be the unicorn. In my day-to-day life I’m one of the only African Americans in my workplace. I unpack that in different ways, I don’t want to unpack that in my game design.

Right now, I am the only African American woman executive that my company has ever had. I deal with “only-ness” every single day. I don’t want to play it!

I also think there are other people who are more interested in pushing for racial inclusiveness in games. More power to them. I don’t want to be typecast. There’s more to me than my race. I don’t only want to write games about black people. I also like bicycles. I knit. I love Irish and English folk music and I’m really interested in writing games that incorporate these folk ballads.

Book Review

Book Review

The Role-Playing Society

STEVEN DASHIELL

Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco, eds. *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016. 320 pp. Softcover/eBook. \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-7864-9883-3

The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs (McFarland, 2016) represents a crux point in the relationship between academia and role-playing games. Rather than attempting to take a more urbane view of role-playing through various disciplines, the editors set the ambitious goal of measuring the influence of role-playing on culture, a “variety of essays that illustrate RPG’s [role-playing games]’ broad appeal and impact.”¹ What was once a random, odd game of pen and paper is today one of the most influential games in the contemporary world. The impact of role-playing games on the social world is staggering in scope and while the book valiantly attempts to explore this thesis, it manages just to scratch the surface

1. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco. *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016.

through a somewhat uneven set of essays revolving mostly around topics of history, education, and pedagogy.²

The Role-playing Society is a collection seeking an audience. While some essays suggest an audience of readers who aren't a part of the role-playing world, others assume readers have a experience with role-playing games. Some of the works are cloistered within the language of their discipline with references to theory and concepts that are specific to their particular fields. Other essays are engaging and easy to read: a perfect introduction for individuals new to role-playing studies, yet comprehensive enough to interest those already in the field. The historical accounts, specifically in the first section, are reminiscent of Michael Witwer's *Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons*,³ immersing readers in the culture of a gaming world. A few of the more scientific essays present themselves as research and analysis but do not provide sufficient data to support their claims—leaving me with questions about their data sources and methodology. Still other essays deal with the field of education. The second section includes tips on many “best practices” in education and role-playing, much like the book *Simulations and Role Play in University Education*.⁴ Despite the book's heavy engagement with education, the collection is heavily humanistic. I would have been interested in reading more essays from other sectors of the social sciences like sociology, or political science. There is a sense that the book is trying to be the spiritual successor to Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role Play as Social Worlds*.⁵ Unfortunately, *The*

2. While the book's essays come from a variety of fields, a good number of the works are framed in the education discipline. This is important to note, because while it does give credence to the sense that education is a critical agent of socialization in which role-playing can play a vital role, it also reflects some of the epistemological blinders of the work, as the essays only scratch the surface of what power role-playing games have demonstrated in the last forty years.

3. Michael Witwer. *Empire of Imagination: Gary Gygax and the Birth of Dungeons & Dragons*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

4. Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney, and Elyssabeth Leigh, eds. *Simulation, Games, and Role Play in University Education*. Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2013.

5. Gary Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Role Playing Society's interdisciplinarity leads to a somewhat disjointed analytical terrain, where Fine's sociological background helped to ground his book within a coherent analytic scheme.

Unlike Sarah Lynne Bowman's book, *The Functions of Role-playing: How Participants Create Communities, Solve Problems and Create Identity*, *The Role-playing Society*⁶ centers itself on the larger implications of role-playing games rather than their effect on the individual. In short, it tells the story of how role-playing games are culture, rather than how they create culture.

The Role-Playing Society focuses on *Dungeons & Dragons* and is broken down into three sections. The first section, "The Players Guide" provides a basic understanding of the cultural context that early role-playing emerged from. The current construction of role-playing games, and *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular, is very much a result of a social fear faced in the early years of its development—this fear is referred to here as a "moral war" and is very much visible in all of the essays. The first section places the reader in the center of this social maelstrom, evoking nostalgia for those of us who lived through it, and a history lesson for those who did not. The second section, "The Tome of Knowledge", contains essays about use of role-playing games in educational settings. The essays are informative for those who use role-playing games in the classroom. The third section, "The Book of Change", looks at social change and how role-playing games have played a part in this. We get to see how much role-playing games are a part of our social reality, and how they can be much more. Finally, part four, "The Manual of Play: Seeding New Avenues of Gaming," offers insight as to the different sorts of games which developed from *Dungeons & Dragons*.

6. Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-playing: How Participants Create Communities, Solve Problems and Create Identity*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010.

The first section, “The Players Guide: The Psychological and Cultural Impact of a Game Genre”, starts with Andrew Byers “The Satanic Panic and *Dungeons & Dragons*: A Twenty-five year Retrospective.” Byers provides a clear picture of the circumstances involving the moral indignation surrounding the game, wisely framing it in the reality of the 1980’s. He frames role-playing games within the context of technological development and population expansion, finding connections to widespread social concerns about the safety of children. One limitation of Byer’s history is the intimation that *Dungeons & Dragons* persists due to its resiliency. While it is true that *Dungeons & Dragons* did persist and grow, outliving the “panic,” it is worth noting the capitulation the game made in order to quell fears of mysticism and devil worship. For example, when TSR released *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* second edition, the company completely sanitized the game of devils and demons and changed the name of the *Deities and Demigods* supplement to *Legends and Lore*.

The second essay in the “The Player’s Guide,” “Psychological Effects of Fantasy Games on Their Players” by Andreas Lieberoth and Jonas Tier-Knudsen considers the psychological benefits of role-playing. The authors conclude that while there do appear to be some benefits of role-playing, significant evidence backing this claim up is simply not plentiful. Much of the research done on role-playing games and their players is performed by individuals with a vested interest. Role-playing game researchers are likely to be current or former gamers, and therefore might be overzealous in attempting to explain how the potential benefits of role-playing might outweigh the negative aspects drummed up in the afore mentioned moral panic.

Tim Bryant’s contribution, “Building the Culture of Contingency:

Adaptive Choice in Ludic Literature from Role-playing Games to Choose Your Own Adventure Books,” shows how role-playing games were impacted by the culture of the 1980s. He argues that the nuclear age instilled a “this or that” choice for most, reinforcing a clear right and wrong answer. Bryant surmises that this behavior plays itself out in many games of that time: role-playing games, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, and computer games all partially reflecting this logic.

Part two of the book, “The Tome of Knowledge: Playing to Learn in and across the Disciplines”, is intended for educators inclined to introduce students to the world of role-playing. The essayists assert that role play can be a functional tool that can help in the process of knowledge acquisition. Jonathan Bradley’s piece, “Do you want to be Dr. Frankenstein or Edna Pontellier?: How Getting into Character Enhances Literary Studies” discusses the potential of turning works of literature into role-playing modules—linking them with tools that allow students to become the characters they read about. By designing literature characters as player characters, students have the ability to “get into the head” of those they read about, thus gaining a deeper understanding of motivation. The essay “Playing Between the Lines: Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies with Virtual Worlds” considers how educators could bring lessons and texts out of the book by incorporating them into pre-existing systems such as *Second Life* and *RPG Maker*. While these essays both show how these methods can work in the classroom, I wonder if the organizational work that is necessary to operationalize these projects in the classroom has been downplayed in the pieces. Fortunately, Bradley provides an appendix that helps readers see the end results of his work. It goes a long way in showing results that can aid readers in turning the theory of the essay into practice.

Part three, “The Book of Change: Enacting Social Transformations”, discusses how role-playing games can be a tool of social change in contemporary culture. Antero Garcia’s essay “Teacher as Dungeon Master: Connected Learning, Democratic Classrooms, and Rolling for Initiative” re-imagines the structure of the modern classroom, moving from a dictatorial and authoritative model to something more democratic. In re-imagining the teacher as “Dungeon Master,” Garcia creates a social world where the teacher serves more as a storyteller rather than a draconic authority figure. The essay shows how role-playing games can present reality in a manner that encourages input and collaboration. Joseph Meyer’s essay “Leveling Influence: *Klout* and the Introduction of Social Leveling” considers *Klout*, an online system that measures one’s social “level” or position in contrast with the importance of levels in various games. The author looks deeply at the leveling process in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and compares it to the system operationalized in *Klout*.

