

# ANALOG GAME STUDIES

VOLUME 1

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# ANALOG GAME STUDIES

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## FOREWORD

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There's an old cliché in role-playing games where a rag-tag set of adventurers each walk into a bar alone and then leave together as a party ready to embark on an epic quest. For *Analog Game Studies*, it was the hotel bar at the Wardman Park Marriot in Washington, DC on March 29th, 2013 during the 43rd annual Popular Culture Association conference. At this bar, our heroes shared stories about how the analog had been exiled from the Kingdom of Games by the currently reigning digital aristocracy. There was hope, however, as our heroes also brought with them tales of how grassroots communities throughout the land practiced the lost and forbidden arts of the analog in secret. Determined to restore balance to the kingdom, our heroes purchased a web domain, installed WordPress, and started publishing...

Anachronism aside, the above is a succinct telling of how *Analog Game Studies* came to be. It was over a series of conversations at the 43rd Popular Culture Association conference between Christopher Amherst, Emily Care Boss, Sarah Lynne Bowman, Nick Mizer, Evan Torner, Aaron Trammell, William J. White, Matthew Wysocki, and Ibrahim Yucel we decided there needed to be an immediate forum to host all of the great work that had been, until this point, mostly considered ephemeral by the greater game studies community (Greg Costikyan & Drew Davidson's *Tabletop: Analog Game Design* had only been released two years prior). There were of course, other conversations

happening in separate spaces and spheres as well. For example, Trammell, Waldron and Lizzie Stark were running Nordic larp in New Jersey under the moniker of “The Highland Park Players.” Meanwhile, Torner had been involved in the active indie tabletop RPG and larp design scene in western Massachusetts since 2006, including notable figures such as Boss, Vincent and Meguey Baker, Julia Ellingboe, and Epidiah Ravachol, among many others. It from this amazing sense of community, support, and interest that the journal was developed. We haven’t looked back since.

Volume I of *Analog Game Studies* reflects the energy and enthusiasm around analog games that had, until 2014, been corked in various academic and industry subcultures across the world. Stylistically, the journal is at it’s most intimate, vulnerable, and raw—still organized by what seemed (at the time) to be important distinctions between communities “analysis,” (for the academics) “documentation,” (for the players) and “experimentation and design” (for designers). Although in hindsight these divisions were largely arbitrary, they help to frame the growing pains the journal weathered as we endeavored to bring disparate communities of practice into conversation with one another around analog games. The discourse that resulted from this initial energy is heartfelt, radical, and lively. We are proud to claim that it accurately represents one beginning of what is now the burgeoning sub-field of analog game studies.

This collection includes a special essay by Lizzie Stark entitled “The Curse of Autobiographical Game Design,” a meditation on designing a game about her mastectomy and experience with the BRCA1 gene. We’ve included it here as a special bonus for those who have purchased this volume in print, to reflect our belief that some of the most interesting writing exists only in analog spaces.

— The Editors

# REINVENTING ANALOG GAME STUDIES: INTRODUCTORY MANIFESTO

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BY EVAN TORNER, AARON TRAMMELL, EMMA LEIGH  
WALDRON (ALPHABETICALLY)

Game studies—once considered a marginal field—is now over a decade old, and its share of the academic and cultural spotlight grows daily. But all spotlights cast shadows. In 2001, computer games hovered at the margins of what were then emerging studies in digital media. Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* published that year, for example, focused on the privileged spaces of installation art, hypertext literature, and cinema over any discussion of games as a medium.<sup>1</sup> As digital media studies blossomed, however, computer games suddenly became that which—above all else—exemplified radical new directions in scholarship. In his introduction to the first issue of *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth noted that the field should be prepared to encounter both the “Nintendo-Hollywood” industrial complex, as well as open-source revolutions in design and distribution cropping up everywhere on the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Computer games would become essential to understanding the intersection of

1. Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.
2. Espen Aarseth. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001).  
<http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

digital media with popular culture; similarly, nothing could have been more in-vogue than *Game Studies*, an open-access online publication, dedicated to these games' analysis and critique.

Now, thirteen years later, it has become increasingly clear that the field of game studies needs a hack: not so much a 2.0, but rather a 0.5. None will contest the fact that computer games are becoming increasingly pervasive in our society. As game studies has come into its own as a field of scholarship, now lying at the margins are the *analog games*: those very games at the center of foundational texts such as Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*<sup>3</sup> or Richard D. Duke's *Gaming: The Future's Language*<sup>4</sup>. Analog games have had their own terminology and prominence for centuries. They are those products that are not always mediated through computer technologies, but which nevertheless exemplify contemporary cultural forms. As Jonathan Sterne points out, the term "analog" only exists by way of negative comparison to the digital, such that our present-day digital forms of expression produce their analog heritage as a by-product.<sup>5</sup> Today, so-called analog games often take a hybrid form, composed of those elements of the digital they might exploit and use: high-quality image editing, social media distribution, and tablet interfaces, for example. In other words, game studies can no longer afford to primarily focus on computer games in an era where the world has become so digitally mediated that the nomenclature ceases to carry the same weight that it once did. Furthermore, analog games are notably detached from many cultural attitudes prevalent in the computer game industry, and can offer an insight into the ways that games work to produce social change. They make clear the rules that govern behavior

3. Roger Caillois. *Man, Play and Games*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

4. Richard Duke. *Gaming: The Future's Language*. New York: SAGE Publications Inc., 1974.

5. Jonathan Sterne. "Analog/Analogue: A Speculative History of the Not-Digital [DRAFT]." *Culture Digitally*. May 15, 2014. <http://culturedigitally.org/2014/05/analog-draftdigitalkeywords/>.

within games and, in doing so, reveal the biological and cultural rules which have forever governed our society.

In business, gamification is the new trend: badges, points, achievements, and leaderboards are increasingly tied to all social media product rollouts. And, like Katniss Everdeen from the immensely popular *Hunger Games*, consumers must learn the affordances of these systems to ensure what is understood to be emotionally healthy, fulfilling and cost-efficient living in the 21st Century. Applications like *Foursquare* transform everyday activities like barhopping, dining, and shopping into games, and dating websites like OkCupid offer incentives and points to users who fill in more profile data. Jane McGonigal has spoken from the pulpits of TED on the strategies she has taken to gamify her life in the pursuit of excellent productivity, physique, and balance.

The positive attitude toward gamification in meatspace should be somewhat baffled, however, by the homophobic, racist, and misogynist horrors that continue to ravage the culture of digital gaming. As testified by the *Penny Arcade Expo's* "Diversity Hub and Lounge", an effort at inclusion that was effectively a geek apartheid for women, queer folk, and gamers of color, not all is right in the world of computer game culture. Video games have met with critiques mounted by, for example, Anita Sarkeesian's web series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." The series was met with death threats and a stream of mindless argumentation relentlessly advocating the merits of a rape-culture that relies on the construction of women as sex objects. What remains is a sad truth: while games are now a clear part of our social infrastructure, they often act as a counter-progressive apparatus in the world today.

On the point of social justice, it is interesting to note that some of the most innovative and progressive movements in gaming recently have been analog. Independent role-playing games have

evolved into a niche publishing industry, and games like Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2009) or Emily Care Boss' *Under My Skin* (2008) have greatly expanded what narrative possibilities role-playing games have to offer. Meanwhile, people around the world are taking notice of a vibrant Nordic tradition of discourse and documentation about larp (through conferences such as Knutpunkt and Fastaval and publications such as the *International Journal of Role-Playing*), while similar practices are becoming more and more common in other play cultures as well (in the States we have the Wyrd Con Companion Books and the recently inaugurated Living Games Conference). Finally, thanks to the popularity of eurogames – epitomized by *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Carcassone* (2000), and *Ticket to Ride* (2004) – fan interest in board games rivals that of computer games at this time, and Internet crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter have helped usher in a renaissance of board game development. The Spielmesse in Essen, the world's largest board game convention, regularly hosts over 150,000 devoted board game enthusiasts each October, more than double the attendees of PAX Prime, the premier video game festival. This is not to say that analog games are more *important* than computer games, but it does imply that published research in game studies has been disproportionately focused on computer games. *Analog Game Studies* aims to close this gap.

The argument for game studies began with the point that computer games are important due to their already-extant centrality in today's media industries. And while this is—if anything—more true now in 2014 than it was in 2001, perhaps the opposite point could be advanced for analog games. Because the barriers of entry to design do not require the technical expertise demanded by the lines of codes which bring computer games to life, analog games hold the potential to allow a new and different set of voices into design processes, voices which might resist the pathological displays of racism, sexism, homophobia,

and violence native to the video game industry. In addition, analog games are – except for a rare few blockbusters such as *Monopoly* (1935) or *Cards Against Humanity* (2011)– marginal, and estranged from demands made by the conventional publishing industry (although the indie publishing industry indeed makes its own demands). Many larpscripts are circulated by PDF, and other games still are passed down through oral tradition alone. Because the impetus is on *invention* as opposed to *industry*, analog games epitomize the potentials of a design ethic that does not pander to over-generalized market demographics.

The marginality of analog games, however, is not without its own problems. Because these games are often trafficked in underground circles, there has been far less documentation about the practices, and cultures of analog game players. Although certainly work of many of the authors contributing to this blog has gone a long way to better document these practices, *Analog Game Studies* is committed to providing a periodically published platform for the critical analysis, discussion of design, and documentation of analog games. By offering sharp narratives that highlight the most interesting features of individual games, we hope to increase the visibility of analog games within the sphere of game studies.

So, that's it! That's why we're here. Not to eclipse game studies scholarship, but rather to show how the field's marginalia have been important and central to the dialogue of games in the 21st century all along. We hope you enjoy the articles we offer each week, and help contribute to a communal conversation by joining us in the comments with your own ideas and perceptions.





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## **ANALYSIS**

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# “FUN IN A DIFFERENT WAY”: RHYTHMS OF ENGAGEMENT AND NON-IMMERSIVE PLAY AGENDAS

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BY NICK MIZER

“I played a boffer larp, which is, you have padded swords and stuff like that, you know, and you hit people....So I like that, you know, a troll shows up and you fight it, like you actually fight it, you know? It’s just like, another level of immersion...The actual, sitting at a table and playing D&D is a lot of fun in a different way.” – Eric Coumbe

I met Eric towards the beginning of about five months of intensive fieldwork, traveling around the country watching how people actually play role-playing games and talking to them about their thoughts on gaming. As we sat in a dimly lit German pub in Brooklyn, Eric talked about his past experiences with larping and contrasted them with the enjoyment he found in playing in the New York Red Box community, which focuses on old-school role-playing games, especially *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). The “different way” of fun Eric described is one that I have found repeated again and again in my research. It speaks to an aspect of tabletop games often either overlooked or considered a “bug” by many players and designers rather than a design feature: non-immersive play. In this essay I consider how

sustained immersion in any one aspect of play is a necessary goal in gaming and to propose the idea that we carefully examine how shifting, and sometimes even fleeting, changes in attention can comprise positive aspects of the gamer experience. After considering the idea of non-immersive play as a possible goal that people pursue, I will present an example of the idea of rhythm in frame-switching as an example of the type of productive analysis that this line of thinking opens up.

In trying to understand and describe the types of experiences that come up in various games, I've turned to phenomenology, a school of philosophy that focuses on experience. Erving Goffman, a phenomenologically-influenced sociologist interested in the roles we play in everyday life, used the concept of frames in his work.<sup>1</sup> Frames are the way that people create an understanding of social interactions that defines what is admitted or disallowed from participants' attention and understanding of the relevant reality at hand. Gary Fine took up this work in his 1983 ethnography of role-playing games, *Shared Fantasy*, where he described three important frames common to most or all gaming sessions.<sup>2</sup> First is the social frame, which participants inhabit as friends and fellow hobbyists. Laminated over this is the game frame, where players use rules to manipulate the fiction of the game. This fiction forms the third frame, which participants inhabit as characters. This is a useful framework that helps us understand the management of in-character vs. out-of-character knowledge, for example.

Immersive experiences (which may be different from a flow state, but seems closely related) are those where both the social and game frames are largely excluded from the participants' attention. Thus, games designed to produce immersive states

1. Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor, 1959.

2. Gary Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

have largely invisible rules. In these games, pulling out a rule-book or speaking out of character is likely to break the experience. However, in my fieldwork I observed that many players are not looking for that sort of immersive experience. Though not a groundbreaking revelation, gamers and game researchers nevertheless create a hierarchy of experiences that privileges more immersive games. Daniel Mackay, for example, claims that “Good performances [...] manage to keep all participants within the sphere of the role-playing game theater.”<sup>3</sup> Mackay places a central value not just on the fictive frame, which he calls “the theater sphere,” but on keeping players’ attention within that sphere as much as possible. In fact, he goes so far as to say that games with “no great amount of emotional identification with the character’s struggles and passions” are best understood as “callow rituals that disguise an unconscious process of disciplining all participants according to the principles motivating society’s structures of power.”<sup>4</sup> Despite Mackay’s concerns, a prejudice against non-immersive games ignores how certain gamers, gaming communities, and traditions of gaming have established evaluative principles based on goals other than the immersivity of a single frame of play.

There is a wide variety of potential experiences of frames in gaming that I term non-immersive experiential goals, but they tend to share common features. Non-immersive game experiences involve lots of frame shifting, moving between in-game realities, game rules, and out-of-character social interactions. Instead of treating the frames as necessary artifacts of the gaming experience, gamers involved with non-immersive play turn the frames into one of the “objects” they are playing with. Often players draw attention to the frames themselves. Zak Smith, (in)famous old-school gaming blogger, describes this attention towards the frames as “distance,” and invokes the

3. Daniel Mackay. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001, p. 101.

4. Mackay, p. 130.

“racing back and forth between the story-identity and the human identity, plus the drama of simply trying to get shit done against some rules”<sup>5</sup> as both unique to tabletop role-playing games and a central part of his enjoyment of tabletop gaming.

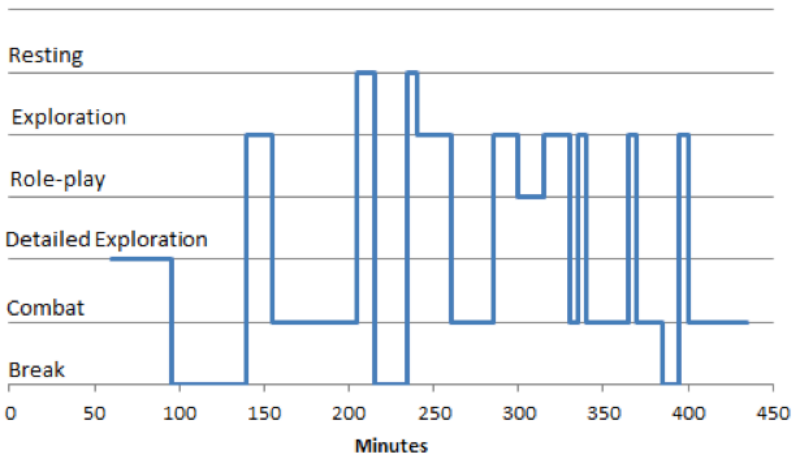
This aspect of non-immersive play, the laying bare of the frames that help produce the experience, is remarkably similar to the epic theatre tradition popularized by Bertolt Brecht. Brecht argued that “it is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than creating an immersive experience where people forgot that what they were watching was “just a play,” Brecht would do things like flood the house with bright lights to remind them that this is exactly what they were doing. Like Brechtian theatre, part of the experience of non-immersive gaming is maintaining an awareness of the means of enchantment. This complicates Mackay’s assertion that a lack of immersion makes players slaves to panoptic discipline. Instead, viewing non-immersive play as something comparable to Brechtian theater suggests that by laying bare the frames of the experience this type of game can actually provide what Michael Saler calls “disenchanted enchantment” or “delight without delusion.”

By looking carefully at the types of experiences that gamers actually seek and experience rather than assuming in advance that we already know the purpose of play, we can obtain a richer understanding of the variety of experiences that are out there. For example, in my fieldwork at Gary Con, a gaming convention in Lake Geneva, WI, a session, run by Ernie Gygax in the “Dungeon Hobby Shop Dungeon,” was far from immersive.

5. Zak Smith. "Like Playing Monopoly with Squatters." *Playing D&D with Porn Stars*. March 5, 2010. <http://dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com/2010/03/playing-monopoly-with-squatters.html>.

6. Bertolt Brecht. *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, p. 122.

During the session the players switched freely between in-character joking, reminiscing about their past experiences in gaming combat, exploration, and asking Ernie about the history of the hobby. Yet by analyzing those shifts in attention I was able to identify a sort of rhythm to the evening, roughly portrayed here as a map of the relationship between in-game and out-of-game time:



*A diagram of what players do during a game session. Game time is represented horizontally, while behavior is plotted vertically. Image used with permission by the author.*

Although we switched attention more frequently than this chart would suggest, this grand overlay reveals the night's momentum. The two dominant time relationships we experienced in play were exploration, in which ten minutes of diegetic time elapsed in approximately one minute of ludic time; and combat, where the reverse relationship holds. The alternation between these two modes created a rhythm to our play, and as the night progressed the rhythm increased in tempo. The increasing tempo of this alternation created a sense of forward momentum, compelling us forward through the session with increased



tension, like a musical *accelerando* building towards the climax of the evening.

This rhythmic alternation between diegetic and ludic time seems to accomplish in a different medium the altered state of consciousness identified by McDowell as produced by acoustic rhythms found in the commemorative discourse of ballads.<sup>7</sup>

Ernie's session reveals how rhythmic arrangement is not limited to the verbal, material, and kinetic (as McDowell would suggest), but can extend to the shifting of attention between the frames of play. This increasing tempo is only one possible rhythm that frame switching might exhibit, and frame switching itself is only one possible angle by which we might look at non-immersive play. We might also consider a static maintenance of divided attentions. The central point is to consider play as it actually occurs and to attempt, as much as possible to take a session of play on its own terms and not on terms that we might externally impose upon it.

7. John H McDowell. "Folklore as Commemorative Discourse." *Journal of American Folklore* 105.418 (1992), pp. 403-423.

# STRATEGIES FOR PUBLISHING TRANSFORMATIVE BOARD GAMES

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BY WILL EMIGH

*Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* is a manifesto that attempts to broach some important problems of representation in the video game industry.<sup>1</sup> On her site, Anna Anthropy explains that her book “shift[s] the balance of our dialogues about videogames a little. when our culture discusses videogames, it mentions corporations, blockbusters, and a hyper-masculinized “gaming” culture. Rarely does the idea of the small, authored, self-published game get much air in our discussion of art.”<sup>2</sup> Because our culture treats “game” as a synonym for “videogame,” we can understand why Anthropy frames her argument in these terms. Ignoring the broader world of games is folly, as a zinester<sup>3</sup> attitude prevails in board game cultures as well. Board

1. Anna Anthropy. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.
2. Anna Anthropy. "Rise of the Video Game Zinesters." *Auntie Pixelante*. March 30, 2012. <http://auntiepixelante.com/?p=1583>.
3. The “zinester” ethos as Anthropy uses the term is descended from print fan magazines (zines) with small print runs, often 100 or fewer, that addressed cultural issues, particularly from feminist and punk perspectives in the 1980s and 1990s. As applied to games, zinesters are game creators who deal with cultural topics and perspectives that are marginalized by mainstream video games.

games share many of the virtues held by the micro-videogames to which Anthropy refers, like strong authorship, small scope, and often self-publishing as well. This essay considers the ways in which micro-publishing models have allowed board games the leeway to tackle critical themes that the major publishing industries preclude.

Board game designers have less visibility than video game designers because it is much harder to distribute a board game than a video game. Since a video game's distribution costs can be close to zero, designers can afford to post their games on the Internet where anyone can play. Because these avenues of funding are not available to board game designers, it can be difficult for authors to express their message without incurring significant costs. Some niche board game designers have proposed a variety of strategies to ameliorate this problem.

UK company Hide & Seek has published several iOS apps, books, and cards that provide new rule sets for old board games. *The Board Game Remix Kit*<sup>4</sup> is a book that tells players how to mix and match pieces from *Clue* (1949), *Scrabble* (1948), *Monopoly* (1935), and *Trivial Pursuit* (1982) in order to create both variants and entirely new games. Hide & Seek followed their book with *Tiny Games* (2013), an app that gives players rules for hundreds of miniature games that help to critique everyday situations. For example, while watching TV, you might play *I Told You So* (n.d.), where one person guesses what the next ad will be about, the television is muted, and then that player has to argue that the ad shown matches their description, regardless of the actual content. By turning players into active participants, the game sets up a situation that makes it easier to see the similarities between ads and the absurdity of the situations they depict.

4. Kevan Davis, Holli Gramazio, and James Wallis. *The Board Game Remix Kit*. Hide and Seek Productions: London, 2010.

Another way of combating initial costs is to include the game with another purchase. Often, board game rules are included as part of conference programs or magazines. Brian Train's *Battle of Seattle* (2000) is a small game with a traditional, although simplified, wargaming structure that engages the 1999 Seattle anti-World Trade Organization protests. In this game, one player takes the part of the protestors and attempts to control locations while minimizing looting while the other player acts as a collection of civil authorities and tries to shut down protests without being exposed by the media. Since *Battle of Seattle* was included freely in *Strategist* magazine, it reached a much broader audience than Train could have reached on his own and encouraged readers to consider the anti-WTO protests as a wargame with two asymmetrical forces.



*A Night in Ferguson.* Image used with permission by the author.

More recently, morac released *A Night in Ferguson* (2014), a solitaire game played with a normal deck of cards that is based on the protests staged after the killing of Michael Brown in

Ferguson, MO. The game is available as a pay-what-you-want PDF download and is played by creating stacks of cards where black cards represent protestors and red cards represent police. The police automatically arrest the black cards in their location. The game's goal is to finish the deck, thus ending the night and helping the protestors to avoid arrest. It is unlikely that a mainstream publisher would support such an overtly political message, and so because of this and the game's simple and easily shared components, the game fundamentally resists commercial appropriation.

Another strategy of accessibility that board game designers have experimented with is running their games at events. Here, players can play for free while the designers pay only to produce the copy of the game used for play. This model helps designers test new ideas that may be too radical for the mass market, while admittedly forfeiting the mass distribution networks that Anthropy exalts in her book. Naomi Clark's *Consentacle* (2014) offers a strong example of this radical design practice. In this two-player card game, a human and a tentacled alien try to have sex without being able to communicate. Each player secretly selects a card and when revealed, the cards take effect: trust is swapped, stolen, and/or converted into satisfaction. *Consentacle* deals with issues of trust in relationships by abstracting the concept into a resource to be exchanged from player to player.

Brenda Romero has advanced this concept by framing her games as installation pieces that can be played with without the designer's influence in her *The Mechanic is the Message* series (2008-present). The series is best known for her board game *Train* (2009) where players are tasked with packing people into miniature train cars and running them across tracks balanced on broken windows laid flat. As the game progresses, Romero asks, "Will people blindly follow rules?" and "Will people stand by and watch?" At some point during the game, players realize that they have unwittingly taken on the role of Nazi soldiers sending

prisoners to Auschwitz. Romero allows people to draw their own conclusions, with some continuing to play the game and others refusing to be a party to it. In any case, players now have a more visceral understanding of how context affects the interpretation of games.