Part four, “The Manual of Play: Seeding New Avenues of Gaming” looks at the different forms of gaming that have evolved out of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Kai-Uwe Werbeck’s “Shapers, Portals and Exotic Matter: Living Fiction and Augmented Reality in Google’s *Ingress*” takes a stark look at how the smartphone game *Ingress* has been heavily impacted by role-playing game culture. For Werbeck, the quest is a key similarity between *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Ingress*. Cathlena Martin and Benton Tyler discuss the other post-RPG gaming explosion, card and board gaming, in their essaying “Descent to Munchkin: From Pen and Paper to Board and Card.” The authors show how these games borrow just enough from role-playing games to instantiate their own genre without becoming a role-playing game with a board. Finally, Francesco Crocco considers the effects of gamification on curriculum design. The author notes certain aspects

of gamification that are already occurring (such as levels and badges in *Blackboard*) argues that because participatory learning means greater gains, gamification should be a major goal of education the future.

The book does not end with an effort to bring all the disparate ideas together, a weakness given how well the introduction served to frame the history of role-playing games and their positioning in popular culture. Further, more than a third of the essays in the book discuss education. In this sense, the collection's ambition to consider the "cultural influence of RPGs" seems out of place. The book relates more to the educational impact of role-playing games than the other cultural components affected by the phenomena.

In summary, for those interested in a wide-ranging and education-focused discussion of role-playing and its cultural influence, this book could be useful. Those new to development of the cultural timeline of *Dungeons & Dragons* will find much to enjoy in this book—virtually all the essays touch on the history and tumult surrounding role-playing games. The works are expansive enough to clearly explain their theses, but clear enough to not overwhelm the reader. Overall, this is a book for educators who wish to expand their knowledge of role-playing games and enthusiasts who desire better to round out their knowledge base.

About the Authors

Eliane “Lilith” Bettocchi is a professor at the Arts and Design Institute of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF) in Brazil. Between 1991 and 2010, she was an illustrator, game designer and art director for Brazilian publishers. She also had illustrations published by US gaming companies such as Green Ronin, GenCon and Hidden City.

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Steven Conway, PhD is a Senior Lecturer and Research Director for Games & Interactivity at Swinburne. Conway has presented on many aspects of digital game philosophy, aesthetics and culture, and has had a variety of articles published on these subjects in journals such as *Eludamos*, *Game Studies*, the *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *Westminster Papers in Communication & Culture*, *Sport, Ethics & Philosophy*, *Analog Game Studies*, and *ToDiGRA: Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*. He is the co-editor of the first book on the relationship between video games and policy, *Video Games Policy: Production, Distribution and Consumption*. Conway was awarded a PhD from the University of Bedfordshire, funded by a national AHRC scholarship. His doctorate focused upon the relationship between digital games and the sports-media complex.

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Antonnet Johnson, PhD (Participation Design Strategist) researches, develops, and tests design solutions for improving participatory budgeting processes and tools. Prior to receiving the ACLS/Mellon Public Fellowship (2018), she taught professional writing and game and user experience courses at Purdue University. She earned her PhD in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English at the University of Arizona, where she developed a research agenda focused on the interplay of subjectivity, ideology, and cultural engagement. To consider the productive possibilities afforded by conflict, contradiction, and tension, she focuses on how engagement with cultural artifacts and activities is impacted by one’s values and experiences as well as dominant narratives circulating about those artifacts and activities. Currently, her work facilitates the growth of

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Martin Nielsen, PhD is a larp designer and event organizer from Oslo Norway. He has been a key contributor to Fantasiforbundet's projects in Lebanon, Belarus, and Palestine as well as meeting places such as Grenselandet and Knutepunkt in addition to The Larpwriter Summer School. As his dayjob, he is the manager of Alibier AS, a company making educational larps.

David Phelps is currently pursuing his PhD in the Learning Sciences at the University of Washington. As an educational researcher he studies how young students take up and develop a wide range of inquiry practices as they collaboratively puzzle through simple yet deep board games. As a game designer he creates original games that students of all ages find easy to learn, quick to play, yet challenging to master. Taken together, he designs game-based learning environments that invite young students to have fun while developing their capabilities and competencies as sophisticated inquirers.

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Cole Wehrle is a PhD candidate at the University of Texas at Austin where he has taught courses on subjects as varied as video games, film, and romantic poetry. Most of his research focuses on the relationship between the British Empire and the Victorian novel and how narratives were able to make the world seem like a smaller and more knowable place. He served as a design specialist for the Digital Writing and Research Lab at UT and is the co-editor of *Culture Bytes Back*, a website that features articles and podcasts on game criticism. He is also a published board game designer. His first design, *Pax Pamir*, has been translated into five languages and was nominated for the 2015 Golden Geek Award, which is not bad for a game about 1820s Afghanistan. He is also the designer of *Root*.

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