Board game designers face many of the same difficulties as video game designers. For instance, there is a problematic lack of diversity in both game design communities and this perhaps offers a clue as to why so many games are themed around war and conquest. Board games also tend to exoticize and “other” the subjects of their games, whether they are Wall Street traders in Edgar Cayce’s *Pit* (1904) or merchants in Rüdiger Dorn’s *Istanbul* (2014). Board games that approach problematic themes often remove the questionable areas entirely as they abstract the mechanics rather than deal with them directly. For example, in Klaus Teuber’s *Settlers of Catan* (1995) native inhabitants are conspicuously absent on the island, though there is a mysterious robber pawn that can be said to represent the native tribes. The pawn however, is controlled by the players and represents natives only insofar as it is instrumental to player goals.



*Depictions of “natives” in Archipelago. Image used with permission by the author.*

Even when mainstream board games do work to reveal dense political and economic systems through their design, they can be limited by a sense of what their audience is willing to accept. For example, Christophe Boelinger’s *Archipelago* (2012) features a set of “natives” which are press-ganged into work by players and then must be pacified with churches lest they rebel. However, all of the processes involving the natives are abstract and it is hard to read a deeper cultural message than “there were natives before colonists arrived.” Liam Burke’s RPG *Dog Eat Dog* (2012) has a very similar theme but was self-published using Kickstarter as a platform, which gave the designer much more leeway. This game casts most players as Natives who must contend with the arbitrary rules set by the player acting as an outside Occupation force. The game ends with all Native players assimilating to the Occupation to some extent or running amok and entirely rejecting the Occupation. New tools and strategies like these

allow game designers to bypass mainstream publishing and address social issues more honestly and openly.

Unfortunately, many amazing games never reach a wide audience because of hard limits in production and distribution costs. This paper outlined some of the innovative strategies being used to challenge this seemingly impossible obstacle. As crowdfunding reduces costs for designers and niche publishers alike, print-on-demand<sup>5</sup> publishing has also become a reasonable option for many games that use common pieces. These print-on-demand services have also begun setting up digital storefronts, making it easier for designers to distribute quickly and efficiently as well.

Many full games and re-themes have become available as print-and-play<sup>6</sup> versions. The fan-moderated website, *Board Game Geek*, has a vibrant print-and-play culture, which offers many cheap games for both designers and players to download. There is a catch, however, as players must endeavor to craft these games, assembling them themselves. Some games though, like *A Night in Ferguson*, use common components so that the print-and-play version consists of just the rules. This method of distribution offers the best of all worlds as the player's work is minimized.

Board games have long provided an avenue to tackle important

5. Print-on-demand technology allows designers to sell or buy individual copies of their games rather than having to purchase large lots (1,500 or more) at once. These companies also allow players to purchase a game directly from the printer so that designers don't have to handle fulfillment. However, a print-on-demand[footnote]Print-on-demand technology allows designers to sell or buy individual copies of their games rather than having to purchase large lots (1,500 or more) at once. These companies also allow players to purchase a game directly from the printer so that designers don't have to handle fulfillment. However, a print-on-demand copy will be more expensive, of lower quality, or both, as compared to a large run version.
6. Print-and-play refers to games where the rules, pieces, and board are provided as common downloadable files, usually PDFs. Players download the files, often for free or for a small donation, and print them out and combine them with pieces they already own in order to play the game.



social issues in an engaging and striking way. However, the costs to print and distribute these games have made it difficult to reach a significant audience without a publisher. These publishers outright reject or elide messages that don't align with their goals, primarily a mass-market appeal they can sell at a minimum cost to themselves. Clever designers have found ways to bypass this system, by piggybacking on other distribution systems like magazines or by self-publishing at significant expense. New opportunities make it increasingly viable for designers to create and distribute small, personal games that accurately represent their viewpoints and for players to discover games that speak to them directly. A variety of welcoming game conferences like No Quarter and IndieCade allow designers to directly engage with players, while web forums, blogs, and online databases have reduced distribution costs drastically, particularly for games that repurpose existing game pieces. For designers who are able to promote themselves effectively, crowdfunding sites provide a way to remove middlemen and to raise the funds necessary for a quality print run. With these recent changes, even more designers have begun to create important games that wouldn't be possible with mainstream publishing's conservative business model.

# MISOGYNY AND THE FEMALE BODY IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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BY AARON TRAMMELL

There is a clear problem of representation in games and — more broadly — in the cultures produced by games. This problem in representation has most recently yielded controversies such as #gamergate,<sup>1</sup> but it is also more or less responsible for debacles such as the PAX dickwolves saga, and the recent death threats to Anita Sarkeesian spurred by her “Tropes vs. Women in Games” series. Outside the spotlight of digital games, some members of other game communities, such as Ajit George<sup>2</sup> and Shoshana Kessock,<sup>3</sup> have been outspoken about problems of representation at Gen Con,<sup>4</sup> North America’s largest tabletop game convention. Even in Gary Alan Fine’s classic book, *Shared Fantasy*, the

1. #Gamergate refers to an alleged scandal in which independent game developer Zoë Quinn was accused by her ex-boyfriend, a game journalist, of sexual coercion in order to receive positive press for her game *Depression Quest*. Since the incident, Quinn has received rape and death threats, some from the #gamergate “community,” which claims that they work to further objective journalism.
2. Ajit George. “Gaming’s Race Problem: Gen Con and Beyond.” *Tor*. August 13, 2014. <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2014/08/gamings-race-problem-gen-con-and-beyond>.
3. Shoshana Kessock. “Can’t Swing A Con Badge Without Hitting A Nazi.” Shoshana Kessock. August 21, 2013. <http://shoshanakessock.com/2013/08/21/cant-swing-a-con-badge-without-hitting-a-nazi/>.
4. George has noted the explicit lack of people of color at Gen Con, while Kessock was startled by the normativity of Nazi cosplay at the Gen Con scene.

distinction between reality and fantasy for role-players is considered “impermeable,” despite the sociologist’s own admission that “[frequently] non-player male characters who have not hurt the party are executed and female non-player characters raped for sport.”<sup>5</sup> Given that even canonical game theorists such as Fine seem unconcerned with the reproduction of rape culture within the space of role-playing games, it is important to better understand the history of racist and misogynist attitudes in game culture. This essay addresses this problem by offering a close read of two articles on the topic from *The Dragon*, TSR Hobbies’ flagship magazine for all things *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). Unlike Jon Peterson’s recent essay, “The First Female Gamers,” which argues that TSR Hobbies was instrumental in bringing women into the hobby, this essay concerns the unfortunate amount of currency still afforded to misogynist attitudes in the gaming community.<sup>6</sup> It proposes that these attitudes reproduce themselves by way of the community privileging the *accuracy* of simulation over the *ethics* of simulation.

The first article reviewed in this essay is “Notes on Women & Magic – Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D,”<sup>7</sup> which offers a schematic for the ways in which the female body should be understood and regulated within *Dungeons & Dragons*. The second article, “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D,”<sup>8</sup> also deals with the schematization of bodies, but deals more specifically with how characters look when role-played. Together, the articles offer a glimpse of game culture in years 1976 and 1977.

5. Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 44.

6. Jon Peterson. “The First Female Gamers.” *Medium*. October 5, 2014.

<http://medium.com/@increment/the-first-female-gamers-c784fbc3ff37>.

7. Although this article was first published in Lakofka’s fanzine, *Liaisons Dangereuses*, it was reprinted in issue three of *The Dragon*. Len Lakofka. “Notes on Women & Magic -- Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D.” *The Dragon* 1.3 (1976), pp. 7-10.

8. P.M. Crabaugh. “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D.” *The Dragon* 2.4 (1977), pp. 19-20.

Regarding audience, these articles were published for men and by men. Although *The Dragon* operated on a publication model that openly accepted articles by any contributors, women were infrequent contributors in the early years.<sup>9</sup> The two essays analyzed in this article offer clues toward understanding the poisonous trends of racism and sexism within the hobby.

Len Lakofka, author of “Notes on Women & Magic,” was an avid participant in the play-by-mail *Diplomacy* community. Most notably, Lakofka served as the vice-president of the International Federation of Wargamers in 1968 when they sponsored the first Gen Con convention. Later, Lakofka would take on a stronger role in organizing the convention, organizing most of it in 1970. In the 1970s, Lakofka was responsible for playtesting many *Dungeons & Dragons* supplements and, in fact, advised Gary Gygax on many design decisions made over the course of the game’s development. Lakofka was an important figure in the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and although many of the rules proposed in “Notes on Women & Magic” failed to stick,<sup>10</sup> they do offer an interesting historical lens through which the culture of the time can be interpreted. Specifically, they allow us to understand the ways in which a predominantly white male gaming community imagined the bodies of women.

Needless to say, women were not the intended audience of *The Dragon*. This is made abundantly clear in the antagonistic and condescending tone Lakofka takes in “Notes on Women & Magic.” As the essay begins, one must wonder whether the notes were staged as a manifesto of whether or not women should be

9. One notable exception to this rule was Lee Gold, the main editor of the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*. *Alarums & Excursions* #19 was instrumental, as Peterson notes, in contesting Lakofka’s sexist missive in *The Dragon*.

10. There is also a notable companion article within *Dungeoneer* #2, entitled “Those Lovely Ladies,” by an anonymous contributor which replicates many of the tropes regarding diminished fighting capability and beauty that were first penned in Lakofka’s article. The preface even admits that the article is intended to continue the conversation begun by Lakofka’s work. Anonymous. *The Dungeoneer* 1.2 (1976), pp. 5-7.

allowed at the game table, or within game worlds more broadly. Lakofka writes:

There will be four major groups in which women may enter. They may be FIGHTERS, MAGIC USERS, THIEVES and CLERICS. They may progress to the level of men in the area of magic and, in some ways, surpass men as thieves. Elven women may rise especially to high levels in clerics to the elves. Only as fighters are women clearly behind men in all cases but even they have attributes that their male counterparts do not!<sup>11</sup>

Despite the clearly sexist language employed in this article (where Lakofka allows women to participate in game fictions through his use of the word “may”), Lakofka makes an earnest effort toward offering a workable simulation of the female body for interested players.

The key difference between the male and the female body, according to Lakofka, is that instead of a charisma score, women have a “beauty” characteristic. This statistic, unlike charisma (which has become a standard statistic in role-playing games), has a range of 2-20 as opposed to 3-18, and is relied on for a number of special skills that only female characters can use during the play of the game. These abilities focus on the character’s beauty specifically, and consist of abilities such as “Charm men,” “Charm humanoid monster,” “Seduction,” “Horrid Beauty,” and “Worship.” As shown in Figure 1, some of these abilities could be used to charm men of various races provided the female’s beauty score was equal to or higher than the number shown on the chart. Additionally, Figure 2 shows the ways in which characters can opt to roll a die in protest in order to resist seduction. These abilities represent a woman who uses beauty as a weapon to get what she desires from men who must in turn resist succumbing to temptation. Not only do these statistics reinforce the stereotype that a woman’s value and power lie only in her beauty, but they also reify a heteronormative standard

11. Lakofka, p. 7.

of sexuality where relationships are exclusively staged between men and women. Finally, Figure 1 can even be read as a schema of discrimination wherein I argue that the slight and fair builds of Elves are preferable to the plump and ruddy Dwarven build, or to the dark, muscular build of the Orc.<sup>12</sup> Thus, these charts work to reinforce racial stereotypes that revere a pale and slight standard of beauty, that prefer exotic “oriental”<sup>13</sup> bodies, and that and read black bodies as invisible.

Woman's Race	Male's Race				
	Men	Elves	Orcs	Hobbits	Dwarves
Elf	10	11	10	10	10
Woman	11	12	11	12	12
Hobbit	12	14	13	11	12
Orc	15	20	11	14	17
Dwarf	13	15	14	13	11

Figure 1: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in *The Dragon* #3, p. 9. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

12. As indicated, human players (indicated by the column “Men” on this chart) will remain chaste when resisting the sexual advances of an Orc on a roll of 15 or less (on a 20 sided die), while they will have considerably more difficulty remaining celibate when resisting the advances of an Elf which will require a roll of 10 or less. Even Dwarves, according to this chart, prefer the exotic body of the Elf to those of their own kind (“A Dwarf can seduce another Dwarf on a roll of 11 or less, while an Elf can seduce a Dwarf on a roll of 10 or less.”).
13. See Figure 4 for an example of orientalism in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Or, for that matter, the core manual *Oriental Adventures* (1985).

**Saving Throws** against seduction. The Saving Throw is based upon **seduction level** (spell # — not level of seductress), **Beauty score**, **Wisdom** of person being seduced, and **type** of figure being seduced.

Sum seduction level and beauty scores.

Subtract the Wisdom of the Target Figure and add that product to a 20 sided die roll.

A Fighter needs a score of 13 or higher to be saved (That is NOT laid — is that being saved???)

A Thief needs a score of 12 or better to be saved

A Paladin needs a score of 10 or better to be saved

A Magic User needs a 9 or better to be saved

A Cleric needs an 8 or higher to stay celibate.

*Figure 2: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in The Dragon #3, p. 9. Reproduced for purposes of critique.*

In addition, Lakofka presents tables that elaborate on the abilities of women engaging in combat. Here, women are compared to men via the “default” standard of fighting prowess. Statistically speaking, Lakofka works to show the ways in which women fight at a disadvantage to men in a variety of contexts. A level one thief, titled “wench,” fights at the ability of “man-1,” while a level two thief, titled “hag,” fights equivalently to a “man.” Even a level one fighter advances at a disadvantage, fighting only at the strength of “man+1” upon reaching level two (see Figure 3). Lakofka justifies this by explaining that it is easier for women to advance in levels, and so they fight at a drawback as they progress. Still, as evidenced in his introduction, fighting women may only advance to a maximum of tenth level, regardless of their tenacious advancement. As a whole, the system makes a consistent point: the bodies of women can only be understood when set in opposition to those of men, and within this realm they excel in abilities which foreground the importance of their beauty.

In contrast, P.M. Crabaugh’s article, “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D,” offers a more precise take on the configuration and abilities of bodies. It focuses specifically on the ability of bodies to lift, measures of height and weight, and the cultural parameter

of ethnicity. Crabaugh saw the bodies of women in a different way, and saw female bodies as superior to male bodies in a variety of ways (aside from sheer strength), granting female player characters a +1 bonus to their constitution statistic and a +2 bonus to their dexterity. He also offers a defense to those in the community who might beg to differ:

[Constitution and Dexterity] and body mass are the only differences between male and female. Before someone throws a brick let me explain. As Jacob Bronowski<sup>14</sup> pointed out, as well as, no doubt, many others, there is remarkably little difference between male and female humans (the term is here extended to include the Kindred Races), compared to the rest of the animal kingdom. There is little physiological difference, no psychological difference (Think about it. Consider that human societies have been both matriarchies and patriarchies. Don't let your own experience blind you to history.), and so forth.<sup>15</sup>

He then goes to offer the point that a constitution bonus is due to the fact that women are more resilient to disease than men, and that the dexterity bonus hails from the fact that women have lighter builds, with slighter fingers, and that they are then therefore more adept at picking locks than others.

Although not as condescending as Lakofka's treatise on women, Crabaugh reveals in his writing an essentialism that reads bodies as purely biological entities. By this, I mean to say that – for Crabaugh– knowledge of the body could be and was apparently ascertained through strictly “scientific” measures. Michel Foucault calls such a reduction of bodies to numbers a mode of informatic power, primarily used to manage and control bodies in the modern state.<sup>16</sup> Within Crabaugh's writing (and within *Dungeons & Dragons* as an entire game system, which views bodies as assemblages of strength, dexterity, constitution,

14. Bronowski was a historian who focused on the history of science.

15. Crabaugh, p. 19.

16. Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976, pp. 154-5.



wisdom, intelligence, and charisma statistics) we can read this as a means of controlling bodies in the game state, but also, more broadly, a reification of existing modes of state and scientific control within the game state.

Alongside “handedness” in Crabaugh’s tables, lies “Skin” (Figure 4). According to this table, roughly one tenth of all players should have a “dark” complexion, one tenth of all players should have a “black” complexion, and one tenth of all players should have an “oriental” complexion. In defense of his chart, Crabaugh immediately explains that these determinations stem from representations in the literature that players drew on for play: “The reason that 16 out of 20 possibilities are variations on caucasion [sic] is not that I think that that represents the actual population-distribution; it is because the literature of swords & sorcery is *primarily* (but not entirely) concerned with Caucasians.”<sup>17</sup> Here we find representation functioning as a mode of power that replicates and reifies. The representational contexts and normativities traditionally valued by members of the community are replicated and reinforced here within the systematic logic of the game (where it might replicate then, again).

THIEVES			
Wench	1	man-1	-
Hag	2	man	-
Jade	3	man + 2	-
Succubus	4	2 men	1 limited and special
Succubus	4	2 men	1 limited and special
Adventuress	4+1	2 men +1	2 limited and special
Soothsayer	4+2	3 men	2 1 limited and special
Gypsy	5	3 men +1	2 2 limited and special
Sibyl	5+2	hero-1	2 2 1 limited and special

Figure 3: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in *The Dragon* #3, p. 8. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

17. Crabaugh, p. 20.

<b>Skin (0-20)</b>	
<b>Die</b>	<b>Complexion</b>
15-16	Dark
17-18	Black
19-20	Oriental
<b>Handedness (2 6-sided)</b>	
<b>Die</b>	<b>Handedness</b>
2	Ambidextrous
3-4	Left
5-12	Right

*Figure 4: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in The Dragon #10, p. 20. Reproduced for purposes of critique.*

The problem that recurs in both of these historic examples of game systems is one that elevates the ideology of simulation above values of inclusivity, plurality, and compassion. Such pursuits of authentic recreations and representations of past histories (such as in historical reenactments) can be problematic for the ways in which they offer an airtight alibi for the reproduction of predominantly white, male, historical vignettes. But Crabaugh and Lakofka move this attitude regarding authenticity and simulation into worlds of fantasy where the alibi is lost (no longer is the reenactment about history). But here, again, an opportunity to establish gender equity was lost, owing to the racist, misogynistic, and homophobic trappings of that particular genre of literature. For instance, Robert E. Howard, author of the original Conan the Barbarian stories (1932-1969), though idolized by the fan communities engaged in *Dungeons & Dragons*, has also been heavily critiqued for themes of white

supremacy in his work. To simulate fantasy in the 1970s was to simulate work that divides people between good and evil, depicts a world filled with predominantly white male heroes, and often holds that might makes right.

Disappointingly, the scene has changed very little in the past 47 years. In George's 2014 essay regarding the lack of diversity at Gen Con, he touchingly writes: "As an awkward teen, like other awkward teens, I wanted to be accepted. But acceptance meant something different to me, as perhaps it does to other minority teens. Acceptance meant being white."<sup>18</sup> With that in mind, it is interesting to note Lakofka's historic intersection with Gen Con, as both attendee and organizer in the early years. We must ask whether Gen Con and other related community events have ever been particularly free of problematic racist and misogynist tropes. To some extent, the hobby has been coping with these biases since its infancy, and they are a seemingly inextricable part of the rules and cultural traditions that have been passed between players for years.

The simulation of literature, imagination, and other fantastic worlds, however, is not without potential for improving representation and inclusion. Although several toxic pathologies (specifically racism and misogyny) can be traced through the genealogical work above, players, designers, and gamewrights alike can choose to represent whatever they like when playing games in the future. Though some game rules are cemented in print, the culture of the hobby also allows games to bring with them an interpretive flexibility where rules can be broken, statistics can be changed, different bodies can be designed, and new worlds can be represented. This task is one that must be taken up by all members of the community. It means not considering these discussions as solely for "social justice warriors," it means acknowledging that extreme biases are

18. George, par. 10.

written into the games we play, and it means taking deliberate steps to avoid reproducing rules and images in games that play host to a problematic politics of representation.

# THE PLAYING CARD PLATFORM

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BY NATHAN ALTICE

“Any thin, stiff piece of material can be used as a playing card.”?—Detlef Hoffman, *The Playing Card: An Illustrated History*<sup>1</sup>

At its simplest, a card is just that: a physical card, which may or may not have undergone any modifications. Its role in the game is both as itself and as whatever information it carries, which can be changed, erased or amended. —“1000 Blank White Cards: Structure of a card,” *Wikipedia*

In 1993, Richard Garfield revolutionized playing cards. In *Magic: the Gathering* (1993), players took the role of dueling spellcasters called Planeswalkers. They battled using constructed decks of cards, or *libraries*, divided into two basic types: land and spells. A player’s land provided the game’s primary resource, *mana*, which could then be spent to cast spells—the creatures, artifacts, and other sorceries that populated each player’s battlefield. As in thousands of card games spanning many centuries and cultures, *Magic* cards came into play in their upright, or portrait, orientation. But once in play, cards could be *tapped*—rotated ninety degrees—to indicate their use. Tapped lands generated mana; tapped creatures were committed to battle. The simple

1. Detlef Hoffman. *The Playing Card: An Illustrated History*. Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973.

visual cue gave both players a quick survey of the game's current resource allotment.

Garfield's revolution has since become one of card games' most influential mechanics. In the deluge of collectible card game (CCG) competitors and clones that followed *Magic's* debut, tapping has appeared—though never by its patented name<sup>2</sup>—in numerous themes and variations. The conspiracy-focused *On the Edge* (1994) uses “cranking” to indicate a card's triggered power, attack, or movement. *Pokémon* (1996) extends *Magic's* positional cues, using each cardinal direction to indicate a card's status: a counterclockwise turn shows that your Pokémon is asleep, a clockwise turn shows that it is paralyzed, and a full 180° turn shows that it is confused. *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (1999) uses rotation to indicate battle position: upright cards attack, rotated cards defend. Whether cards exhaust (*Warhammer 40,000: Conquest* (2014)), boot (*Doomtown* (1998)), engage (*Dune* (1997)), disengage (*Galactic Empires* (1994)), bow (*Legend of the Five Rings* (1995)), flop (*Adventure Time Card Wars* (2014)), open (*Heresy: Kingdom Come* (1995)), tack (*Seventh Sea* (1998)), or turn (*Shadowrun* (1997), *Shadowfist* (1995), *Firestorm* (2001)), the physical action is the same.

As a game mechanic, tapping worked because it multiplied a card's base combinatorial possibilities without the need for supplementary art, text, or other physical alterations. 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. But tapping also worked because, materially, a playing card is a flat rectangular plane. Squares, circles, hexagons, and other symmetrical

2. Wizard of the Coast's patent defines tapping as “rotating one or more cards on the playing surface from an original orientation to a second orientation...90 degrees from the first orientation.” See Richard Channing Garfield. “Trading card game method of play.” <http://www.google.com/patents/US5662332>

geometric surfaces do not lend themselves as easily to rotation. For Garfield, design followed physical form.

Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort inaugurated platform studies in 2009 to research the oft-ignored material substrate of digital media—graphics processors, cartridge ROM, disk sectors—and analyze how its specific form shapes the look, sound, and feel of the software it supports.<sup>3</sup> Atari VCS and Nintendo Entertainment System games, for instance, do not differ merely due to programmer fiat or raw processing speeds—the material hearts of these machines create specific affordances that shape design from the bottom up, circuit to code.

While prescribed for computational platforms like videogame consoles and personal computers, platform studies is pliant enough to accommodate non-digital media as well. Though they lack bit shift registers or operating systems, cards are platforms too. Their “hardware” supports particular styles, systems, and subjects of play while stymying others. Of course, pasting computational metaphors atop media that pre-date the analog/digital divide by more than a millennia risks imposing anachronistic technological norms that never factored into their design or use. But at a time when card games are experiencing a popular resurgence—especially in digital form—it is worthwhile to consider both how analog and digital characteristics overlap and intercede and what types of play cards encourage or discourage. *Magic*’s simple rotational gesture exploded the playing card design space, prompting designers to reconsider how cards, as a material form, could be used for games beyond the standard suited deck.<sup>4</sup> Playing cards’ shift to digital platforms similarly raises new design questions.

3. Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort. *Racing the Beam*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009.

4. *Magic* was not the first game to use rotation as a mechanic. *Mille Bornes*, for example, a racing card game dating at least to 1962, included both hazard and safety cards, the latter of which were played “crosswise” during a *coup-fourré*. However, *Magic* does appear to be the first to use rotation to indicate resource expenditure.

There are at least five interleaved platform characteristics that structure card game design. Cards are planar, uniform, ordinal, spatial, and textural. These five characteristics appear consistently in the centuries-long history of card games and define the playing card platform's formal contours. However, these are not exclusive but exceptional qualities. Video games are certainly good at counting and sorting numeric data, but a card's material form encourages ordinality in ways that other game media, whether badminton, backgammon, or *Bioshock* (2007), do not.

## PLANAR

The history of cards is a history of rectangles. Though scholars disagree about playing cards' exact date or location of origin,<sup>5</sup> one design pattern is consistent across disparate cultures and centuries: flat, rectilinear forms. Historical exceptions exist, most notably the circular Ganjifa cards prominent in India,<sup>6</sup> but the rectangle, taller than it is wide and almost universally held in its upright position, dominates the platform. Why this shape took precedence is unclear. Some historians believe cards trace their lineage to a marriage of Korean and Chinese divinatory arrows, narrow bamboo lots, and paper money,<sup>7</sup> and resembled books in miniature, a shape that fit comfortably (and readably) in the hand.

As planar surfaces, cards have two opposing sides that, barring

5. See George Beal. *Playing Cards and Their Story*. New York: Arco, 1975, pp. 7-10; Roger Tilly. *A History of Playing Cards*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1973, pp. 7-17; Roger Tilly. *Playing Cards*. London, Octopus, 1973, pp. 7-15.

6. Notes Tilly: "Indeed Indian cards are entirely different from those of any other country. They are circular, made from thin discs of wood, tortoiseshell, canvas, ivory or even fish scales, heavily lacquered, enamelled and hand-painted" (Tilly, *Playing Cards*, p. 11). Hoffmann suggests that the circular shape may be derived from draughts (i.e., checkers), though he adds that there is "no direct evidence of a relationship" between the two games (Hoffman, p. 54).

7. Other practical concerns likely played a role: the profile orientation matched the (typically royal) portraiture commonly decorating cards, rectilinear shapes were easy to print and cut on early presses, and cards, often used for education as well as games. See Tilly, *Playing Cards*, pp. 79-87 and Hoffmann, pp. 38-42.



any imaginative folding or mirror tricks, cannot be viewed simultaneously. In most games, the card's back—decorated with a uniform pattern to make all cards appear identical—faces one's opponent(s) while the front displays information meant to be hidden from other players. This simple binary state has spawned countless game variants that rely on concealment. Poker is the obvious example since its primary mechanic is secrecy, and it is distinctive as a game that can be won without winning, since bluffing successfully can coerce an opponent to concede a superior hand. Compare this to board games like chess, go, checkers, *Monopoly* (1935), or *Risk* (1959), where the distribution of information is equal across all players. Winning in such games defers to skill, chance, player stamina, alliances, or other means—but not concealment. Chess players cannot hide their king until a decisive checkmate, but card players can stow an “ace in the hole.” In cases where board games need to incorporate concealment (or corollaries like randomization), as in *Monopoly's* Community Chest or *Risk's* missions rules, cards provide the material means.

The card's planar surface also excels as a support for text, color, pattern, icons, and many other forms of art and design. In every playing card throughout history, whether used in games, education, or divination, the planar surface is a canvas in miniature, though the density and style of design varies tremendously across games. In past centuries, when card games were considered frivolous, unlawful, or sinful, card designers crowded card faces with moral, religious, or historical lessons, leaving the portion of the card reserved for game-specific information proportionately miniscule. During the mid-90s heyday of CCGs, rule text, game iconography, and statistical craft dominated the card's surface, sidelining decoration in favor of game-specific information.

Often subversions of platform characteristics, like reversing a card's concealment, yield the most interesting design results. In

*Hanabi* (2010), for example, players hold their cards face out and must use their teammates' verbal clues to deduce their own hand (and help others do the same). *Slapjack*, a children's game, uses a similar mechanic. Each player controls a stack of face-down cards. All players reveal one card per turn by flipping their card into a common pile so that their opponents can see it first. If a jack is revealed, the first player to slap their hand atop the card wins the pile. *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* (2014), a variation of the Russian game *Mafia* (1986), combines secrecy and role-playing to distribute information unevenly across the player group. No single player knows which players claim which cards and thus must deduce their roles (e.g. human or werewolf) through logic, conversation, and intrigue. These games undermine centuries of playing card convention by forcing players to reveal their cards to their opponent(s) first, though at drastically different tempos.

Playing cards' planar surfaces simultaneously excel at both displaying and concealing information, whether from one's opponent, as in most gambling games, or from oneself, as in games of *Memory* (1959) or patience (i.e., solitaire). Concealment in turn configures the arrangement and distribution of participating bodies. Card players commonly face one another in a shared space, allowing them to read both their cards and one another. Compare this to digital games, which arrange bodies (or typically, a single body) facing a screen, forcing cooperation or competition to either take place in that shared visual space, making secrecy and face-to-face play more difficult, or across multiple screens, often networked at a distance. Networked screens, whether ad hoc or online, reinstate concealment, but often at the expense of a shared local play space. Card design, both materially and mechanically, assumes local play and often reinforces this trait through common cards (e.g., the river in Texas Hold'em). Any dislocation of space (e.g., a Skype game) or time (e.g., play-by-mail) elevates concealment from rule to

threat and often requires the intercession of an impartial—and frequently digital—mediator to ensure fairness.

## UNIFORM

Playing cards, no matter their geometric form, are cut to identical sizes. Variations exist across games—tarot, bridge, and poker formats, for instance, are standards with slight rectilinear differences—but within games, cards typically share the same profile. Uniformity, in turn, breeds the deck, or multiple cards stacked atop one another, and the shuffle, the process of reordering a deck's sequence at random. In concert, the deck and shuffle introduce chance and mathematical variation.

When chance comes into play, uniformity guarantees fairness. In sport, standardization is crucial to competition. The *Official Rules of the National Basketball Association*, for example, dictate that the backboard must be a 6' x 3.5' transparent rectangle, the hoop measure 18" in diameter, and the basketball maintain an air pressure of 7.5–8.5 psi. Creating regional backboard and hoop variations would make it impossible to compare one player's or team's skill to another. Prior knowledge of a deck's sequence would likewise tilt a card player's advantage unfairly, a fact that motivates the casino industry's sophisticated surveillance and security systems.



*Image by Leonie di Vienna licensed under CC BY-NC.*

Historically, card backs were uniform in their blankness. They had no patterns besides those inherent to their supporting surface, typically thick paper or cardboard. However, the natural wear and tear from handling became an unfair competitive tell, so card makers devised uniform printed patterns to mitigate cheating. Uniform card faces took longer to adopt. Prior to the seventeenth century, court cards were single-ended, meaning that the king's portrait, for instance, only had one proper orientation. Strategic players discovered that they could spot a court card's presence when their opponent manually sorted their hand. Double-ended court cards obviated that need. Likewise, standardized, uniform corner indices notating the card's suit and value were adopted in America around 1870 to allow players to hold their poker hand in tightly-gripped "fans".<sup>8</sup>

Uniformity speaks primarily to the cultural and economic affordances of card games. The history of playing cards is hewn so closely to the history of mechanical reproduction—from Chinese woodblock printing to German wood- and copper-engraving—that uniformity is now a marker of industrialization

8. Tilley, *Playing Cards*, p. 69.

and capitalist exchange.<sup>9</sup> Mass production ensures that card replication is cheap and reliable, so one player's cards will be no better or worse than any other's. Cheap reproduction in turn drives the playing, trading, and collectible card industries, where scarcity and demand can transform a few cents of cardboard (or for digital games, a few kilobytes of data) into a valuable commodity. Today, the uniform surface becomes a site for branding and advertising. The *Yu-Gi-Oh!* card back, for instance, announces its participation in an international culture of commodity, exchange, reproduction, and play.

## ORDINAL

Since cards are planar and uniform, they can be grouped into sets, counted, sorted, ranked, indexed, and ordered. The standard playing card, dating at least from the fourteenth century, uses the card surface to count and group with numerals (typically one through nine) and suits (commonly four), respectively. Though the sequence, count, and distribution of numbers and symbols vary throughout history, most card games from the fourteenth through twentieth centuries rely on ordinality as their base mechanic, using a card's printed value or symbol to form a series or group of related cards.

Rummy, a card game from the early twentieth century, is the classic American example of platform ordinality. In two-hand rummy, each player is dealt ten cards from a standard pack of fifty-two. The object of the game is to form *sets*, which may be one of two types: a *group* of three or four cards of the same rank (e.g., four 5s) or a *sequence* of three or more cards with matching suits (e.g., ♣KQJ). Players *meld*, or lay down, their sets until they are able to deplete their entire hand. A secondary ordinality comes into play during scoring, as face and ace cards are assigned numeric values.

9. For examples of how playing cards helped spur the adoption and growth of mechanical reproduction, see Tilley, *Playing Cards*, pp. 37-43.

More modern ordinal games are notable for their redesigns of the classic playing card deck. *Uno* (1971) trades royal suits and symbols for a restrained color spectrum (yellow, blue, red, green), a more limited numeric run (0–9), and custom cards that control sequence or card draw (e.g., “Skip” and “Draw Two”). *Phase 10* (1982) adopts *Uno*’s (1971) colors, but being a modern rummy variant, uses the standard playing card sequence (1–12) along with “Skip” and “Wild” cards. *Skip-Bo* (1967) is simpler still, using non-suited numerals and a “Skip-Bo” wild card to construct card sequences from one to twelve.

Ordinality exploded after *Magic: The Gathering*, as card games adopted a statistical complexity previously reserved for video games and pen-and-paper role-playing games. Multiple interacting variables and supplemental rule text replaced simple suits and ranks. *Magic*, for instance, uses a collection of custom cards, replete with an ideographic iconography, to multiply the number of in-game combinatorial possibilities. Like *Uno* and *Phase 10*, *Magic* replaces suits with colors, each representing a mana type—white, blue, black, red, or green—whose cost must be paid to bring a card into play. For creature cards, royal ranks are replaced with power and toughness, designating how much damage a card can deal and endure, respectively. Card-specific rules printed directly on the card face introduce further variations. Today, *Magic*’s complexity compounds further due to the near-infinite range of card combinations made possible from its extensive library of cards, now thousands deep. Even in a standard fifty-two-card playing card deck, there are roughly  $8.0658 \times 10^{67}$  possible deck combinations—greater than the number of stars in the observable universe.<sup>10</sup> *Magic*’s deck

10. Dokkum and Conroy posit that there are roughly  $3 \times 10^{23}$ , or 300 sextillion, stars in the universe. See Seth Borenstein. “Number Of Stars In The Universe Could Be 300 Sextillion, Triple The Amount Scientists Previously Thought: Study.” *The Huffington Post*. December 1, 2010. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/01/number-of-stars-in-universe\\_n\\_790563.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/01/number-of-stars-in-universe_n_790563.html).

variations outnumber the celestial heavens of trillions of metaverses.

*Magic* more cleverly adopts (and patents) ordinality, via set creation and collection, as a correlative metagame. Players construct individual decks from a common card pool, then test them in competition. But the card pool is governed both by official sanctions (cards are regularly retired or banned from official play) and a purposefully constrained supply chain. By design, *Magic* borrows the collectible quality of sports and pop culture trading cards, using scarcity and concealment (via randomized “booster packs”) to make collection a game unto itself.

Prior to CCGs, players could purchase customized playing card decks, but the customization was limited to the cards’ decorative features. Your deck and mine might look wildly different, but we were guaranteed that both contained the same fifty-two cards. Selling cards in randomized packs and artificially limiting the mass production of particular cards introduced economic ordinality to the card platform and created an uneven distribution of mechanical possibilities within games. Participating competitively in CCGs meant an ongoing investment in new cards. Rarer cards became collectibles, sought after not only for their usefulness in play but for their value within the trading card economy. Card manufacturers and designers reinforced players’ consumptive impulses by incrementally retiring older cards and increasing the capabilities of newer cards—a process known as “power creep”—and ensured a perpetual stream of revenue from a single game.

In playing cards, ordinality embodies a hierarchical distribution of cultural capital, a reflection of social stratification represented for centuries through playing cards’ royal visages. Kings outrank queens who outrank jacks and so on down the line of succession. For today’s players living in republican or democratic societies,

royal cards are anachronistic reminders of a monarchical past, more caricatures than relevant cultural symbols. But the ordinal surface can still be a canvas for political hegemony. Following their 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. military distributed decks of camouflage-backed “personality identification playing cards” to active troops (and online). Starting with Saddam Hussein as the ace of spades, members of the Baath Party and the Revolutionary Command Council were ranked and ordered according to their “most wanted” status. The familiar playing cards, equally useful during downtime, gave soldiers a pictorial, ordinal shorthand for their most valuable targets, layering a proxy card game atop their war games. And while the U.S. military portrayed their adversaries as unwitting components of an international contest, the stakes were serious—many of those featured on the cards were subsequently captured or executed.<sup>11</sup>

11. A contemporary CNN Money report is notable not only for highlighting the card platform’s particular strengths, but moreso for acknowledging the equilateral role of play in leisure, commerce, and war: “Cards are small, portable and durable, unlike flip charts that might be used under other circumstances. Their added entertainment function provides incentive for soldiers to keep reviewing the names and images. ‘Given the way special forces operate playing might be a good idea,’ said [Lieutenant Commander Jim] Brooks. The cards would also provide a handy code for soldiers to refer to enemy personnel, he said, in case someone might be listening. ‘If you’re out in the field you can say, ‘Hey, I think I have the five of diamonds here,’’ he said.” Peter Valdes-Dapena. “Hot item: ‘Most wanted Iraqi’ cards.” *CNN Money*, April 16, 2003. [http://money.cnn.com/2003/04/14/pf/saving/iraq\\_cards/](http://money.cnn.com/2003/04/14/pf/saving/iraq_cards/).





*"Most Wanted" cards. Image by Tim Ellis licensed under CC BY-NC.*

## SPATIAL

Cards occupy space. Excluding some portable games or compact “microgames” (e.g. *Love Letter* (2012) uses only sixteen cards), cards require a flat surface for arrangement and display, setting an upper bound for a game’s spatial density and distribution. A game using ten thousand unique cards is not impossible to design (though it might be costly to manufacture), but it strains the limits of player comprehensibility and practical tabletop space.

Abstract card games that rely solely on concealment and ordinality use tabletop space for card display, sorting, or boundary markers. In blackjack, space simply sequesters player and dealer cards. No specific card arrangement is necessary beyond keeping each player’s cards separated and in view. In *Memory*, cards are commonly arranged in rows to provide players additional positional cues for re-locating cards. Such spaces have

no in-game meaning, symbology, or representational content. Space is simply the neutral site for play.

However, card arrangements can describe metaphorical, narrative, representational, geographic, and other hybrid spaces. Metaphorical spaces abound in thematic games, especially fantasy and science fiction, where fictional lore provides mechanical motivation for card placement. *Spellfire* (1994) uses a card arrangement called the *formation*, a six-card pyramid of *realm* cards whose base faces the card's owner. Thematically, these realms (which may represent single nations or entire empires) are kept distinct from other diegetic spaces (e.g., Limbo, Abyss, and Void) and non-diegetic spaces (e.g., one's hand or discard pile). The formation and its accompanying spaces do not depend on precise positions (e.g., a player's discard pile might be to the left or right of the formation), but their interior arrangements are mechanically literal, since realm cards at the top of the formation shield those further down and cards in the Void are no longer in play.

In *Very Clever Pipe Game* (1997), cards in play become the game space. Each card depicts a section of pipes and connectors at various angles that players use to complete pipe circuits. The scoring player then removes those cards from the game and fills the gaps with new cards. Similarly, in *FlowerFall* (2012), players drop flower cards in order to construct a connected garden patch on the table below.<sup>12</sup> The storytelling game *Once Upon a Time* (1993), in contrast, uses cards to construct player-mediated narrative space. Cards list story prompts that a player uses to build a collaborative fairy tale. *Boss Monster* (2013), inspired by the maps of platformer videogames, combines both approaches: players lay down room cards in sequential order, creating a linear space that players must traverse from left to right and a narrative space that tells the "story" of a hero's quest.

12. My thanks to Aaron Trammell for suggesting this game.

All games engage space, but how they do so depends on their material form.<sup>13</sup> Board games, like many sports, clearly demarcate a play space set apart from their surroundings, provide a literal platform for other play implements, make quantifiable spatial comparisons straightforward, and provide a large canvas for illustration and text. So both sports and board games excel at games of territorial capture and control, spatial mastery, mapping, and traversal. Football and *Candyland* (1949) players alike struggle to move from start to goal line. Cards, in contrast, create and contain space that is more mobile, modular, and metaphorical. Card space is space you can touch.

#### TEXTURAL

Cards are made for hands, and a linguistic convention arose to reinforce the link: a *hand* designates the cards currently in a player's possession. And touch is a ubiquitous partner of card game design. Shuffling, stacking, dealing, cutting, fanning, folding, flipping—all are manual processes that require players to touch their cards. Observe any high-level competitive card game player, from poker to *Magic*, and you will notice the near-obsessive compulsive degree with which they manipulate their hands.

13. Despite their thin planar surface, cards also use vertical space. *Gloom* (2005) and *Hecatomb* (2005), for instance, both use transparent plastic cards to make verticality a key play mechanic. In *Gloom*, modifier cards are played atop character cards to create stacking effects. Depending on the position of a modifier's artwork, the new card may obscure or augment previous modifiers. *Hecatomb* uses a similar mechanic to create Lovecraftian "abominations" assembled from stacks of lesser "minion" cards.



*Magic: The Gathering cards. Image by Max Mayorov licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.*

The card's planar surface promotes easily handling. Cards are small and thin enough to hold in multiples, sort quickly, rearrange, and manipulate individually, yet durable enough to withstand hundreds or thousands of plays. Manufacturing improvements have likewise refined the card's texture over centuries. Rounded corners decreased wear-and-tear (and cheating), for example, and the "pneumatic finish," invented by William Thomas Shaw in the mid-twentieth century, permitted "one card to slide easily over another and the pack to be easily shuffled and dealt."<sup>14</sup>

Texture also regulates duration. Computers handle digital cards at microprocessor speed. Ultimately the cards on screen are a visual abstraction of numeric variables stored in memory. Analog cards require external physical computation because their ordinal values are hewn to their surface. And physical computation takes time. Players set up their decks, sort their hands, consider their plays, rifle their cards, and watch their fellow players. Texture throttles the pace of analog play.

Without the proper texture, the card platform would be less

14. Tilley, *Playing Cards*, p. 69.

suitable for ordinal play. Modern checkers are stackable, but their thickness—a boon to their use as movable playing pieces—precludes any practical use for building decks, sorting, or counting. A baseball’s shape and texture are ideal for handling, especially the subtle grip articulations pitchers adopt to control the ball’s flight, but spheres are useless for stacking or concealment. Thin wooden planes make for ideal paddles in table tennis, but their rigid surface would both wreak havoc on hands and make shuffling impossible. Conversely, playing cards are poor substitutes for checkers, baseballs, and ping-pong paddles. Each platform for play demands a suitable texture.<sup>15</sup>

Texture again reinforces cards’ local character. Touching implies proximity and proximity demands a shared space. Divorcing cards from texture requires a fundamental reconfiguration of their material form, a shift experienced most acutely in their translation to digital objects.

## CARD WARS

Though in their early years video games largely modeled their analog kin, especially sport (e.g. tennis) and playing cards, computers have significantly replaced or eroded many of the latter’s platform characteristics. Playing cards’ simple ordinal sets were straightforward to model both mathematically and graphically, and the raster monitor’s gridded field proved an ideal replacement for both rectilinear representations of cards and their playing spaces. Concealment and competition, however, proved more elusive, even mutually exclusive. Microprocessors were not powerful enough to handle the complex artificial intelligence necessary to simulate a human opponent, but human opponents sitting side-by-side in front of the same screen would be privy to one another’s cards.

15. Nonetheless, players have enlisted cards’ textural qualities for uses beyond competitive play. Scaling, or the art of throwing cards, has been a magician’s trick since the nineteenth century. The house of cards likewise subverts the card’s thin, slippery finish, using the unlikely medium for building impressively precarious structures.

Time and technology has erased these limitations: monitor resolutions support photorealistic cards; artificial intelligence offers all levels of competitive play; and online or ad hoc networks give each player their own screen. But texture still remains a significant technological hurdle. The ripple shuffle is replaced with the dry random number generator, a poor substitute for a dealer's trained hands, no matter how efficient the computer shuffle may be. Digital skeuomorphs of physical surfaces remain stopgap solutions. *HOYLE Video Poker* (1999) traffics in faux-wood grain and felt, its "video" cards perfect simulacra of their physical predecessors, but a fat, shaded "DEAL" button replaces the textures of flesh on polymer. Apple's popularization of touchscreen devices returns cards to fingers, but at the cost of a new kind of uniformity: every object we touch is but a thin veneer of glass atop illuminated pixels.

Again, none of the playing card platform's qualities are unique, or even exceptional. Computers are the clear ordinal powerhouses—even the earliest room-sized machines of the 1940s could calculate hundreds or thousands of times faster than the most skilled human computers. Today's processors best us by the trillions. The key distinction is that cards are ordinal in form and computers are ordinal in process. Not to discount the logic gates that ultimately drive binary calculation, but such microscopic mechanisms are abstracted away through multiple layers of electrical and software engineering, while cards' ordinal form is always locally manipulable. Sorting, shuffling, and grouping are manual processes and thus face a hard physical limit on calculation unless players use supplementary tools, whether dice, calculators, or laptops. Computers excel at calculating complex math, storing variables, iterating through loops, and branching based on user input—all processes that simple material ordinality cannot adequately support. Consequently, genres that rely on such processes, like role-playing games, make for poor card games. And when card games

are translated to digital form, they often pick up a platform-specific layer of statistical complexity, as in *Hearthstone's* (2014) RPG-like character leveling.

There are tens of thousands of digital card games on every imaginable computer platform, and most players probably don't mind sacrificing their physical cards for infinitely thin planar surfaces, pixel-perfect uniformity, and processor-driven ordinality. But the best of these games recognize the loss and replace playing cards' materiality with virtual supplements beyond simple skeuomorphs. *Adventure Time Card Wars* (2014) is one of the most compelling examples not only because it exists both as a physical and digital card game, but also because each uses different rules and mechanics suited to its respective platform.<sup>16</sup>

Both versions of *Card Wars* are two-player competitive CCGs that restrict their play space to four lanes representing a particular landscape (e.g., SandyLands, Useless Swamps). Players may place only one creature and one building per lane, and direct card battle may only take place between competing cards that share a lane. Ordinal comparison of competing cards' attack and defense statistics, factoring in any additional *flooping* or building modifiers, determines the battle results.

Beyond these basic elements, both games' mechanics diverge significantly. In analog *Card Wars*, ordinal computation is appropriately minimal. Card statistics and modifiers are easy to add, subtract, and compare, and cardboard counters track any persistent creature damage. Digital *Card Wars* smartly hands computation over to the computer. Card statistics are wildly inflated from their analog twins—the Struzann Jinn card's 1

16. What's stranger still is that both games are adaptations of a fictional card game of the same name, originally featured in the "Card Wars" episode of the *Adventure Time* cartoon. See "Card Wars (game)." *Adventure Time Wiki*. [http://adventuretime.wikia.com/wiki/Card\\_Wars\\_\(game\)](http://adventuretime.wikia.com/wiki/Card_Wars_(game)).

ATK/11 DEF, for instance, balloons to 15/25. Likewise, both games' resource tempos vary. Analog *Card Wars* allows two actions per turn, and card costs are balanced accordingly; digital *Card Wars* uses an escalating resource pool that starts at 2 and increases to 10, throttling the play of higher-cost cards. The physical action of flopping, or rotating, cards becomes a tappable button on the tablet screen, and the straightforward numeric comparisons between battling cards has a digital-exclusive augment: for each card battle, a carnival-style roulette wheel appears. Tapping the wheel at a specific point causes double damage—or a miss

Digital *Card Wars* recognizes the peculiarities of the tablet platform and prunes unnecessary physical ornament from its presentation. Once cards are played to their landscapes, they evaporate, their constituent creatures and buildings rising from the playing field as animated 3D models. Like many of its digital peers, *Card Wars* is easily conceivable as a game using figurines, tokens, or even spreadsheets, since none of the playing card's platform-specific characteristics are essential for play. Ordinality is easily handled by a microprocessor; neither planar nor spatial qualities are constrained by physical limitations; uniformity is not necessary for concealment, since players play on individual computers; and texture is secondary ornamentation. Players may flick their cards onto the playing field, but once there, the physical referent vanishes.

*Card Wars*, *Hearthstone*, and many other digital-native card games reference physical cards for their commodity status rather than their material and mechanical restraints. Analog cards involve inks, cardboards, polymers, printing presses, laser cutters, foil wrappers, transport vehicles, shelves, and game stores. Even absent the artificial supply constraints of the CCG market, analog cards face real physical constraints, whether they be dwindling retail spaces or damp basements. While digital cards involve significant labor—programming, graphic design,



distribution, advertising—their supply is theoretically limitless. Yet digital card games regularly constrain card distribution, manufacture “rare” cards, and create local economies that translate time or legal tender into virtual coins, gems, chests, and boosters.

Formalizing a platform’s characteristics is more than a descriptive exercise, especially when we track a game’s adaptation—or port, in computer game parlance—across multiple divergent platforms. Identifying which platform fixtures a designer chooses to drop or adopt in that process tells us a lot about their conceptual priorities, their economic concerns, and their participation in (or ignorance of) cultures of play. Cryptozoic’s *Card Wars* is sold in \$19.95 starter boxes, supplemented by \$2.99 booster packs that draw from a small card pool, and distributed by online and brick-and-mortar retailers, including Target and Amazon. Kung-Fu Factory’s *Card Wars* is a \$3.99 app available through Google’s and Apple’s respective digital storefronts, supplemented by in-app purchases of gems that otherwise require hours of in-game play to mine, and has a card pool that can theoretically multiply infinitely. Shedding the vestments of the playing card platform save for its material supply constraints acknowledges that today’s mobile app economy demands game prices approaching zero, augmented by persistent and perpetual “micro-transactions.” We must acknowledge that physical playing cards are a niche business compared to Western culture’s absorption in mobile digital play, and that a digital playing card is still a playing card, but not a platform.

# ORIENTALISM AND ABSTRACTION IN EUROGAMES

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BY WILL ROBINSON

Literary theorist Edward Said once wrote, “The Orient [is] viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing.”<sup>1</sup> I suggest here that board games also contribute to Orientalism, shaping what the East is to the West through abstraction and the politics of erasure. While it is not my intent to argue for or against this practice, this essay reveals the political representations of transnational history in play. I argue that this form of representation is not necessarily the result of overt ideology, but rather of the formal properties of the board game medium as such. It is dangerous to laud game design based on form and function without consideration for its political ramifications. To demonstrate as much, I will use Paolo Mori’s *Vasco da Gama* (2009) as an emblematic case study.

1. Edward Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books, p. 41.



Box Art for *Vasco de Gama*. Image by Luis Olcese licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

Mori's work belongs to the Eurogame tradition. In the second half of the 20th century, the genre emerged as a form of board game reflecting an alternate set of design principles and practices. In the monograph *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*, Stewart Woods recounts that the highest-selling games in post-war Europe were American properties such as *Clue* (1949) and *Monopoly* (1935), which were owned by Hasbro and Parker Brothers. In 1978, the major German toy publisher Ravensburger began to invest in local game design prizes to help build a successful line of national games that might compete against American products. The most notable of these prizes is – and remains to this day – the *Spiel Des Jahres*. The contest prompted a creative surge among German game designers, who produced increasingly polished and innovative board-game play. The aesthetic end result could be succinctly described by one of Germany's most decorated designers, Wolfgang Kramer:<sup>2</sup>

“Players act constructive in order to improve their own results. They do not act destructive and destroy the playing of their opponents.”<sup>3</sup>

This game design “arms race” led to a general aversion toward military violence in German board games,<sup>4</sup> and was part of a larger cultural shift described by the German historian Geoff Eley: “Guilty remembrance of terrible hardships conjoins with an unevenly-grounded recognition of social responsibility to produce the present breadth of German aversion against war.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that most German-made games of repute avoid standard battle-scenes such as those found in *Risk* (1959) or *Axis and Allies* (1981). In contrast, American hobbyist games of the same era became increasingly focused on the detailed simulation of war. Such American games often presented entire books of rules on everything from supply lines to firing rates, whereas even the more advanced Eurogame rule-sets are often explained in fewer than ten image-laden pages. Eurogames foster different forms of conflict, avoiding the militaristic battles of American wargames by reducing play times, avoiding the elimination of players, and even constraining leading players, so as to keep all participants competitive throughout the game. Despite the turn away from military violence in game design, however, board games of this genre maintain an interest in depicting histories of European conquest. This contradiction prompts the question: how can colonialist narratives exist within Eurogames without reference to violence? Eurogames often contain the problematic

2. In addition to having been regularly nominated for the award, Kramer won the Spiel des Jahres for *Heimlich & Co* (1984), *Auf Achse* (1987), *El Grande* (1996), *Tikal* (1999), and *Torres* (2000).
3. Stewart Woods. *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, p. 58.
4. For more information about bans on manufacture of military-related products in Germany (including toys), see Frederick Gareau's "Morgenthau's Plan for Industrial Disarmament in Germany." *The Western Political Quarterly* 14.2 (1961), pp. 517-534.
5. Geoff Eley. "The Unease of History: Settling Accounts with the East German Past." *History Workshop Journal* 57.1 (2004), p. 175.

presentation of European expansionism without including the indigenous other.

Paolo Mori's *Vasco da Gama* epitomizes this phenomenon. Representationally, the game is set within narratives of discovery, sailing, and trade that defined the 15th century Portuguese empire. Thematically, the board indicates to the players that their actions are meant to represent the process of buying ships, equipping them with sailors, and sending them off to Africa. Amongst the players, the best equipped might even make it to India.

*Vasco da Gama* actually tells us very little about being a Portuguese expedition manager.<sup>6</sup> We come to know that sailors went up the coast of Africa and across the Indian Ocean without visiting the Middle East. This is not indicated to us via the rules, but rather by the routes depicted on the map. We know that missionaries were sent on these merchant voyages, but not what they did or whom they met. The rules tell us very little here; if the wooden white figures had not been named as missionaries in the rulebook, players would be left to speculate about whether there was any religious work involved.

Using a term from Ian Bogost's work on simulation in games, we can inspect the play of *Vasco da Gama's* proposed system of "unit operations," i.e., the subset of functions that make up the system, the game's mechanics. Bogost's term helps us investigate games in relation to other media and systems of representation more generally.<sup>7</sup> When we appeal to these facets of the game's design, it becomes clear that Mori is uninterested

6. While *Vasco da Gama* is well-regarded amongst board game enthusiasts, currently ranked 147th among strategy games on the website BoardGameGeek (as of Dec. 2, 2014), it has its detractors. In his video review, Tom Vasel explains further: "Yes, I know it is an exciting theme for somebody in the world, but for most of us it is not... when you actually play the game you don't feel the wind in your hair when you sail! You don't even feel the logic of a spreadsheet. It is colder than that. ... Don't come into this looking for any kind of theme." Tom Vasel. "Vasco da Gama Review." *The Dice Tower*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFLYxGIPu0Y>.

in representing an account of Portuguese violence. There are simply no mechanics that offer resistance from any foreign entity, as competition consists entirely of inter-European bidding wars. At best, we instead learn how to navigate a strange form of mercantilism reminiscent of current neo-liberal ideology. With its worker placement system, *Vasco da Gama* occupies the player with timing market logics and compromising the optimal for the possible. Perhaps the most salient unit operation stems from the reward system of the game. Short voyages to the southern parts of Africa are profitable if they can continue up along the coast. Long voyages deliver prestige, but do not return capital. We are never told why. In fact, we are likely to disbelieve anything explained to us, knowing that Eurogames avoid positive feedback loops and probably added such rules to make the game more enjoyable to play. When one considers that this game's financial success rests on winning awards such as the Spiel des Jahres and is made in the same vein as its contemporary contenders, it likely serves two contradictory masters. If anything, *Vasco da Gama* communicates *despite* itself through what it omits: violence. Given that Eurogames offer abstract systemic representations, we might ask what is being abstracted out. In this case – as is often done – the historical recounting of European expansionism is glorified in economic terms, rather than problematized in militaristic ones.

The cultural anthropologist and Islamic studies scholar Engeng Ho explains that the distinctive characteristic of the Vasco da Gama epoch “was the new importance of state violence to markets... The marriage of cannon to trading ship was the crucial, iconic innovation.”<sup>8</sup> For Mori to insert the theme of Portuguese trade into the optimal Eurogame design model, with

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

8. Engeng Ho. "Empire Through Diasporic Eyes: A View From the Other Boat." *Comparative Studies in Society and History: An International Quarterly* 46.2 (2004), p. 218.

its short rule sets and intolerance toward warfare, he had to abstract the violence of that trade system out of the game. Though he received critical acclaim (as previously noted), his creation also whitewashes history. Ho continues his castigation of Vasco da Gama's history, writing:

In addition to plunder and murder, the Portuguese reserved for themselves trade in profitable items like pepper and ginger, thus seeking to ruin the Muslims in all departments... In short, Portuguese colonial and imperial actions were destroying the multi-religious, cosmopolitan societies of trading ports in Malabar, and the diasporic Muslim networks across the Indian Ocean which articulated with them.<sup>9</sup>

Mori never mentions that Calicut was made a Portuguese trading port through cannon fire. His revisionist history describes his players as "rich shipowners who, under [da Gama's] patronage, aim to achieve prestige and riches."<sup>10</sup> Though the figure of Francisco Alvares (The Priest) alludes to some element of religion while also providing the player with missionaries, the only reference to violence in the game comes in the depiction of Bartolomeu Dias holding a sword on the game board. Activating him grants the player first turn in the following round, in addition to a few abstract victory points. Tellingly, there is no mention of an "other" who might have historically received the hidden end of the sword.

These representational tropes repeat in several other Eurogames as well. Stewart Woods explains that, in Eurogames, "direct conflict [in particular] is rarely called upon to motivate players as a thematic goal. Instead, the emphasis is typically upon individual achievement, with thematic goals such as building, development and the accumulation of wealth being prevalent."<sup>11</sup> Woods does not address the fact that building

9. Ho, p. 224.

10. Paolo Mori. *Vasco da Gama*. Rio Rancho, NM: Rio Grande Games, 2009, p. 1.

11. Woods, p. 110.

structures and accumulating wealth often came at the expense of the other's wealth and land. Taking violent histories and turning them into resource management/worker-placement games for family audiences creates an ideological fairy tale. *Vasco da Gama* reinforces a clean and unproblematic interpretation of the Portuguese empire with each play.

Woods writes that the four criteria for the judges of the Spiel des Jahres are:

1. Game concept (originality, playability, game value)
2. Rule structure (composition, clearness, comprehensibility)
3. Layout (box, board, rules)
4. Design (functionality, workmanship).<sup>12</sup>

Political justice or fair representation is nowhere to be found in these criteria. The award remains important as an institution to watch; Woods cites Scott Tepper, who reports that a typical Eurogame will sell 10,000 units for a nomination and nearly half a million for winning the award.<sup>13</sup> If the Spiel des Jahres determines both the field of production and consumption, then it seems that the entire culture of Eurogames aims to be politically disinterested. In so doing, it distorts history and excises guilt from the West. Aaron Trammell has written about this practice of design by competition, explaining that rubrics for game critique often misconstrue games and limit their aesthetic potential. Each of the aforementioned criteria for the Spiel des Jahres, which are nearly identical to Trammell's case studies (that depict a North American variation of Eurogame design), can be easily subverted for political affect.<sup>14</sup> Of course, because market demands lead to these criteria in the first

12. Woods, p. 51.

13. Woods, p. 221.

14. Aaron Trammell. "Who Judges the Judges? Evaluating Competition as a Technique of Evaluation in Online Game Design Forums." In *Online Evaluation of Creativity in the Arts*. Edited by Cecilia Suhr. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 72.



place, the judgments might reflect more of a consumerist – rather than design-oriented – ideal.

In his essay, “Strategies for Publishing Transformative Boardgames,” Will Emigh argues that a zine-style culture is not only possible with game design, but desirable for several reasons. He offers the board game *Archipelago* (2012), as an example of a mainstream board game failing to produce adequate political discourse, even though it features “natives” who must be forced to work and are pacified by player controlled churches. Emigh explains that the game itself is “abstract and it is hard to read a deeper cultural message than ‘there were natives before colonialists arrived.’”<sup>15</sup> Emigh’s critique of *Archipelago* – framing it as an instrument too abstract to mechanically create political justice – is well taken. That being said, however, he goes on to suggest that distribution networks are to blame for the game’s political inadequacies, particularly because of a need for mass-market appeal. On this point, I disagree with Emigh. While it is certainly true that distribution networks affect the cultural products moving through them, different distribution forms offer few solutions when the game design itself elides important political debates.

I remain optimistic. It is entirely possible to imagine a Eurogame of the Vasco da Gama era that does not abstract violence. The form of Eurogames is not so strict as to preclude non-Orientalist representations. The conflation of misunderstood history and the medium’s economic tendencies leads to uninspired modern board games. Surely, the gamewright familiar with post-colonialist theory might abstract other aspects of history to make salient those forms of Western oppression. Brenda Romero has already made several politically informed board games, most famously *Train* (2009). Her works

15. Will Emigh. "Strategies for Publishing Transformative Board Games." *Analog Game Studies* 1.2 (2014). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/09/strategies-for-publishing-transformative-board-games/>.

regularly undermine taken-for-granted principles of Eurogame design, such as determinate game length, replayability, clarity, etc. Because these conventions abstract the grotesque from history, Romero makes a practice of subverting them. Unaltered, the Eurogame form may be adequate for remediating some histories, but will fail when relating others. Here, game design should change to reflect histories worth telling. Rather than shoehorning narrative content onto mechanics, these jarring and unexpected rule changes might just make the forgotten and unexpected parts of history all the more salient. My hope is that we challenge design principles and rubrics by revealing how problematically apolitical narratives are embedded into certain game design principles. In doing so, we might prompt game designers to take notice of their Orientalist tendencies among any number of oppressive practices.



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# DOCUMENTATION

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# FROM WHERE DO DUNGEONS COME?

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BY AARON TRAMMELL



Image by Jason Morningstar licensed under CC-BY by Tony Dowler on Flickr.

Although the infamous fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)<sup>1</sup> may not seem to be overtly political, its structure and design belie the pervasiveness of the cultural anxieties at the time. In his essay about the ways that *Dungeons & Dragons* relates to a variety of cultural norms, Matthew Chrulew asserts

1. Thanks to Jon Peterson for lending his excellent bibliographic eye to this essay. His keen feedback is much appreciated.

that the game simulates the bureaucratic tropes of late capitalism in the ways that it affords players control of their environments through an endless set of tables, charts, and figures. Specifically, he argues that the maps packaged in the game are the most fundamental of all the tools that the dungeon master keeps in their toolkit. “The map is a principle trope of modern fantasy fiction and FRPGs: accompanied by a detailed, descriptive key, it delineates the contours of the imaginary world, imparting both knowledge and mystery,” Chrulew writes. “The freedom of [player characters] to travel and explore the game-world varies, but all is finally determined by the pathways and delineations of the map.”<sup>2</sup> Chrulew explicates how maps determine the action and functions of a site, and I further posit that they also tell much about the cultures that have produced them. While many maps that have been packaged in fantasy role-playing games focus on the wilderness, many others focus on the “dungeon,” which is a notably exotic locale. This essay suggests that the emergence of the “dungeon” as a representational fantasy trope in the 1950s/60s is symbolically related to popular perspectives on nuclear attacks circulating in Cold War America.

The dungeon setting is best fleshed out in the classic *Dungeons & Dragons* manual, *The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*. Published in tandem with the other two core manuals in 1974, the original rulebook had a circulation of only 1000 copies.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, game designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson introduce this interesting twist that had previously been absent from fantasy wargames.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, they encouraged players to plumb (and design) the depths of the underworld, as opposed to the more common terrain of the wilderness. This was a new

2. Matthew Chrulew. "Masters of the Wild: Animals and the Environment in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 32.1 (2006), 146.

3. *The Acaeum: Dungeons & Dragons Knowledge Source* is an excellent reference for statistics such as this. <https://www.acaeum.com/ddindexes/setpages/original.html>.

4. *Dungeons and Dragons* emerged from the same hobby communities that shared fantasy wargames. Its precursor, *Chainmail*, by Gygax and Jeff Perren, was a traditional fantasy-style wargame.

addition to a genre that had previously focused almost exclusively on armies clashing in the traditional battlefield setting.

To be fair, the concept of underworld scenography would not have lurched out of the blue for Gygax and Arneson. Though fantasy wargames to this point had been preoccupied with the simulation of grand armies rushing one another in an open battlefield, and scenarios of “defending the castle,” subterranean imagery was also alive and well in both popular culture and the media. Utopic fiction scholar, Peter Fitting, has been instrumental in showing how this genre of fiction far predates 19th century texts such as *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.<sup>5</sup> Though the genre of subterranean fiction dates back for centuries, traceable to even Dante’s *Inferno*, it is important to note that there was a strange and significant recurrence of it in 1950s and 1960s media.

Both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien featured caves prominently in their work. From the dungeons of Moria in *Lord of the Rings*, to Underland in *The Silver Chair* (volume four in *The Chronicles of Narnia*), the fantasy genre of fiction advanced a robust understanding of the cave after World War II. Other forms of popular media also featured subterranean societies: in cinema, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* was adapted to film in 1959, and *The Mole People* was released in 1956. Popular television series often featured episodes that took place in caves; *Star Trek* featured an episode called “For the World is Hollow and I have Touched the Sky” that thoroughly explored the idea of an underground society. These, and other examples, follow what Fitting and other scholars often refer to as the “Hollow Earth” theory, which advances the idea that the center of the Earth is hollow. Fiction that explored the idea did so by conducting

5. Peter Fitting, ed. *Subterranean Worlds: A Critical Anthology*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2004.



thought experiments regarding what sorts of societies might exist underground, and in so doing juxtaposed them against dominant constructions of society.



*The interior world from The Goddess of Atvatabar (1892).*

*Image within the public domain.*

Although the subterranean is often posed in opposition to aboveground terrain, there is a striking similarity between the unpopulated recesses of the underworld and the unpopulated barrens of the wilderness. The wilderness, though never considered safe in our fantasy imaginaries, is depicted as a particularly dangerous environment in *The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*; at least as dangerous, if not more so, than the mines of a dungeon. Although about one fourth of wilderness encounters would be with men (as opposed to flying creatures, giants, lycanthropes, animals, or dragons), the types of men one might encounter were concerning, at best: bandits, brigands, necromancers, wizards, lords, superheroes<sup>6</sup> and patriarchs could be encountered in the wilderness.<sup>7</sup> Contrasted with the kobolds, goblins, skeletons, orcs, giant rats, centipedes, bandits, and

6. The jargon for superhero means simply a powerful hero; this is not a reference to comic book superheroes.

7. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. *The Underground & Wilderness Adventures*. Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974, p. 18.

spiders of the underground,<sup>8</sup> it becomes clear how Gygax's wilderness was no safer than the underworld.

Although the representational space of both the wilderness and the dungeon are equivalently dangerous, it is important to consider the ways in which players are granted control of the space in both contexts. Whether underground or in the wilds, players were given the tools to understand the unpredictability of their environments. With the maps and grids of the game they could see on a table with a birds-eye-view the likelihood of encountering danger in their journey. Furthermore, Gygax and Arneson encourage players to hack the systems they offer in the guide:

There are unquestionably areas that have been glossed over. While we deeply regret the necessity, space requires that we put in the essentials only, and the trimming will oftimes [*sic*] have to be added by the referee and his players. We have attempted to furnish an ample framework, and building should be both easy and fun. In this light, we urge you to refrain from writing [us] for rule interpretations or the like unless you are absolutely at a loss, for everything herein is fantastic, and the best way is to decide how you would like it to be, and then make it just that way.<sup>9</sup>

The point here is clear. Though the charts in *The Underground & Wilderness Adventures* offer a suggestion for how to moderate the realms of fantasy that constitute the realms of *Dungeons & Dragons*, they are, above all, loose guidelines which are left to interpretation by player and referee discretion.

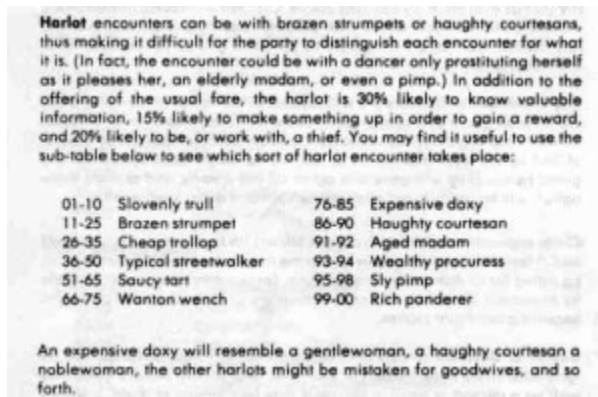
The representational context of *Dungeons & Dragons* has undoubtedly become clear. The critters underground are just as alien and scary as those above ground, but, for the most part, those underground are purely imaginary, while real men<sup>10</sup> above ground still perpetually engage in violence, skullduggery, and

8. Gygax and Arneson, p. 10.

9. Gygax and Arneson, p. 26.

10. I use men here only because it is the predominant usage in the original *Dungeons & Dragons*

brutality. Furthermore, in all contexts, the fantastic populations below the surface could be controlled completely by interested players. But America in 1974 was an uncontrollable and scary place. Watergate had shown citizens that their government was not to be trusted, there was widespread rioting as the status quo of civil rights was challenged, and the population lived beneath the shadow of the Vietnam War and, even more chillingly, the atomic bomb. The dungeon was a fantastic retreat for a class of mostly white, male, suburban players looking to escape these cultural anxieties.



*A (rather sexist) example of a random encounter from the 1st edition Dungeoneer's Guide (1979). CC-BY morrow @enworld.org.*

The fascinating thing about the change of scenery offered by *The Underground & Wilderness Adventures* guide is that there are few precedents in the community built around this topic. Besides the aforementioned chapters in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there were few games that centered on subterranean locales, a trend that reflects how these wargaming communities had kept to the traditions of the wargame genre even when delving into fantasy role-playing games.<sup>11</sup> So what could have

manuals and fan literature at this time. I point this out only to draw attention to the sexism present in the manuals at the time.

motivated this deliberate and genre-bending turn? In the absence of evidence, it is important to turn toward immanence, and consider some of the popular attitudes of the time around the topic of the Cold War.

Indeed, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi explains in her book *The Worlds of Herbert Khan: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*, that life underground was a leading suggestion for nuclear preparedness in the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Discussing “The Mineshaft Gap”—RAND strategist Herbert Khan’s suggestion that a post-nuclear America build sustainable communities in mines, made popular in his bestselling book *On Thermonuclear War*—Gharmani-Tabrizi explains that subterranean development, although heavily criticized and not necessarily popular, was a key discourse in Cold War America, even being parodied in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

Given that other military strategists such as Jerry Pournelle had strong ties with magazines like *The Avalon Hill General* (arguably a space of discourse which unified the 1960s hobby wargame community) as well as the abundance of veterans also publishing in the same community, it is likely that these ideas were traded amongst the participants in the community. Or, at least, lingering as an informed anxiety below the main discussions of the community. After all, there is a strange symmetry between a seemingly inexplicable turn toward underground mapping and worldmaking, the implementation of these subterranean worlds into a set of simulation mechanics, and the necessity of a specialist workforce to explore, redefine, and eventually refine rock into new commodities advocated by Khan.

And, while dungeons, in this context, serve as the key touchstone

11. To be fair, Gygax was an active participant in the fanzine *Thangorodrim*, which specialized in *Diplomacy* variants, including one entitled “Mordor Versus the World” which took place in the *Lord of the Rings* universe.
12. Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi. *The Worlds of Herbert Khan: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.

in organizing and understanding these new worlds, it is important to think of the ways that they serve as a key act of worldmaking and exploration, too. Players had the opportunity to live out their nuclear anxieties in these role-play scenarios where subterranean society was a distinct and plausible possibility. And with this change in locale, the timbre of simulation was also changed. The systems of representation, epitomized by the dungeon, showcase how the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* dealt with far more than just the mapping of the underground. They were instead systems that helped players to manage their affects, and in so doing, offer strategies for coping with a variety of Cold War fears.<sup>13</sup>

13. Matthew Chrlew. "Masters of the Wild: Animals and the Environment in Dungeons & Dragons." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 32.1 (2006), 146.

# LARP-AS-PERFORMANCE-AS-RESEARCH

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BY EMMA LEIGH WALDRON

I would like to address the ways in which larp can be used as Performance-as-Research (PaR),<sup>1</sup> and the ways in which documentation practices can serve that purpose. It is my intention to bring larp into the conversations predominant in performance studies about the ethics and efficacy of documenting ephemeral events, encourage critical approaches towards documentation practices, and open up further discussion around documentation practices of larps and other analog games in various communities around the world. In short, we must question *why* we document larps. If we document our larps out of the desire to preserve the unique, ephemeral event that can never be recreated (that resists scientific reproducibility), then we must not forget that the very thing that gives larp such power is that it remains not in written documents, but in the imaginations of its players, the very place from whence the larp itself was created.

Other larp scholars, such as Marjukka Lampo, have also found performance studies a useful lens through which to understand larp, particularly as it relates to ephemerality.<sup>2</sup> However, I am

1. For more information about PaR see, for example, <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/jones.htm>.

2. Marjukka Lampo. "Larp, Theatre and Performance." In *Think Larp: Academic Writings from*

interested in an approach to larp that challenges this traditional understanding of performance. In her seminal text on archiving live performance, Rebecca Schneider offers a counter-suggestion to the taken-for-granted definition of performance in the field of performance studies as that which is ephemeral, or that which cannot remain.<sup>3</sup> She posits that this is not the only way to understand performance, and that it is, in fact, a perspective that is necessarily established and informed by oppressive patriarchal and capitalistic traditions. In Schneider's utopic perspective on performance as something that certainly does remain but just "remains differently,"<sup>4</sup> performance becomes a powerfully subversive force that resists the "patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural) logic of the Archive."<sup>5</sup> The "body-to-body transmissions"<sup>6</sup> of performance are simply a different way of learning, teaching, and knowing. These lessons and discoveries are written in our bodies and documented in our memories. And if the academy is an institution established by, primarily controlled by, and still operating within the rules of this Archive, then Schneider's notion of performance further challenges the traditional academic view of knowledge itself, as noted by Simon Jones, transforming it from a static noun into an active verb (and therefore ephemeral and unstable): *knowing*.<sup>7</sup> To approach knowing from this perspective is to unsettle the authoritarian concepts of authenticity as well as objective truth and to acknowledge that performance/practice itself can be a form of research (PaR).

Jones describes one of the ways in which PaR diverges from our

*KP2011*. Edited by Thomas Duus Henriksen, et al. Copenhagen: Rollespilesakademiet, 2011, pp.88-103. <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/c/c5/2011-Think.larp.pdf>.

3. Rebecca Schneider. "Performance Remains." *Performance Research*, 6.2, 2001, pp.100-108.

4. Schneider, p. 101.

5. Schneider, p. 100.

6. Schneider, p. 101.

7. Simon Jones. "The Courage of Complementarity: Practice-as-Research as a Paradigm Shift in Performance Studies." In *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*. Edited by Ludivine Allegue, Simon Jones, Baz Kershaw, and Angela Piccini. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.19-32, 19.

traditional understandings of valid knowledge by analyzing the ways in which this type of research is distinct from scientific traditions. Whereas scientific practices aim to reduce knowledge to finite, quantifiable facts and controllable events that can be replicated in identical conditions by anyone who has access to the blueprint, performance acknowledges the mutable, personal, chaotic, infinite, and “uncanny”<sup>8</sup> ways of knowing in which we all are immersed in our day-to-day lives. Jones, therefore, draws a distinction between the scientific write-up, and the *writing alongside* which must occur when documenting performance.<sup>9</sup> This writing alongside acknowledges the fact that document does not equal the documented. Writing alongside is a practice in awareness and acknowledgement of the limits of documentation. Whereas scientific writing-up in is a “blueprint” for reproducibility,<sup>10</sup> writing alongside can only point to the thing that is necessarily irreproducible. As noted by Evan Torner, it is a frustration that can plague the larp documenter, therefore, that no matter how exhaustive or detailed the larp archive may be, the diaries and photos and props and films are only ever empty indices of that which no longer remains in the scientific world,<sup>11</sup> but a performance which has left its mark, often in ways in no way insignificant, on the bodies and in the psyches of the players themselves.

All is not lost, however. Film studies scholars such as Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi have identified a genre of documentary film that challenges traditional notions of authoritative knowledge and which offers instead “an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects.”<sup>12</sup> Although Nichols’ influential taxonomy of

8. Jones, p. 24.

9. Jones, p. 26.

10. Jones, p. 27.

11. Evan Torner. “The Theory and Practice of Larp in Non-Fiction Film.” *In Think Larp: Academic Writings* from KP2011. Edited by Thomas Duus Henriksen, et al. Copenhagen: Rollespilesakademiet, 2011, pp.104-123.



documentary subgenres was developed specifically for documentary film, these modes can be useful in analyzing any kind of documentation practice, particularly larp documentation. Nichols' taxonomy provides a spectrum that starts at one end with a "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" model, and reaches on the other to what he terms the Reflexive and the Performative modes of documentary. In the Reflexive mode, documentary filmmakers showcase their awareness of their medium by inserting themselves into the final product. In the Reflexive mode, the documenter does not try to erase her intrinsic influence over the shaping of the narrative. The Performative mode takes this one step further and acknowledges the inauthenticity of everything, often by incorporating elements which are not easily distinguishable as either fact or fiction. Performative documentary, therefore, subverts the false binary between authenticity (revered by science) and inauthenticity (exemplified by performance, practice, and larp).<sup>13</sup>

Performative documentation of larp does exist, but it is not currently the predominant style. For an example of a typical contemporary larp archive, we may look at one larp in particular: *Mad About the Boy* (2011), designed by Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum and Trine Lise Lindahl.<sup>14</sup> This larp tells the story of a world of women who face the task of rebuilding society after a mysterious virus violently and suddenly kills every human on the planet with a Y chromosome. The game has thus far been run four distinct times in three different countries, and has therefore amassed a diverse, robust collection of documentation from its various iterations. From this collection we may begin to be able to identify familiar modes of documentation, as well as new ones unique to larp alone.

12. Bill Nichols. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001, p.132. See also: Stella Bruzzi. *New Documentary*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2006.

13. An excellent example of performance documentary footage from one of the first runs of *MAtB* is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BP7\\_6XXNq8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BP7_6XXNq8).

14. Edland, Raaum, and Lindahl. *Mad About the Boy*. First run Norway, 2010.

Perhaps one day we will see the development of larp's own taxonomy of documentation practices.

To begin with, most larp archives have at their core the incidental materials which make up the scripts, rules, instructions, or other kinds of blueprints for the game. The full set of such materials for *MAtB* are available online for those who will be running or playing the game.<sup>15</sup> They may also be accessed by those who have never and will never participate in the game, but these kinds of blueprints are arguably empty of the "true" experience gleaned from the body-to-body transmissions experienced in live role-play.

That is why the next step, typically, is to produce a "write-up" of sorts, explaining what happened in one particular run of the game. These write-ups may come from the designers, organizers, or players themselves, and may occur in more formal circumstances (such as at conferences<sup>16</sup> or in edited books<sup>17</sup>), or in more informal ways, such as on personal blogs<sup>18</sup>.

There are also communal documentation efforts such as the Nordic Larp Wiki,<sup>19</sup> as well as more private, semi-inaccessible

15. <http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org/>.

16. Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl, and Margrete Raaum. "Mad About the Boy." In *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*. Edited by Eleanor Saitta, et al. Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014, pp. 251-259. Video of the live presentation is also available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UG8spVaD2Tg>.

17. See Sarah Lynne Bowman, ed. *The Book of Mad About the Boy* (2012 US run). Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2012; Eleanor Saitta. "Mad About the Yankee." In *Crossing Physical Borders*. Edited by Karete Jacobsen Meland et al. Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2013, pp.72-82; and Lizzie Stark. "Mad About the Techniques: Stealing Nordic methods for larp design." In *Wyrld Con Companion 2012*. Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman et al., 2012, pp.71-76.

18. See Adi Robertson. "My So Called Larp." *The Verge*. November 27, 2012. <http://www.theverge.com/2012/11/27/3609806/my-so-called-larp-living-world-without-men>; Kira Magrann. "Anticipating Mad About the Boy." *Gaming As Women*. October 2, 2012. <http://www.gamingaswomen.com/posts/2012/10/anticipating-mad-about-the-boy/>; and Emma Leigh Waldron. "Nordic Larp: What It Is and Why It Matters (Part II)." *Applied Sentience*. April 17, 2013. <http://appliedsentience.com/2013/04/17/nordic-larp-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters-part-ii-2/>.

19. "Mad About the Boy." *Nordic Larp Wiki*. [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Mad\\_About\\_the\\_Boy](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Mad_About_the_Boy).

ones such as in password-protected photo albums and forums (some public if you know where to look),<sup>20</sup> as well as the overwhelming, untrackable mass of email threads, and comments on Facebook, G+, and personal blogs which are accessible only to those who are in-the-know.

Finally, there are the traces of performances as captured in photographs<sup>21</sup> and film, as well as objects and artifacts from the live game-play itself, such as costumes, props, or even character diaries. These kinds of documentation, which point to the simultaneous existence of players and characters and confuse the distinctions between them, are the ones which are most performative, which write alongside the larps, and which have the most potential, therefore, to emphasize the unique ways of knowing that occur only within the ephemeral game experience, and which remain in the bodies of the players.

20. See, for example, <http://laivforum.net/threads/18990-Mad-about-the-Boy?highlight=mad+boy>.

21. See, for example, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/yunyard/sets/72157624333290771/>.


 Agenda for the 4 Nordic LARP Documentation Program

16:00 → 16:30	Welcome	
	Thomas RØM T	Zitrus RØM E
16:30 → 16:45	Alex Vicky, Jo	Konrad, Elisabeth, Ellen
16:45 → 16:59	Linn	Lisa, Christian, Ellen
16:59 → 17:07	Lena, Veronica, Gerda	Edvin, Thomas, Harthe
17:08 → 17:20	Kristin, Elisabeth, Ellen	Lada, Kim, Yvonne
17:21 → 17:33	Linn, Christian, Ellen	Alex Vicky, Jo
17:34 → 17:46	Edvin, Thomas, Harthe	Linn
17:47 → 17:59	Lada, Kim, Yvonne	Lena, Veronica, Gerda
18:00 → 19:00	Ochloade course (aka family group)	
19:00 → 20:00	Dinner	
20:00 →	Further interests will be announced	

*Diegetic documentation from a Norwegian run of MAtB, featuring character names on a real-time schedule for the day. Used with permission of the artist, Xin Li on Flickr.*

Some of these types of documentation will be more suited to different purposes than others—and this is why it is important for us to think critically about *why* we choose to document our games. If larp indeed has revolutionary potential in its innate ability to resist the rigid standards of the Archive, and if we want to harness that revolutionary potential to provide a platform for honoring different ways of knowing—particularly ways of knowing that resist being put into words—then we must strive to engage in modes of documentation that tend more towards reflexivity and performativity. It is impossible to recreate the original larp, or to capture the knowing from the larp into knowledge fixed on paper, film, or in objects. To attempt to do so is futile. Instead, we must approach our documentation practices as writing alongside, as opposed to writing-up. Documentation can serve many purposes: the effort lends itself to growing the

community (whether or not this is always seen as a good thing),<sup>22</sup> provides a semblance of the ephemeral experience of the larp for those who could not participate, and also serves as justification for the hobby. The latter is the point that I would like to take up. Larp has enormous revolutionary potential to unsettle the textocentrism of the academy. That being the case, to what end are documentation efforts in place to try to fit larp into a textocentric mold, and in what ways can our future documentation efforts more deliberately challenge that mold in order to better harness the unique qualities of larp?

In closing, as we move forward in thinking critically about the ethics and efficacy of larp documentation practices, we have many questions left to consider: For example, what does it mean to impose the non-fictional genre of documentary onto inherently fictional stories in larps? Or, to what extent *are* larps fictional—where do the boundaries of performance and reality begin to dissolve? What does it mean to impose the strictures and structures of the academy on a medium whose very strength is in its ability to resist and transcend those structures? Are we perhaps doing a disservice to larp by trying to fit it into certain (textocentric) standards through documentation practices? More importantly, when looking at the ways in which documentation is approached in different play cultures, what does it mean to utilize a discourse that is laden with socio-economic stratification in some environments, but not in others? Why has documentation evolved as an indispensable practice in some play cultures and design traditions more than in others? What different forms of documentation currently exist? What do they seek to do and what do they achieve? What forms of documentation might evolve in the future? On whose authority are these stories told? Whose voices are included in different documentary practices and whose are left out.

22. Lizzie Stark. "Larp's Oral Tradition is Dying." *Leaving Mundania*. July 23, 2014. <http://leavingmundania.com/2014/07/23/larps-oral-tradition-dying/>.

## SEX AND PLAY-DOH: EXPLORING WOMEN'S SEXUALITY THROUGH LARP

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BY KATHERINE CASTIELLO JONES

This piece attempts to document the context and tangible elements created by two live-action role-playing games (larps) that I co-authored: *Cady Stanton's Candyland* (2013) and *Candyland II: Ashley's Bachelorette Party* (2014), run at Intercon<sup>1</sup> in 2013 and 2014, respectively. These larps aimed to explore women's experiences with sexuality and encourage a dialogue about sexual desires, experiences, and conflicts. Though there are several other live-action scenarios dealing with sex—notably *Summer Lovin'* (2012),<sup>2</sup> which deals with a series of one-night encounters at a music festival, and *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011),<sup>3</sup> which focuses on the early days of the AIDS epidemic—co-author Julia Ellingboe and I wanted to create scenarios that focused specifically on women's experiences and how sexual experiences intersect with issues like religion, feminism, family, sexual identity, and age. Our goal was to create games that would allow players to explore these issues in a way that would be both

1. See <http://www.interactiveliterature.org/NEIL/interconConventions.html>.

2. Anna Westerling, Elin Nilsen, and Trine Lise Lindahl. *Summer Lovin'*. Fastaval, 2012. [http://jeepen.org/games/summerlovin/Summer\\_Lovin\\_.pdf](http://jeepen.org/games/summerlovin/Summer_Lovin_.pdf).

3. Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmø. *Just A Little Lovin'*. First run Norway, 2011. [http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book\\_jall.pdf](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book_jall.pdf).

informative and entertaining, and we felt that larp would be a particularly useful medium through which to achieve this goal.

Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros argue that unlike mediated forms of imagining, like movies or books, larp scenarios provide both mental and bodily engagement.<sup>4</sup> Larps provide a safe space for players to try new things and to be more adventurous, receptive, and open-minded. Players can explore different perspectives and experiences through inhabiting their characters. The “*magic circle of play* serves as a social alibi for non-ordinary things,”<sup>5</sup> allowing players to act in ways that they ordinarily would not, by taking on fictional character roles. Because they are not acting as themselves, players may feel free to take on attitudes or behaviors considered taboo using the excuse that it is the character committing these transgressions.<sup>6</sup> It was exactly these aspects of larp that drew us to the idea of using the medium to explore diverse women’s experiences with sexuality. With that in mind, we designed the activities within the *Candyland* games to help players explore their characters’ sexual experiences and preferences, leaving open a space for the player to either play “close to home” or to explore a very different set of experiences than their own.

We envisioned a game that would examine women talking about sex in an open and positive environment. These kinds of discussions about sexuality in the U.S. are still rare. There are few spaces where such discussions can take place, particularly among people who are not friends or intimates. Getting a group of strangers to talk about sex opens up possibilities for sharing

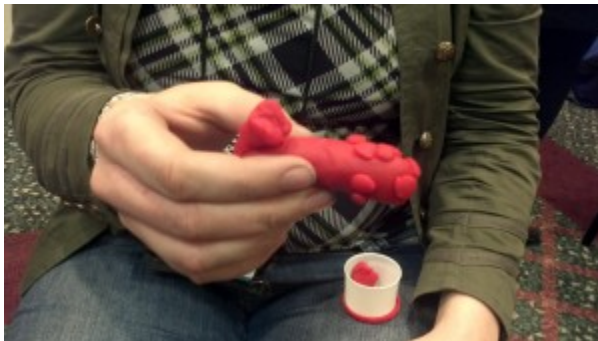
4. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, eds. *Nordic Larp*. Stockholm: Fëa Livia, 2012.

5. Markus Montola. “The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing.” In *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2010*. DiGRA: Stockholm, 2010, par. 10. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/10343.56524.pdf>.

6. Emily Care Boss, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and William J. White. “Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play and the Discourse of Immersion.” In *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. Edited by Evan Torner and William J. White. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, pp. 71-86.

a wider variety of experiences, and perhaps rethinking assumptions, but it also means confronting feelings of embarrassment and shyness. We thought the larp medium could provide some specific tools for overcoming these barriers. To this end, we designed our games to center around the *Candyland* “fun parties”, Tupperware-style parties for sex toys. *Cady Stanton’s Candyland* takes place at a feminist bookstore in the 1970s and *Candyland II: Ashley’s Bachelorette Party* takes place at a present-day bachelorette party at a community center. Both larps feature games within a game, as the “hosts” of the parties lead the characters (and therefore also the players) through a series of activities and games meant to explore sexuality and desire in a fairly light-hearted and humorous way.

My goal in documenting these games here is to provide a resource for particular techniques used to facilitate open, productive discussions about sexuality. Larps are a medium that can address a myriad of topics and can do so in many distinct ways. Documenting larps allows future authors and organizers to draw on past techniques in their own games, or to approach similar topics using different means.



*Erotic sculpture from Candyland II: Ashley’s Bachelorette Party.*

*Image provided by the author.*

While developing the game, we attended a workshop run by *Not Your Mother’s Meatloaf*,<sup>7</sup> a sex education zine and book that



portrays sexual narratives in comic format. We were inspired by the argument that the comic format allows for an exploration of embarrassing and taboo topics through humor. We began thinking about how a larp scenario could also provide a different space to explore sexuality and address potentially controversial, embarrassing stories in a way that was fun and humorous, but might also deal with serious issues. Humor, as the creators of *NYMM* demonstrate, is a great way to approach difficult topics and we looked for a mix of activities that would provoke laughter while also allowing for people to talk about sexual experiences and desires.

As we began writing the *Cady Stanton's Candyland* scenario, we thought about ways we could better tap into larp's ability to engage both the body and the mind, as well as the idea of inhabiting an experience. We wanted players to do more than just talk; they should engage with their characters in an embodied way, and get a chance to act out and play with sexuality as their character. We consulted websites for real sex toy parties, such as Ann Summers and Pure Romance Parties,<sup>8</sup> to find activities and tips. We also drew on older, sex-positive, consciousness-raising activities from the second wave of the feminist movement, such as providing players with pages from the *Cunt Coloring Book*<sup>9</sup> and discussing masturbation tips. A deck of "adult" party games<sup>10</sup> also provided some ideas. We then curated and designed our activities to suit various purposes. We took several games directly from their sources (complete with titles) while other games were created based on combinations of games, or adaptations of existing activities. Some activities were meant mostly as ice-breakers, allowing the players to laugh at

7. Liza Bley and Saiya Miller. *Not Your Mother's Meatloaf*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2013.

8. For example, <http://annsummerspartiesuk.com/annsummers/Home.html>, <http://www.jacquelinegold.com/ann-summers/party-planners/>, and <https://www.pureromance.com/>.

9. Tee Corinne. *Cunt Coloring Book*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1989.

10. *21 Adult Late Night Games*. London: Lagoon Games, 1994.

themselves and helping them move outside their comfort zone. In “Pussy Galore”, for example, one character was blind-folded and had to guess which character’s lap they were sitting on by asking them to “meow” or “roar”. Once the players were warmed up, we introduced activities meant to explore characters as well as open up discussions about differences and similarities in desire. An activity called “Forbidden Fruit” asked characters to anonymously write three things they can never get enough of, which were then pulled from a hat and other characters tried to guess who had written each one.

One of our primary goals was to help players engage in a more tangible way with sexuality in order to encourage a different mode of engagement for the players’ benefit as well as to produce tangible representations of the ephemeral elements of the characters and their relationships to each other. We utilized two activities in particular to achieve this goal: vulva sculpture/erotic sculptures and lingerie drawings, both of which I will be documenting in this essay.



*Vulva sculptures from Cady Stanton’s Candyland. Image provided by the author.*

In *Cady Stanton’s Candyland*, the party hosts gave the characters

Play-Doh and asked them to construct vulva sculptures and then share their creations with the group. Characters in the game expressed a variety of opinions about the activity from embarrassment, to frustration, to excitement. The variety of artistic representations of the vulva was quite wide. Several characters were nervous about their ability to construct an “accurate” vulva. Some characters consulted the vulva coloring pages left out in the game space to help them with their sculptures. While players seemed to enjoy the activity in-game, there did seem to be some reluctance to keep the sculptures around after the game and worries about what the next group in the space would think if they found the sculptures. Several players destroyed the sculptures at the end of the game in order to put away the Play-Doh, so only a few sculptures were photographed. Yet the photographs serve as a reminder of the activity in a way that the simple description of the activity can’t quite capture.

During *Candyland II: Ashley’s Bachelorette Party*, we attempted to do a better job of documenting the tangible ephemera created during the game. During this game, characters were also given tubs of Play-Doh and asked to create “erotic” sculptures. Because the parameters of the activity were wider than in the first game, the variety in these sculptures was also much wider than with the vulva sculptures and therefore communicated a lot more about the characters. For example, the character of Ashley’s grandma was rediscovering her sexuality after being widowed, and she created an especially detailed erotic sculpture of a man and a woman engaging in intercourse. The sculpture evoked shock and hilarity in the other characters, depending on their relationships to the grandmother and their own comfort levels with sex.

In the second activity, characters were asked to draw pictures of the lingerie they were giving to bride-to-be Ashley as gifts. These drawings documented both the individual characters’ own tastes as well as their relationships to Ashley. Some characters were

Ashley's friends, some were her family (including her mother, sister, and grandmother), and other characters were future in-laws. Ashley was asked to guess which character had made which drawing, an activity that also helped explore Ashley's relationships with these other women. Ashley had an easy time guessing which character had created which drawing, since her character had the most knowledge of all the other characters. This activity was another that exposed surprising revelations and challenged preconceptions about the characters that we'd built into the game. For instance, Ashley's libertine friends were often shocked when Ashley's future sister-in-laws, both conservative Christians, demonstrated their wide-ranging sexual experiences and preferences. While the drawings we collected at the end of the game don't fully communicate the relationships and experiences they demonstrated during the game by themselves, they do leave behind a record of how drawings, as opposed to words, can be used to access different information about characters and character relationships.



*Grandma's erotic sculpture from Candyland II: Ashley's Bachelorette Party. Image provided by the author.*

As other authors have discussed,<sup>11</sup> larps are evanescent events, which makes documenting larps often difficult to accomplish.

11. Montola and Stenros, *Nordic Larp*; and Emma Leigh Waldron. "Larp-as-Performance-as-

This raises questions about how accurately the experience of live-action play can actually be captured. Can the experiences from a larp scenario accurately be communicated to people who did not participate? While the two *Candyland* games created tangible artifacts linked to characters' ephemeral experiences with sexuality and their interrelationships, much of this information is lost outside the context of the game. Looking through the photographs of the erotic sculptures, it is hard to remember the stories behind some of them. While the grandmother's sculpture stands out in my memory, others have faded, so I'm left unsure as to which characters created them and what their explanations of the sculptures were during the game. But while the desire to recapture the game for those who did not attend may have been the initial impulse for documentation, I now believe that there is a different value in these artifacts.

Although documentation may not be able to recapture or recreate a past larp event, there is still value in creating tangible reminders of a game for those interested in larp design. While the particulars of these larps may be lost to those who did not play the game, documenting them serves to add new tools for future larp designers to explore. I believe that these activities helped players more fully engage with their characters while also allowing them to explore sexuality in a new way. Although it might not be possible to capture the specific relationships and interactions from the game, documentation of the game might encourage other designers to incorporate some more creative activities in their games, such as crafting, that engage the tactile and visual senses. Designers might also be inspired to draw on "real-world" resources, such as party games and historical documents as we did, to implement activities that help connect players to their characters and to each other. While our *Candyland* games focused on activities meant to explore women's

sexual experiences, designers should consider how activities that access bodily engagement and the idea of inhabiting can be used to explore a wide variety of topics and social issues. As my documentation here evinces, larp techniques tend to be most successful when they take advantage of character alibi in order to allow players to explore ideas or behaviors that they would not normally feel comfortable with.

# O JOGO DO BICHO: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF LARP IN BRAZIL

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BY LUIZ FALCÃO



*Original larp poster. Image used with permission of the author.*

Brasil, 1971. A seleção é tri, a ditadura está pior do que nunca e Roberto Carlos continua fazendo. Além de perseguir terroristas, a polícia está a caça da Quadrilha do Bicho, chefiada pelo homem

conhecido como Tarzan, que vem roubando bicheiros nas principais capitais do país.

Brazil, 1971. Brazil is a third-time champion in the World Cup, the dictatorship is worse than ever, and the singer Roberto Carlos continues to be very successful. Besides pursuing terrorists, the police are also hunting the Animal Gang, led by a man known as Tarzan, who has been robbing bookies in the major capitals of the country.<sup>1</sup>

*O Jogo do Bicho (The Animal Game)*, created by Luiz Falcão and Luiz Prado, is a two-hour chamber larp<sup>2</sup> for eight people about (bad) luck, uncanny experiences, and what people do together when there is nothing to do. Influenced by Jeepform,<sup>3</sup> Nordic Larp,<sup>4</sup> and other blackbox traditions,<sup>5</sup> the game makes heavy use of metatechniques<sup>6</sup> and is one of the first Brazilian larps (that we know of) in this style. We wanted to document this larp because we believe that it is a unique and interesting game, it is relevant to the regional and international larp communities, and it epitomizes Brazilian flavors.<sup>7</sup> *O Jogo do Bicho* (2014) takes its name from the infamous folkloric and illegal betting game. The larp is set in Brazil in 1971, during our military dictatorship. At our first run, the setting was a bar, represented with tables and chairs, and 1970s music played on the radio in the background. Guns (represented by bananas), beer and “Cachaça”, and decks of playing cards and thematic betting cards completed the scene.

*O Jogo do Bicho* was first run in Belo Horizonte in April, 2014 at a festival called Laboratório de Jogos (Game Lab),<sup>8</sup> aimed at

1. Thanks to Telmo Luis Correa, Jr. for assistance with translation for this essay.

2. For more information about chamber larp, see [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Chamber\\_Larp](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Chamber_Larp).

3. For more information about Jeepform, see <http://jeepen.org/>.

4. For more information about Nordic Larp, see [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main_Page).

5. See for example <http://scenariofestival.se/>, <https://www.facebook.com/blackboxmlm/info>, and <https://tickets.grenselandet.net/>.

6. For more information about metatechniques, see <http://leavingmundania.com/2014/08/28/defining-meta-techniques/>.

7. All photos courtesy of the photographer, Luiz Lurugon.

8. For more information about Laboratório de Jogos, see <http://www.laboratoriodejogos.com/>.



a community of indie analog game developers, especially indie RPGs. Our larp attracted a wide variety of participants including role-players, game designers, larpwrights, an academic researcher on role-playing, and a psychodramatist. We also had a diverse array of players from various states, such as Minas Gerais (where the event was hosted), São Paulo (580km/360 miles away), Rio de Janeiro (430km/267miles away), and Rio Grande do Sul (1.708km/1061miles away). There was even an international representative from Portugal (4406km / 2738 miles away, counting from Lisbon). It is interesting to note that all players in this run were men, which was not typical of the other activities we sponsored at the event.

In *O Jogo do Bicho*, players represent freelance criminals (some of them in their first involvement with organized crime), hired by the bookie known as Tarzan. They commit a crime against another bookie, but the plan goes wrong and they find themselves, after the failed attempt, in a previously agreed-upon meeting place. The action of the larp takes place here, during the meeting of the characters as they await the arrival of their employer, which is meant to occur two hours after their arrival—the event that concludes the larp. The setting of the 1970s—with no cellphones—prevents players from communicating with this character and contributes to a sense of isolation for the group. The game is characterized by a sense of waiting and anxiety, as Tarzan never does actually appear (there may be some of *Waiting for Godot* in *O Jogo do Bicho*).

The aesthetic inspiration for this game came from the films of American directors Quentin Tarantino (especially the movie *Reservoir Dogs*) and David Lynch. Our research around the second director eventually fully absorbed us and inspired us to reframe the use of “key scenes” in larp (which is discussed in more detail later on).

After the first playtest, which was more in the style of Tarantino,

we decided to dial back the use of referentiality to American cinema. In the search for new aesthetics to spice the game, we came across a recent news story about the bookie mafia. This theme seemed to fit like a glove and made the most sense with the mechanics and outline of our larp, even with the Lynchian influence. The Animal Game + David Lynch + 1970s: there was something a little *Hotline Miami* about that mix and we knew we were on the right track.

The setting of the 1970s, the time of the bustling underworld of the illegal gambling game known as *O Jogo do Bicho* (The Animal Game),<sup>9</sup> nurtured an aesthetic and thematic framework without equal. It was a time in which our generation did not live, but one that we approach with intense nostalgia: for good or for evil. A military dictatorship in one of its most oppressive forms, the national euphoria of a third-time win in the World Cup, colorful media saturated with tropical imagery, the political movements, the music, the fashion, the stereotypes of the time... We attempted to represent this rich aesthetic in our larp through the soundtrack, the costumes of the characters, and the familiar betting cards. The bar setting of *O Jogo do Bicho* is a familiar environment, but with a time shift that takes us out of the commonplace, the territory of comfort, and contributes to an experience of the uncanny, the strange/familiar, which helps build the atmosphere proposed for the game.

And why represent firearms with bananas? Representing guns in larps is always tricky. Nerf guns work well in adventure games. But realistic replicas are very difficult to be authorized in Brazil, and can bring some problems too. We wanted something more than a simple marker of a gun. We wanted something that would symbolize something in our larp. So Luiz Prado suggested bananas, which happened to be a national symbol when Brazil

9. For more information about the traditional gambling game, *Jogo do Bicho*, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jogo\\_do\\_Bicho](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jogo_do_Bicho).

was under dictatorship. And the shape allows it to be held like a gun. Issue resolved.

For us, *O Jogo do Bicho* was an opportunity to push the boundaries of Brazilian larp. We based our creation of *O Jogo do Bicho* on some very simple assumptions. It should be a flashy larp, with an attractive theme in Brazil: the mafia. Such a “necessary zombie”<sup>10</sup> should attract players to an unconventional experience. We also wanted the details of the plot to be determined at random from a deck of options that could be recombined freely. Finally, the “key scenes”, a common element in other Brazilian larps, would not be controlled by the organizers, but rather by the players.

Larp first took hold in Brazil in the early 1990s, alongside the popularity of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991). The practice quickly consolidated itself, spreading through the country and incentivizing a well-diversified freeform<sup>11</sup> scene. Some groups developed autonomy, tradition (like *Graal*<sup>12</sup> and the Confraria das Ideias<sup>13</sup>), and their own style. Today, most Brazilian larps are *Vampire* larps and other *Mind’s Eye Theatre* (1993) games, or other boffer<sup>14</sup> larps. But freeform larps are growing in popularity, becoming at each turn a more relevant larp practice, both experimental and artistic.

10. Eirik Fatland. “Does Your Larp Have a Zombie?” *The Larpwright*.  
<http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=316>.

11. For more information about freeform games, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeform\\_role-playing\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freeform_role-playing_game).

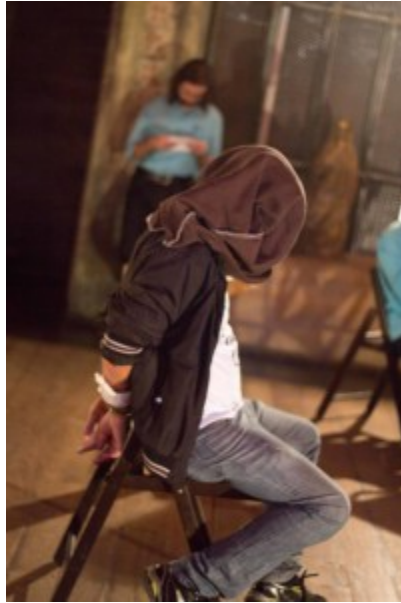
12. A promotional video for the larp *Graal* can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3Ywac1hHJM>.

13. For more information about the larp group Confraria das Ideias, see <http://www.confrariadasideias.com.br/>.

14. Boffer larps use foam-padded weapons to simulate live combat. For more information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foam\\_weapon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foam_weapon).



*Traditional “O Jogo do Bicho” betting card, illustrated by Mariana Waechter and designed by Luiz Falcão. Image used with permission of the author.*



*The crime randomly chosen was kidnapping. "We kidnapped the wrong person!" Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Detail of a character attribute developed by the player during preparation for the game. He used materials provided by the larp organizers. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*The game scenography included gambling, drinking, and guns (represented by bananas). Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Contact between players was allowed, even without much regulation, unlike most larps practiced in Brazil. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Props provided for the game. The crime that goes wrong is selected randomly and may be an assault, a kidnapping, or a murder. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*





*Characters drinking beer in-game. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



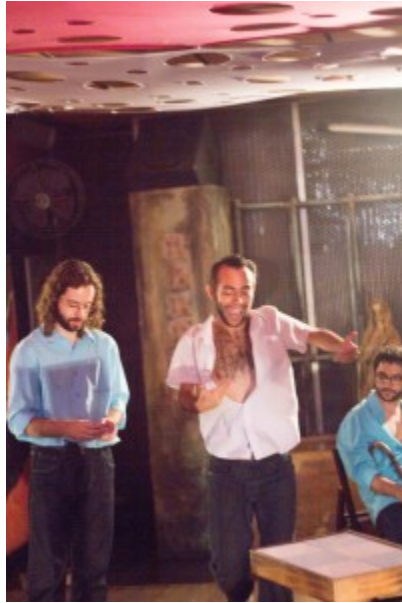
*The character "Butterfly" commits suicide. Shooting characters was permitted in-game, though this might be undone by the "back in time" metatechnique. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Firearms are represented by bananas. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Luiz Falcão introducing the larp to participants, a pile of “guns” at his side.  
Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*In one metatechnique, one player must spontaneously perform a full musical number. At the end, all players exchange character sheets with the person to their right and continue playing as the new character. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Mobsters interrogating their kidnapping victim. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*This bloody shirt was another random element of gameplay. The status card “bloodied” gave a character physical complications incurred during the crime scene. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*One metatechnique called out by players involved all characters betting on a round of “O Jogo do Bicho”, and those who lost had to perform like the animals that matched their codenames. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*





*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*In the “ballroom dancing” metatechnique, two characters are chosen to perform a waltz together. All other characters must watch silently. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*

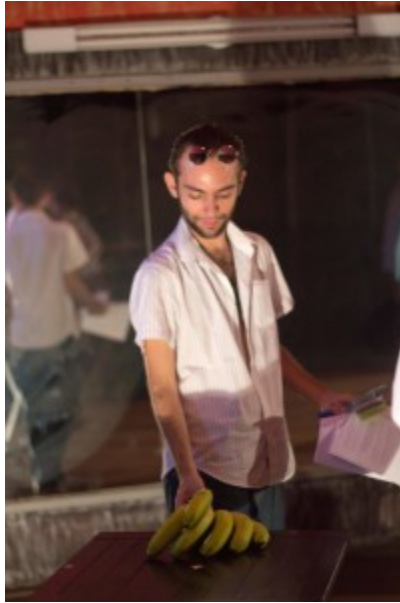


*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*





*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Preparing the traditional “O Jogo do Bicho” betting cards for the game. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*



*Various cards set up for random selection before the larp. Photo by Luiz Lurugon.*

In 2011, the group Boi Voador (Flying Ox)<sup>15</sup> was the first Brazilian larp group to notably defend larp as an art form, influenced by the traditions of Nordic Larp and other nations

outside of the Americas, such as in France and the Czech Republic. This instigated an explosion of more and more unique larps, new authors, and a decentralized community of enthusiastic players. In a context where the predominant larps were very traditional, with conventional units of time, space, and character, and predominantly influenced by commercial tabletop RPGs, Boi Voador started to experiment with the possibilities of the medium. The Brazilian run of *Tango for Two* (2008)<sup>16</sup> (a Nordic larp), the discovery of the Norwegian Role Play Poems,<sup>17</sup> and the original larps *Caleidoscópolis* (*Kaleidoscopolis* (2011))<sup>18</sup> and *A Clínica: Projeto Memento* (*The Clinic: Memento Project*) (2011)<sup>19</sup> marked the first phase of research. In those attempts, the group experimented with breaking from the traditions of mimetic representation and the unities of character, duration, and form. *A Clínica* aimed to take larp seriously as an art form and push the production values to a more professional level than had previously been the norm in Brazilian larp. The game took an immersive approach influenced by the manifesto *Dogma 99*,<sup>20</sup> with no violence in its plot, no simulation mechanics, and no permission for the players to go out of character during the experience. *O Jogo do Bicho* is the next step of this research process. While *A Clínica* searched for deepening of immersion and drama, the newest Boi Voador games are epic and non-illusionistic, in the tradition of Brechtian theatre.

We therefore adopted some specific criteria for the design of this larp:

- No secrecy: there are no secrets in the game, and the events of

15. For more information about the larp group Boi Voador, see <http://boivoador-larp.blogspot.com.br/>.

16. See <http://chambergames.wordpress.com/2008/10/29/tango-for-two/>.

17. See <http://norwegianstyle.wordpress.com/category/role-playing-poems/>.

18. See <http://boivoador-larp.blogspot.com.br/2011/10/diario-caleidoscopolis-roteiro-e.html>.

19. See <http://boivoador-larp.blogspot.com.br/search/label/larp%3Aclinica>.

20. For more information about the *Dogma 99* manifesto, see [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Dogma\\_99](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Dogma_99).

the game are not based on secrets. All participants may have access to all materials of the game.

- No distinction between organizers and players: the organizers also play, and the control and pacing of the game—usually responsibilities of the organizers—is divided equally among all participants.
- Narrative and structural control given to the players: the Confraria das Ideias, one of the most traditional larp groups in São Paulo, structures many of their larps with what they call key scenes, or narrative events, triggered by the larp organizers, to confer rhythm and movement. In *O Jogo do Bicho*, we removed this power from the hands of the organizers and instead, placed it at the disposal of any player. With the influence of our readings on the metatechniques of Jeepform and Nordic larp black box,<sup>21</sup> these “key scenes” were strengthened and took on absolutely new functions in our game. In our game, a list of nine metatechniques was on a blackboard on the wall. At any time, a player could pick one from the list to initiate a new key scene. Some of these techniques interrupt the narrative flow and pull players out of characters (such as “pausing the game”), others add a dramatic event (such as a firefight or a round of betting), some temporarily change the mode of representation (such as having the players close their eyes and tell a collective dream one by one, or having the players temporarily represent animals), and some instigate a shift in narrative (such as having a player/character perform a monologue, or having two players/characters dance a waltz).
- Randomness: situation, plot, nicknames, characters... to eliminate the necessity of secrets built for the plot, to eliminate predictability, and to allow for a higher replay value, the majority of the plot elements in the larp are determined randomly, by drawing cards at random from a deck, a design

21. For more information about black box larp, see [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Black\\_Box](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Black_Box).

element that allows for many variations of the game to be played. This includes the crime that was committed by the group (such as a kidnapping, the burglary of a suitcase filled with cash, finding a body at the meeting place), and for the creation of characters. The theme of chance is also evinced through the subject and title of the larp.

- Dislocation of the narrative / dramatic focus: The players do not enact the climactic and adventurous moments of the crime their characters commit. Instead, the action of the game is the waiting for the arrival of their employer to provide further instructions. But that event, too, does not occur in-game, as the larp ends at precisely the moment when Tarzan arrives. In this manner, the larp is set in an interstitial moment, between one happening and another. The focus is not, then, the development of an elaborate narrative about crime, but what happens between these characters during these two hours of waiting.

All these elements differ from the typical larps made in Brazil, which usually vary between narrative-centric and mechanics-light games, or RPG-like games where the story is occasionally interrupted in order to resolve conflict with character statistics (which is often mediated by an organizer). Our choices to randomize character generation and to combine the roles and responsibilities of players and organizers were somewhat innovative, as the use of metatechniques that disrupt narrative flow had not, to our knowledge, been used before in the Brazilian larp scene.<sup>22</sup>

22. For further reading on Brazilian larp, see “New Tastes in Brazilian Larp: From Dark Coke to Caipirinha with Nordic Ice” in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp* (2014) ([http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/e/e8/2014\\_The\\_Cutting\\_Edge\\_of\\_Nordic\\_Larp.pdf](http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/e/e8/2014_The_Cutting_Edge_of_Nordic_Larp.pdf)) and correlating video of presentation at Knutpunkt 2014, by Wagner Luiz Schmit (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC7i60zGMok>); “RedHope: Brazilian horror sci-fi larp”, on Petter Karlson’s Blog (includes further “Brazilian Larp Highlights”) (<http://petterkarlsson.se/2013/11/12/redhope-brazilian-sci-fi-horror-larp/>); *Analog XP*, Issue #3, a magazine on Brazilian analog game design featuring a special issue on larp (includes highlights of Brazilian larp scene, selected by Encho Chagas, creator of PULSE

For some of the participants in our run of *O Jogo do Bicho* at Laboratório de Jogos last April,<sup>23</sup> this was their first experience larping. Others had tried more traditional forms, especially *Vampire*. We were pleasantly surprised by the implementation of these new techniques, by the commitment of the players, and by the successful functioning of the key scenes and metatechniques. The game we proposed, albeit quite different from the norm, was engaging to and assimilated by both veterans and first-time players. Even the most unorthodox metatechniques like “back in time” (where all characters go back to an earlier point in the game, regardless of what just happened, and move forward playing it differently this time) and “all players exchange characters” were performed freely and spontaneously by the participants, although there was, inevitably, some degree of confusion. Nonetheless, the response from the players was very positive, including inspiring João Mariano—our Portuguese guest—to run another Brazilian larp (*Listen at the Maximum Volume* (2013))<sup>24</sup> a few months later in Lisbon.

(Gamechef 2013 winner)) (<http://analogxp.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/the-analog-xp-issue-3/>); and Brazilian larpscripts in English, *Listen at the Maximum Volume* (2013) and *Bitter Coffee* (2013), both by Luiz Prado (<http://nplarp.blogspot.com.br/p/english.html>).

23. In addition to *O Jogo do Bicho*, other activities connected to the larp were featured at the event, including *Álcool (Alcohol)* (2014), a larp by Luiz Prado with blackbox and Jeepform characteristics (but without a director) where players collectively created a central character about their relationship with alcohol ([http://issuu.com/akitan/docs/\\_2014\\_\\_mais\\_dados\\_-\\_alcool\\_e\\_caf\\_\\_\\_](http://issuu.com/akitan/docs/_2014__mais_dados_-_alcool_e_caf___)); *Morte Branca (White Death / Hvid Død)*, a non-verbal (and very physical) larp by Nina Runa Essendrop and Simon Steen Hansen and translated by Tadeu Andrade for the event (here intensified by the heat, rather than the cold!) (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.774331085940573.1073741828.768019049905110&type=1>); and a playtest of *Akitan* combat mechanics, a medieval larp that uses metal swords and a system to represent choreographed combat (<http://livemedieval.blogspot.com/>) (see also “Looking Back to Move Forward” at [http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/4/4d/2013\\_Crossing\\_Physical\\_Borders.pdf](http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/4/4d/2013_Crossing_Physical_Borders.pdf)). At the first Game Lab in 2013, we also ran a larp called *Máfia*, which was a precursor to *O Jogo do Bicho* (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.839140606126287.1073741833.768019049905110&type=1>). Much more like Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, *Máfia* didn’t focus on elements of Brazilian cultural, for example. The character creation and game setup were also very different. Coincidentally, the random drawing by card to determine which crime had been committed had same result: “kidnapping”.

In retrospect, the setup of the game—that is, the lotteries that determine the characters and the crime they committed—seemed to us very lengthy. We feel the game could have benefitted from a more elaborate preparation with warm-ups and pre-game workshops designed to better guide the experience. We would also fine-tune the techniques to more smoothly transition all the players into the desired mood of the game. Some key scenes fulfilled this function exceptionally well (such as the collective dream and the five minutes of silence), but there were some variations that evoked over-excitement and squabbling (which have little to do with the desired mood for the game).

In *O Jogo do Bicho*, we experienced various possibilities within the medium of larp which broke from the main traditions of Brazilian larp. We were influenced by characteristics of larp in other countries, but most importantly, we found our own identity in this research. We will be running *O Jogo do Bicho* again on October 18th, 2014 in São Paulo, where we plan to implement some simplifications in the setup and add warm-ups and pre-game workshops (as influenced by our experience with the Nordic larp *White Death* (2013) and some Brazilian larps by Luiz Prado). Thus, Boi Voador continues to push the boundaries of larp in Brazil and establish it on the map of the international contemporary larp community.

24. More information about *Listen at the Maximum Volume* can be found here <http://nplarp.blogspot.com.br/p/english.html>.



## A NIGHTTIME TALE OF XIROS

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BY ADAM LAZAROFF



*Image licensed under CC-BY by Yinan Chen at  
<http://www.goodfreephotos.com/>.*

*Editor's Note: This piece is a creative, narrative account from one larper's character's experience. The following short story demonstrates a uniquely performative mode of documentation, in that it is a story from the character's memory, but not does not describe an in-game event. The tale was, however, born in-game when it was inscribed in the character's diegetic journal, and told aloud in-game, in a world where oral storytelling is a sacred practice. This piece evocatively demonstrates the rich lived experiences that flourish in role-playing games, and*

*honors the powerful and nuanced aspects of world-building that color the plots we traditionally document. -Emma Waldron*

The game is set in medieval times, where nobles rule, the artisans tinker, and the peasants labor. The Éras Chronicles is the brainchild of Hilary Diane and Adam Shelby. These two along with their staff have created a beautiful world in which the players have been invited to explore and, in many ways, add to its past, present and future. For those of you who love to dream reality, I highly encourage you all to check out the Éras Chronicles for yourself and let yourself be inspired. [www.eraschronicles.com](http://www.eraschronicles.com)

On the 14th day of Springrise in the Braelin year of 1214 (1376 by the Xirosie Calendar), a grand storytelling contest in the duchy of Esos was had, in honor of her Highness Princess Valencia Odell. Storytellers from as far north as Blacknell, and as far south as Zakari, came to tell their tales. It was only fitting that one of Xiros also come to tell his tale. To those of this land I am known as Jacamou Malaysri, Shaman of Xiros, and Gravedigger of Ravensgate. Come and sit by the fire, hear my tale, and live as I lived.



*Jacamou's journal. Photo used with permission of the author.*



*Photo used with permission of the author.*



Photo used with permission of the author.



Image by Caroline Nesbit and used with permission of Éras Chronicles

The Hour is late.

The Moon shines down upon the sands of Xiros and shimmer like the stars. It is as if we walk in the sky above. There is no up, no down, only the infinite twinkle of lights all around us.

The warriors beside me, tired, both in body and spirit, stand firm, weapons in hand. It is a rare respite for us, and while we take in the stillness and beauty of the night, we dare not let our guard down. And so battered, but not broken, we stand, waiting, watching.

Our healers have retreated far behind our line to tend our Chieftain. Regardless we do not fear what lay before us. We will not flinch when the sands part ways to reveal our enemy.

As we stand, the spirits of our ancestors stand with us.

The ground begins to rumble as they approach. The torches are lit to reveal our presence.

We are of Xiros.

We are unafraid.

We see their faces, faces of our friends, allies, brothers, sisters, mothers, all taken and raised to fight for the maddened Shaman Gramin whom commands them. The moans of the dead raise into crescendo as their master commands them forward.

The dead hunger for the living, and charge us with unnatural force. Twenty of our best sheath their weapons and hold their totems of deflection aloft. Faint blue light emanates as they chant in unison. The dead, with nowhere to go, funnel between them towards those of us who still bore arms...

Our work begins.

For what feels like eternity, we hack the undead. The horde is endless. As our limbs fatigue, we fall back as our second line, advances to continue our work. I wipe the blood from my face and take a rare moment to survey the battle. To my dismay I see our novice shamans begin to tire, their throats growing hoarse from their endless chanting.

Slowly the light from their totems begin to dim and fade.

The dead break through...

The screams of the shamans are drowned by the sound of broken bones and torn flesh. Tired, broken, and battered we charge forward, swords in hand. The dead wash over us like an ocean wave upon a rock. Still we hold the line. One by one we fall to the dead, only to be raised by our enemy. The battle seems lost, and yet we stand, we are of Xiros, we will not yield so long as one of us has breath. Those of us left regroup for one last stand. Our swords are chipped, our shields reduced to splinters.

Far off over the mountains the first rays of twilight split the night sky. We howl to the light and prepare for the final charge; we shall make them pay in blood for every inch they take.

As if in answer, the healers of our hearth returned to us, followed by our chieftain Coramou. Beyond him an army marches ten score deep. Risen to fight for our hearth, and obey the words of our hearth leader.

Elder Coramou, Grandmaster Shaman, and leader of our mighty hearth, bellows a command, as the entirety of his horde rushes forward to destroy our enemy. We overwhelm them; those of us who still hold breath allow our blood to boil with the fury of war and charge forward.

I look across the land and spot the black figure. I see his eyes, so sure of victory, now dart in fear. He sends his elite dead into the

fray in a desperate attempt to sway victory back to him, though he knows in his black heart, he has lost. I sprint through the battle, ducking swings, and breaking through their dead gnarled hands. I will not allow him the dishonor of living past this night. The mad shaman sees me, and for a moment is frozen in fear. A war cry bellows from my lips as I make the final charge up the slope of sand, dagger and sword in hand.

The old man is quicker than I anticipate, as he ducks my swing, brings out an angry blade, and with a flash, plunges it deep within my chest.

I crumple to my knees, and meet the gaze of those ice blue eyes. From within a fold in the shaman's cloak he pulls out a stone of Greater Maladiction, intending to place it on me before the last of my life leaves my body. Gramin's laughter cuts through me, sending a shiver up my spine.

That laugh would be his last. With the strength left in me, I snatch the old man's wrist, rise to my feet like a man possessed. I can feel my ancestor's strength flow within me, as I snatch the Greater Malediction stone from his hand and force it into the shaman's mouth before driving my dagger deep into his heart. He croaks, spasms, and crumples before me.

All goes dark, I fall to the ground, the last bit of life flows out of me.

Our banner has risen high in the sky. My people cheer, and I feel a pride only one of Xiros can know...

...I am of Xiros

...I am unafraid.



*Jacamou Malaysri, Shaman of Xiros, and Gravedigger of Ravensgate. Photo used with permission of the author*



# VISUAL DESIGN AS METAPHOR: THE EVOLUTION OF A CHARACTER SHEET

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BY JASON MORNINGSTAR



*Image created by Rich Longmore  
([richlongmoreillustration.blogspot.com](http://richlongmoreillustration.blogspot.com)), and used with  
permission of the author.*

A character sheet is a resource commonly found in tabletop roleplaying games. It serves many purposes, from state tracking<sup>1</sup> to space for note-taking, and is a focal point of player agency—a player’s sense of ownership and control over the game world.

1. “State Tracking can be everything from keeping track of the scores of the different players of the game (like a cribbage board) or tables like the complex character sheets used in some roleplaying games.” Jeremy Gibson. *Introduction to Game Design, Prototyping and Development*. Crawfordsville, IN: Pearson Education, 2014, p. 59.

Any important player-facing information<sup>2</sup> that needs to be referenced during a game session typically appears on a character sheet. They can vary in size and scope from a few words on an index card to multi-page documents of crushing complexity. Although some games omit character sheets entirely, they remain an iconic bit of ephemera across the hobby.

As tangible links between the social and diegetic worlds, character sheets are often central to the roleplaying experience. For something so important, it is surprising how little thought sometimes goes into their design.

For my game, *Night Witches* (2015), I didn't want to fall into this trap. The game presents so many barriers by premise and content alone that I knew I wanted everything the players touched to be as engaging and usable as possible. As the primary and very literal point of contact between player and character, I knew that the character sheets needed to function efficiently while serving as objects of inspiration that communicated theme and hinted at possibilities for exciting play.

2. I use "player-facing" as quick shorthand to distinguish ephemera that is not explicitly GM-facing. Character sheets literally face the players. In some games this is a false dichotomy but here it makes sense.



*Image created by Rich Longmore, and used with permission of the author.*

*Night Witches*<sup>3</sup> is a tabletop roleplaying game about the 588th Night Bomber Regiment<sup>4</sup> a group of Soviet airwomen who flew dangerous missions against incredible odds during the Second World War. Struck by their powerful story, I started toying with a game about them in 2007, but only really began serious work after playing Vincent Baker's brilliant game *Apocalypse World* (2010), which would be the inspiration for the underlying structure for my take on the *Night Witches* story many years later. The elegant and always consequential feedback loop between

3. For more information about *Night Witches*, see <http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/night-witches/>.

4. Good books on the Night Witches include: Kazimiera Cottam. *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*. Manhattan, Kansas: Military Affairs/Aerospace History Publishing, 1983; Kazimiera Cottam. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*. Nepean, Ontario: New Military Publishing, 1997; and Anne Noggle. *A Dance With Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1994 (my top recommendation).

fiction and mechanics in *Apocalypse World* was a natural fit for the kind of play I had always imagined for my game.

Because there is a lot of information to track in *Night Witches*, I knew I would need to include a character sheet. Since it occupies the middle ground of complexity, as does *Apocalypse World* (2010), I found the *Apocalypse World* model a useful one to follow. You need reference material to play the game, but the essential components generally fit on one side of a sheet of letter-sized paper. This includes your character's name and background, their "look", and the mechanical bits that make them special in the game world—moves they can make, things they possess and people they know.

While deciding how to organize the information players would need to reference to play *Night Witches*, I found that it generally fell into three categories. The first is static information—your character's name, for example. This rarely if ever changes. The second is stable information—your moves, for example. This changes once per session or less. And the third is volatile information, which changes frequently. A character's health—Harm, in *Night Witches* parlance—falls into this category. During a session you may be changing and erasing this many times. These categories of use don't map one-to-one with the frequency with which they are visually referenced, but they are reasonably close.

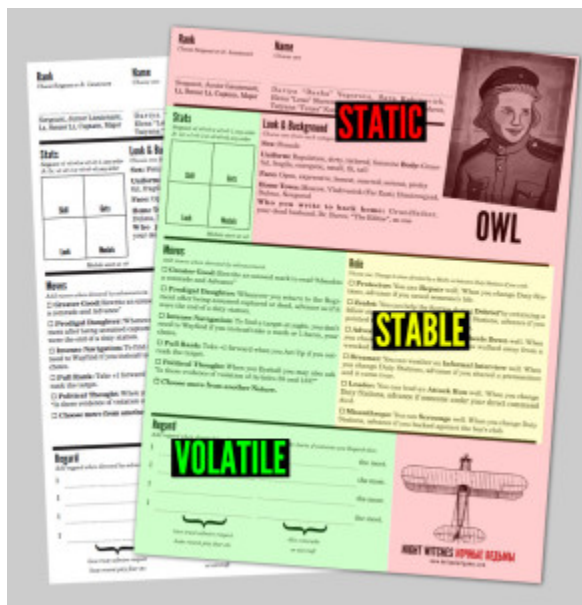


Image used with permission of the author.

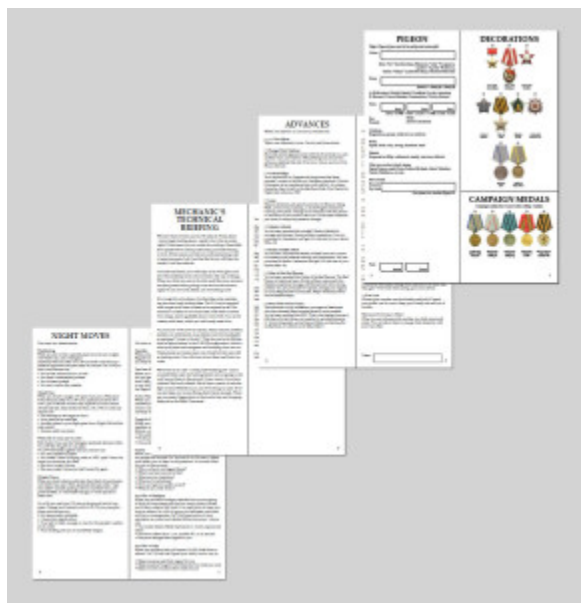
In the static information category, *Night Witches* has your character's name and rank, her look and background, and some localizing aids—regimental honors and information on the Regiment's command staff and your airwoman's place in it. In the stable information category, your character has a role, stats, moves, possibly some medals, and advancement options that all change infrequently. And finally, in volatile information, you have regard, harm, and marks, all game-specific subsystems that are referenced constantly in play. Stats and moves, while not volatile, are also subsystems that see continual reference at the table. These categorizations were obvious in some cases and less so in others. Over time they became clearer, and their placement was adjusted to reflect their use and utility.

My challenge was to present all this information in a way that was clear, easy to reference, and usable. One of my primary goals was to minimize both handling time and clutter at the table. Character sheets are physical objects that take up space,

and a paper-heavy game like *Night Witches* can be a little overwhelming. In addition to character sheets, there are duty station handouts and other necessary play materials, and I wanted to avoid a blizzard of paper on the table.

To this end, early character sheet designs involved presenting the material in booklets. I tried both portrait (4.25" by 11") and landscape (5.5" by 8.5") formats, each consisting of two double-sided pages, folded. While these designs neatly reduced table clutter, they increased handling time dramatically. There was no good way to put the volatile information where it would be easy to modify without also relegating often-referenced material to awkward locations within the booklets. I concluded, after a lot of painful experimentation and subsequent observation, that the density of information in this game made booklets a poor fit, and resigned myself to using a standard, double-sided sheet of paper. I was really in love with the portrait-oriented booklet, which I still think holds a lot of potential, but for *Night Witches* it was a poor fit and I reverted to a more common format.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the final design for the *Night Witches* character sheets is double sided, letter-sized, in portrait orientation.

5. Booklets have yet to come into their prime. My experiments with *Night Witches* and other games have led me to believe that the format is bad for traditional character sheets, which benefit from divorcing reference information shared by the entire table and player-facing and volatile information like statistics that ebb and flow within a discrete session, functions that booklets tend to combine. I think the booklet has a lot of potential in weird edge cases, like games that have hidden or transformational character components—perhaps where manipulating the booklet itself mimics the fiction in some way.



*An early iteration of the character sheet design, utilizing a booklet format. Image used with permission of the author.*

Having settled on the overall format of the character sheets in terms of usability, I then focused on aesthetic design. I wanted a clean, functional layout that echoed the game's book design, which is strongly influenced by mid-century Soviet texts. When designing the book, layout designer Brennen Reece and I collected visual references centered on the technical manual for the PO-2 airplane actually flown by the Regiment. As a result, both game book and character sheet feature functional groups of information broken up by strong lines: thick horizontals and thinner verticals where they add utility. The information is dense but allowed to breathe<sup>6</sup> through the careful use of balanced white space.

One clear design goal was the incorporation of medals.

6. This is a layout term related to page arrangement—margins, kerning (character spacing), leading (line spacing), etc. We used wide-ish margins and very careful leading to provide balanced white space.

Historically, earning medals was a big deal in the Red Army Air Force, so it is incorporated into the game as both a mechanical and fictive component of *Night Witches*. Besides, they look cool, and displaying the visually striking medals makes the character sheet more colorful and interesting – which, in turn, makes the sheet more usable.<sup>7</sup> The prominent display of medals serves to orient the player to the time and place of the game, an important added benefit in a game that is rooted in real history. Medals began on the front/bottom of the character sheet and, over successive iterations, slowly migrated to the back/top. As stable but not volatile information, they didn't need to be in constant view. Their presence on the sheet at all was enough to add visual interest and communicate theme.



Image used with permission of the author.

After I observed players sketching their airplanes or modifying airplane images on combat section information handouts, I also

7. See Don Norman. "Emotion and design: Attractive things work better." *Interactions Magazine* 9.4 (July 2002), pp. 36-42.

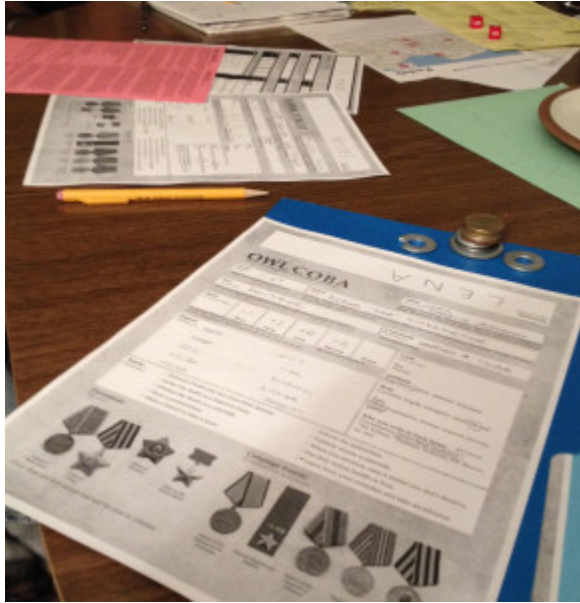


added a small but detailed overhead of the trusty PO-2 biplane to the front of the character sheet, and a silhouette to the back. Like the medals, this adds a bit of visual interest and perhaps gently focuses players on the game's core—women, in airplanes, being heroes. These illustrations take up valuable space but I think the tradeoff is worth it.

The upper right corner of the character sheet is blank—space left free to staple on a passport-sized photo of an airwoman. I knew that relating to the women that the game is about would be very important for the players, and decided early on that we'd commission an artist (the talented Claudia Cangini, as it turned out) to illustrate a score of them. There is a well-established tradition of drawing a portrait of your character, as reflected in some of the earliest *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) character sheets. My character sheets for *Night Witches* recognize the value in this tradition, making it very easy for players to adopt an image they can relate to—an image they choose themselves or, if they prefer, draw themselves. As an added bonus, the affixed head shot gives the character sheet a more official, bureaucratic look very much in keeping with the time and place.

After making my initial design choices, I then had to test their actual usability. Jakob Nielsen recommends quick and dirty usability testing with a cohort of 3-5 users repetitively,<sup>8</sup> which sounds like a gaming group to me. With this in mind I put my friends through the character sheet design wringer across the development process of *Night Witches* as we played through a complete campaign. Almost every weekly session saw them transferring information to a new sheet. I'm grateful for their patience.

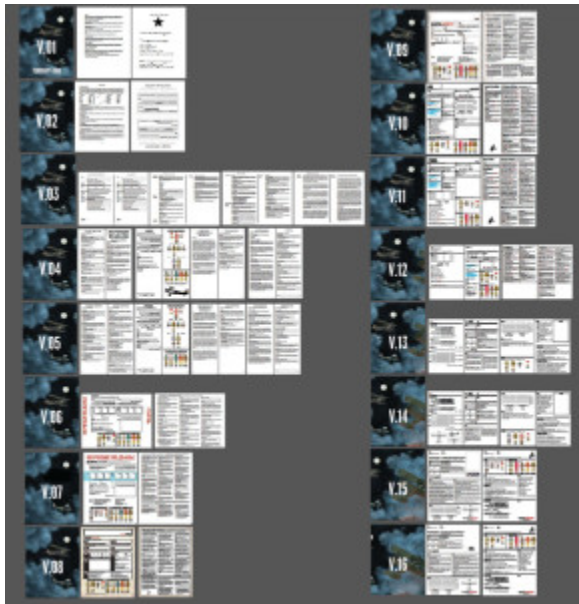
8. Jakob Nielsen and Thomas K. Landauer. "A mathematical model of the finding of usability problems." *Proceedings of ACM INTERCHI'93 Conference*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press, 1993, pp. 206-213.



*Playtesting in progress. Image used with permission of the author.*

By observing how the players interacted with the elements of the character sheet, I was given strong pointers that influenced my design decisions. One carry-over from the earliest version of the game was something I called the character's Story, represented by a simple structure that formed a sentence like "Mariya's Deadly Vengeance" or "Valya's Unlikely Love". I loved this idea, which presented a clear pointer toward a uniquely Russian blend of melancholy and melodrama, as well as incentivizing a style of play that fit the fiction I wanted to generate very well. I mechanically incentivized the use of your Story in various ways, and each one failed. Players didn't reference their character's Story, progressively more prominent placement on the character sheet had no effect, and it rarely entered play. In the end, based on my observations, it was removed from the game without any real loss and many of the elements built into Story found their way into moves, GM guidelines, and other areas of the game.

Another example of how observing playtests influenced my design choices is the selection and use of player moves. Inspired by Marshall Miller’s great game *The Warren* (2015), for a time, I had all the available character moves listed on every character sheet—a communal resource. By direct, painful observation I learned that this was a nightmare for a game as complex as *Night Witches*. Tracking who had taken which moves became complex and problematic. I eventually reverted to moves “owned” by individual playbooks, a far more common approach. It is illuminating how often I reverted to old, well-used forms in this process.



*A visual representation of the evolution of the Night Witches character sheets. Image used with permission of the author.*

Ultimately, I generated around two dozen versions<sup>9</sup> of the *Night Witches* character sheet, some featuring modest, incremental

9. As a note, I only included about half these in my analysis as the other half were very incremental. So the image above of the multiple versions only shows 16 steps although there were quite a few more in the entire process.

changes and some showcasing radical departures. By carefully observing how these sheets were used in play, I was able to not only refine the visual design of the functional tool but also re-examine and improve the game itself, which addressed my goal of improving usability. I addressed my second goal of including aesthetics, theme, and inspiration in the character sheets by incorporating period-specific visual design choices, coupled with the careful use of images. What I learned through this very focused process is that the evolution of a character sheet, or any piece of essential player-facing ephemera, can mirror the evolution of a game's design and serve as a metaphor for design missteps and triumphs. By making a commitment to both usability and the aesthetics of play, I was able to iteratively improve *Night Witches* outside the realm of traditional playtesting.



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**EXPERIMENTATION AND  
DESIGN**

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# UNCERTAINTY IN ANALOG ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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BY EVAN TORNER

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

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



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

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

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

5. Evan Torner. "Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games." *WyrdCon Companion Book 2013*. Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. Los Angeles, CA: WyrdCon, 2013, pp. 14-17.

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

#### UNCERTAINTY AND KNOWLEDGE

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

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

6. Monte Cook. *Numenera*. Seattle, WA: Monte Cook Games, 2013. p. 320.

7. Leonard Balsera, et al. *Fate Core*. Silver Spring, MD: Evil Hat Productions, 2013, p.185.

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

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

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

8. Vincent Baker. “Where were we...?” *anyway*. November 12, 2012. <http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/689>.

9. George Skaff Elias, Richard Garfield, and K. Robert Gutschera. *Characteristics of Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, p. 137.

10. Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, p. 139.

11. See also Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World*. Stanford, CA: Unreason Press, 2012.

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

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

## THE MANY VARIETIES OF UNCERTAINTY

Costikyan presumes that most games have multiple sources of

12. This book is part of the excellent new Playful Thinking series at MIT Press, edited by Jesper Juul, Geoffrey Long and William Uricchio.

13. For more information about platform studies, see <http://www.platformstudies.com/>.

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

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

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

14. Alexandre Mandryka. "Fun and uncertainty." *Gamasutra*. January 29, 2014. [http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/AlexandreMandryka/20140129/209620/Fun\\_and\\_uncertainty.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/AlexandreMandryka/20140129/209620/Fun_and_uncertainty.php).

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

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

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

16. For more information about the rise and fall of adventure games, see

<http://www.digitalgamemuseum.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-adventure-games/>.

17. For more information about hidden object games, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puzzle\\_video\\_game#Hidden\\_object\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puzzle_video_game#Hidden_object_game).

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

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

## **Dungeons & Dragons**

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

18. For more information about The Forge, see <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php>.

19. See Ron Edwards' "System Does Matter" ([http://www.indie-rpgs.com/\\_articles/system\\_does\\_matter.html](http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/system_does_matter.html)) and "The Nuked Apple Cart" (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/12/>).

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

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

## **Fiasco**

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

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



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

## **Amber**

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

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

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

### ***Dread***

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

22. This state of affairs made *Amber* one of the ultimate players-passing-notes-to-the-GM games of the 1990s. Next to White Wolf products, of course.

23. For more on the general power of alibi such as dice within a game context, see Cindy Poremba. "Critical Potential On The Brink Of The Magic Circle." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Situated Play Conference*. Edited by Akira Baba. Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2007, pp. 772–778.

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

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

24. Emily Care Boss. *Breaking the Ice*. Black and Green Games, 2006.  
<http://www.blackgreengames.com/bti.html>.

25. Nathan Paoletta. *carry: a game about war*. ndp design, 2006.

26. Creative agendas, as defined by the Big Model Wiki, are “the players' aesthetic priorities and their effect on anything that happen [sic] at the table that has any impact on the shared fiction.” They emerged as a concept in order to explain the different kinds of enjoyment experienced at a role-playing table, especially with regard to the inter-player friction differing agendas create. [http://big-model.info/wiki/Creative\\_Agenda](http://big-model.info/wiki/Creative_Agenda).

## EPISTEMOLOGY AND UNCERTAINTY IN RPGS

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

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

27. The presumption that role-playing games exist only for “entertainment,” as the industry often claims, denies us the ability to seriously engage with the symbols and meanings that these games otherwise generate, and leave us with little or no apparatus to interpret the political, social, emotional and cognitive surplus also emergent from many RPGs. On this point, see: Markus Montola. *On the Edge of the Magic Circle*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere, 2012.

28. First-person audience means that a player will be the only one who can properly understand and process their own experience as both player and character. For more on first-person audience, see: Torill Mortensen. “Playing with Players: Potential Methodologies for MUDS.” *Game Studies* 2.1 (2002). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/mortensen/>; J. Tuomas Harviainen. “Kaprow’s Scions.” In *Playground Worlds*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Jyväskylä, Finland: Ropecon, 2008, pp. 216-231; Christopher Sandberg. “Genesis: Larp Art, Basic Theories.” In *Beyond Role and Play*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki: Ropecon, 2004, pp. 265-288.

*World* (2010) designer Vincent Baker once put it, “all role-playing systems apportion [credibility,] and that’s all they do.”<sup>29</sup>

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

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

29. Vincent Baker. "Vincent's Standard Rant: Power, Credibility and Assent." *The Forge*. October 4, 2002. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=3701>.

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein. "On Certainty." Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1969-1975. <http://web.archive.org/web/20051210213153/http://budni.by.ru/oncertainty.html>.

31. Wittgenstein, Thesis 12.

32. See Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New Delhi: Sage, 1992.

33. Wittgenstein, Thesis 110.

34. Simonite, Tom. "The Decline of Wikipedia." *MIT Technology Review*. October 22, 2013. <http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/520446/the-decline-of-wikipedia/>.

35. Wittgenstein goes so far as to frame doubt itself as a kind of *mini-game* in which we (falsely) presume specific facts are certain so we can reach out to affirm veracity of other facts: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt itself presupposes certainty." Wittgenstein, Thesis 115.

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

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

36. Greg Costikyan. *Uncertainty in Games*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013, p. 2.

37. Costikyan, pp. 3-7.

38. At least, as Costikyan argues: In *Dungeons and Dragons*, “no outcome is necessary, and quantification is irrelevant to the outcome.” Costikyan, p. 12.

39. With regard to simulation games, for example, Bogost writes: “What simulation games create are biased, nonobjective modes of expression that cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity and ideology.” Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 99.

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

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

#### FRAMING IDEOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

# POST-LARP DEPRESSION

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BY SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN AND EVAN TORNER

Live-action role-playing (larp) occupies a unique place among analog games, for it demands as much from players' bodies as it does from their minds. It comes then as no surprise that many players find themselves in the situation of feeling confused, exhausted, and emotionally raw after a larp event.<sup>1</sup> In fact, larpers frequently exhaust themselves in advance through the leisure labor of planning their costumes, character actions, possible outcomes, and interactions. Subsequently, the event itself often features what some would describe as "intense content" – dramatic interpersonal dynamics, improvisational comedy, combat, political struggles, problem solving, etc. Intense content is there by design in order to maximize the emotional impact of the game. The sheer amount of emotional intensity experienced in a short time frame can impact any given larper, regardless of whether or not they found the experience enjoyable.<sup>2</sup>

1. Eirik Fatland. "Debriefing Intense Larps 101." *The Larpwright*. July 23, 2013. <http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=384>.; Peter Munthe-Kaas. "Post-Larp." *Munthe-Kaas.dk/Blog*. October 23, 2013. <http://munthe-kaas.dk/blog/?p=217>; Tobias Bindset and Pernille Schultz. "De-Fucking." *Playground Magazine 2* (2011), pp. 30-33.
2. Fatland; Sarah Lynne Bowman. "Bleed: How Emotions Affect Role-playing Experiences." *Nordic Larp Talks Oslo*, 2013. <http://nordiclarptalks.org/bleed-how-emotions-affect-role-playing/>.

According to many larpers, the return to the “real world” can feel deflating. The mind must divest itself from the vivid social reality of the larp, and attempting to communicate with outsiders about the events of game can feel alienating. Petri Lankoski and Simo Järvelä have argued that role-playing immersion and emotional bleed between the character and the player are, in fact, cognitive processes and “natural consequences” of how “the brain works.”<sup>3</sup> The emotional highs of game most likely have a hormonal component; endorphins, adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin levels shift as the result of game stimuli. As with any high, the comedown can often feel shocking and depressing.

Post-larp depression is a common phenomenon and should not cause players excessive concern. Indeed, participants report similar experiences after attending events at fan conventions, conferences, kink scenes, festivals, and so on.<sup>4</sup> The BDSM community in particular has developed strategies for aftercare, referring to the depression participants experience after a scene as “crash” and “drop.”<sup>5</sup> Both scholars and practitioners have noted the connection between BDSM and role-playing scenes,<sup>6</sup> indicating that the phenomenological mental processes are probably similar. Mental illness and role-play are not necessarily interrelated,<sup>7</sup> but the drop after an intense event may trigger imbalances already in place. This article describes strategies some larpers employ for transitioning between the game to the “real world” and coping with post-larp depression. By mobilizing

3. Petri Lankoski and Simo Järvelä. “An Embodied Cognition Approach for Understanding Role-playing.” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2012), pp.18-32.
4. Beth Dolgner. “Post-Con Depression: Its Symptoms and Treatment.” *Beth Dolgner*. September 4, 2012. <https://bethdolgner.com/dragoncon/post-con-depression-its-symptoms-and-treatment/>; Munthe-Kaas.
5. Gregg Norris. *Glossary of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, Masochism)*. Phillip Reeves, 2010.
6. J. Tuomas Harviainen. “Sadomasochist Role-playing as Live Action Role-playing: A Trait-Descriptive Analysis.” *International Journal of Role-playing* 1 (2008), pp.59-70; Hanne Grasmo. “Taking Care.” *Playground Magazine* 2, (2011), pp.28-29.
7. Fatland.

these diverse techniques, larpers recognize the larp as a non-trivial intervention in their daily emotional lives.

One of the most common strategies is to tell war stories and/or hold a debriefing afterwards, both of which constitute a reframing of the larp material. Larpers often process the experiences they had by sharing memories of what transpired in the game with one another. War stories tend to valorize, intellectualize, or make humorous moments that occurred in game, whereas debriefing tends to take emotional content seriously in order to process and move through it.<sup>8</sup> Both forms of “reframing” are important for larpers, allowing them to validate their experiences in the eyes of others. Storytelling also permits larpers to structure the oft-chaotic experience of a larp, drawing together a cohesive narrative that is easier to master.<sup>9</sup> War stories can be found anywhere there are larpers. However, those who choose to debrief are perhaps best able to do so in small groups with trusted friends and/or in a structured fashion with a moderator. Some larpers also assign each other debriefing buddies, who promise to contact each other in some fashion later. These debriefing buddies are expected to remain available to each other long-term as they share feelings that come up days, weeks, or months after the larp.<sup>10</sup>

Adapted from psychotherapy, some larp circles also employ the process of “de-roling,” a form of debriefing and detaching from one’s in-game role, to recover from larpers’ adoption of an alternate persona for long periods of time, which requires a different frame of reference. Regardless of whether a larper’s “real” persona is similar, pleasant and unpleasant in-game

8. Fatland; Lizzie Stark. “How to Run a Post-Larp Debrief.” *Leaving Mundania*. December 1, 2013. <http://leavingmundania.com/2013/12/01/run-post-larp-debrief/>.

9. Johanna Koljonen, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Bjarke Pedersen, and Jaakko Stenros. “The Great Player Safety Controversy.” Panel at Solmukohta 2012, Nurmijärvi, Finland, April 13, 2012; Johanna Koljonen. “The Second Great Player Safety Controversy.” Presentation at Knutepunkt 2013, Haraldsvangen, Norway, April 19, 2013.

10. Fatland; Stark.

memories, thoughts, and emotions persist long after the larp has ended. Such thoughts, emotions, and experiences may bleed-out into one's daily life.<sup>11</sup> Some larpers thus perform "de-roling" rituals to avoid problematic forms of bleed. These "de-roling" rituals vary in activity and scope, but include: taking off a piece of one's character's costume and placing it in a circle, saying goodbye to the character for a time;<sup>12</sup> thinking of one or more aspects of one's character that one admires and "taking" it with them; thinking of one or more aspects of one's character one dislikes and wishes to leave behind;<sup>13</sup> speaking about one's character in the third person during war stories or debriefing to emphasize a sense of distance;<sup>14</sup> and making sure to interact with all the people from a larp both in-character and out-of-character to emphasize the distinction.<sup>15</sup>

Other larpers forego the angst and throw a party instead. Oftentimes, relaxing pre- and post-game social events unaffiliated with the game fiction help players connect with one another and relieve post-game depression. These social events include MeetUps, "afters," dinners, parties, coffee dates, online discussions, etc.<sup>16</sup> Socializing with one's fellow larpers actually tends to increase the feelings of emotional safety in the larp space, so that players get to know one another well and can better distinguish between in-game and out-of-game actions. Also, interacting in new contexts tends to deepen bonds of friendship that already get forged at the game. Social events give larpers the space to have conversations with one another that might not

11. Markus Montola. "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-playing." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*. 2010; Sarah Lynne Bowman. "Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013), pp. 17-18.

12. Stark.

13. Munthe-Kaas; Sarah Lynne Bowman, ed. *The Book of Mad About the Boy* (2012 US Run). Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2012. [http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book\\_matbus2012.pdf](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book_matbus2012.pdf).

14. Stark.

15. Stark.

16. Fatland; Bowman, "Social Conflict," p.19; Stark.

otherwise take place, working through conflict and increasing trust.

Some players further emphasize nurturing their physical and emotional well-being after a larp, taking care of mind and body. They insist upon players sleeping, eating, bathing well, and not pushing themselves too hard. Human touch is also said to be helpful, if one feels comfortable with hugs.<sup>17</sup> Depending on the intensity of the larp, sometimes people can take days to recover. For the mind, some players find it helpful to write about their experiences after events. Players may share these memories or keep them private. The mere act of committing events to paper helps individuals externalize and order their experiences in a meaningful way.<sup>18</sup> Players may also seek to simply distract themselves, moving from one immersive activity to another: watching a few episodes of a television show, reading a book, playing another role-playing game, and so forth. Transporting the frame of reference from one to another may smooth the transition for some players.

Lastly, one effective strategy to ease the transition back to the mundane world is the act of showing gratitude to the other larpers and the organizers themselves. This act of storytelling can boost morale. It dignifies the presence of all involved, and lets everyone know that they mutually enhanced each other's experience. The organizers in particular expend a great deal of time and energy to create a fulfilling experience, and players who acknowledge that effort may find the overall experience of returning to life less deflating.

Not all players experience post-larp depression, however. Some fluidly transition back to their daily lives. Other participants have noted an inverse phenomenon called "post-larp charisma," in which players are fueled with an abundance of creative

17. Fatland; Bowman, "Social Conflict," p.19.

18. Fatland.



energy.<sup>19</sup> Others still object to the use of psychological terms such as “depression” or the more conversational phrase “post-larp blues,” preferring to refer to the phenomenon as “post-larp” to avoid the connotations of mental dysfunction.<sup>20</sup> Responses to intense game events can vary and no one strategy works for all people. The most important point remains, however: the effects of larp on the players are often too significant to ignore, as are the impact of the techniques outlined here.

19. Fatland.

20. Søren Ebbehøj. “The Great Player Safety Mess.” Presentation at *Knutpunkt 2014: Sharpening the Cutting Edge*. Gullbrannagården, Sweden, April 4, 2014.

# RULES FOR WRITING RULES: HOW INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN IMPACTS GOOD GAME DESIGN

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BY IBRAHIM YUCEL

Rules are the building blocks of all games, providing all the structure and boundaries to which players consent.<sup>1</sup> Yet they can quickly become the most frustrating aspects of a game.<sup>2</sup> The task of reading and memorizing a textbook-sized list of rules for more complicated games intimidates many players, particularly new ones. As players discuss and try to parse out poorly-organized rules, a game can come to a standstill, breaking what we would see as “immersion” or “fun.” While much has been written on the need to playtest to discover a game’s feedback loops (e.g., how a player multiplies his/her in-game rewards) and

1. Editor's Note: We recognize the striking affinity between this piece and Steven Pinker's recent essay on the clarity of academic writing, which also makes reference to psychological organization techniques such as "chunking." Steven Pinker. "Why Academics Stink at Writing." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 26, 2014. <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Academics-Writing-Stinks/148989/>.
2. Raph Koster. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Phoenix, AZ: Paraglyph, 2004; Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek. "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research." In *Proceedings of the Challenges in Games AI Workshop, Nineteenth National Conference of Artificial Intelligence*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2004. <http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>; Russell B. Williams. "A Nine Component Framework for the Design and Analysis of Meaningful Games." In *Proceedings of Meaningful Play Conference*. Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2008. [http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008\\_paper\\_32.pdf](http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008_paper_32.pdf).

dominant strategies (i.e., a strategy that defeats all other options) in games, vague rules still plague the best of games, especially in games where specific rules (i.e., rules on individual cards) may contradict the general rules of the game. It is thus important to write rules in clear, understandable, and easily referenced manner to allow players enjoyment of the game.

One game plagued by vague rules is the *HeroClix* (2002) collection of collectable miniature combat games, in which comic book heroes and villains battle each other utilizing various superpowers. Collectable games that sell individual components in booster packs such as *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) and *HeroClix* are often prone to open rules conflicts, due to booster packs' constant introduction of new elements. Players must frequently consult the directions, deliberate with others about vague rules, and adjust meta-game strategies – emergent strategies of the player community beyond the strictures of the game – as certain elements of a game privilege certain modes of play over others. At best, poorly-written rules and abilities receive attention from the community of players itself, which leads to errata, or rules published after the initial release. These errata then become paratextual references outside of the rules themselves,<sup>3</sup> and increase the difficulty of comprehending the game. Acting as rules arbitrators, the *HeroClix* HCrealm community dedicates whole sections of their discussion forums to game rules and player interactions with these rules. Often, game judges must search and read pages of discussion to discover how a particular game element interacts with other game elements. If an issue is not discussed, players must post a new discussion in the forum to seek clarification. The HCrealm forums, specifically the unit rulings thread, also constitute the main archive of these rulings.

The HCrealm forums represent a needed communication

3. For more on paratexts as a theoretical concept, see Gérard Genette. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997.

channel between the designers of the game and its community, patching up points where the rules have failed to provide clear, unambiguous instructions. Game designers focus on the ability of rules to work in conjunction with each other, and achieve a specified game “aesthetic.”<sup>4</sup> While flow, engagement, and fun are always the primary goals of games, the comprehension of rules remains essential to those goals.<sup>5</sup> Players’ experiences could be greatly improved with some general principles of design applied to the crafting and presentation of rules. Below, I suggest some principles of design and instruction to improve legibility, reviewability, and comprehension of rules.

Designers often craft a series of statements that form the rules. These statements are often presented in paragraph formats, with the designer describing the elements and defining terms used in a game. However, those with experience in writing legal documents, where meaning and interpretation carry the upmost importance, sympathize with the difficulty in writing something that is both easy to comprehend, yet unambiguous. Game designers utilize the tricks of various forms of media including text, web videos, and interactive flash presentations to communicate the basic rules of a game. Three areas which make a large impact on making rules clear and easy to read are *chunking*, *figures*, and *flowcharts*.

## CHUNKING

Chunking is one of the simplest and most common ways of taking complex sets of rules and organizing them to make them easier to memorize and reference. William Lidwell, Kritina Holden and Jill Butler define “chunks” as “[referring] to a unit of information in short-term memory—a string of letters, a word,

4. Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek.

5. Jenova Chen. *Flow in Games*. MFA Thesis. 2006. [http://www.jenovachen.com/flowingames/Flow\\_in\\_games\\_final.pdf](http://www.jenovachen.com/flowingames/Flow_in_games_final.pdf); Jenova Chen. “Flow in Games (and Everything Else).” *Communications of the ACM* 50 (2007), pp. 31–34. <http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/lieber/courses/cs4500/sp09/resources/p31-chen-flow-in-games.pdf>; Koster.

or a series of numbers. The technique of chunking seeks to accommodate short-term memory limits by formatting information into a small number of units. The maximum number of chunks that can be efficiently processed by short-term memory is four, plus or minus one.”<sup>6</sup>

While much debate surrounds the precise optimal number of chunks our memory can handle, fewer chunks generally mean easier recall by readers.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, gameplay containing a long series of steps will often be broken into phases, converting chunks to more manageable lists. Examples of chunking a series of steps in a turn can be found in *Magic: The Gathering's* phase system, *Dungeons and Dragons* (2014), and the board game *Agricola* (2007), among others. In most editions of *Dungeons and Dragons*, for example, fighting requires a pre-combat chunk that establishes who is aware of the enemy, an initiative chunk to establish turn order, and finally a combat chunk for actions to be taken. This allows the dungeon master to be aware of specific rules for each chunk, and give considerations to each player at the table in turn. *Agricola* similarly uses chunks so that important game events are not ignored. Chunks also allow each player ample time to consider the strategy they will use that turn. Its chunks are divided into: start the round, replenish, work, return home, and harvest. Each of the phases are further chunked in the rules to sub-phases, all of which must be followed to ensure fair play.

This technique also often reflects the *aesthetic* basis for a game. For example, many tabletop role-playing games feature a large set of rules and terms for defining the abilities of one's character and their application. While there are rules regarding how

6. William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler. *Universal Principles of Design: 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions, and Teach through Design*. 2nd edition. Minneapolis, MN: Rockport Publishers, 2010, p. 40.

7. George A. Miller. "The Magical Number Seven, plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information." *Psychological Review* 63.2 (1956), pp. 81–97; Alan D. Baddeley. *Human Memory: Theory and Practice*. New York & Oxford: Psychology Press, 1997.

capable the character is in combat, we chunk the rules into “combat” sections rather than “character creation.” Chunking also works well on smaller-scale games such as war, poker, or backgammon. Many board games will chunk their setup rules separately from the game sequence rules just for this reason.

The proper number of chunks needed for any particular set of rules is a compromise between its subject matter and a player’s limits on memory. Complex games, such as war and empire-building games, rely on reference cards for players to remember chunks and their contents, since the game has an otherwise high cognitive load. In best practice, chunks are easy to find, and organized via lists and outlines.

## FIGURES AND EXAMPLES

A great rulebook is one that shows as well as tells. Figures such as photographs of the initial game setup may be necessary in some games in order to convey placement without resorting to onerous and confusing details. However, such images also prove vital in examples of gameplay, to show the before- and after-states of complicated moves outlined in the rules. Figures and visual examples scaffold the player, providing needed context to the rules and may show how a number of rules interact to create dynamic gameplay.<sup>8</sup> The use of scaffolding techniques is also vital to design in educational video games, as the scaffold provides the needed context and starting point for all players.<sup>9</sup> Figures, diagrams, and examples help when the rules become complicated enough that any chunking remains a difficult proposition. Finally, figures help accommodate those players

8. Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek.

9. M. B. Rosson, and Jack Carroll. “Scaffolded Examples for Learning Object-Oriented Design.” *Communications of the ACM* 39 (1996), pp. 46–47; Alexander Reppenning, David Webb, and Andri Ioannidou. “Scalable Game Design and the Development of a Checklist for Getting Computational Thinking into Public Schools.” In *Proceedings of the 41st ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education*. New York: ACM, 2010, pp. 265–269.

with different kinds of learning preferences, increasing the game's appeal to diverse audiences.

Those who utilize figures, however, need to pay special attention to the design principles of *comparison*, *framing*, *highlighting*, and *iconic representation*.<sup>10</sup> Each of these principles has an impact on developing the user's mental model of the game itself and how the rules of the game fit into that mental model. *Comparison* helps the user distinguish between states of the game. A series of figures showing — via comparison — how states change from one point to the next allows the user to mimic and then internalize how a rule is implemented in actual play. *Framing* provides the context for the player, so that the picture is not just a series of unrelated objects and the placement of game elements makes more sense to the user. *Highlighting* informs the player of key game elements they might otherwise overlook. Finally, *iconic representation* is usually used in place of photographic depictions because of the increased clarity and (often) universality of the figure. Rule authors would do well to avoid arbitrary iconic representations, however, as they may confuse players more than help them.<sup>11</sup>

## FLOWCHARTS

Sid Meier once said “A [good] game is a series of interesting choices.”<sup>12</sup> Choices available to the player can be represented using a flowchart of the decision points. Rules are often misinterpreted around timing and sequencing effects, for which flowcharts often provide the best guidance. Many games feature abilities for different players to enhance the tactical options and aesthetics of a particular choice of play. However, since these abilities need to interact with both the standard rules of play and other players' abilities, the resolution of said effects must be

10. Lidwell, Holden, and Butler.

11. Lidwell, Holden, and Butler.

12. Meier, quoted in: Andrew Rollings and Dave Morris. *Game Architecture and Design*. San Francisco, CA: New Riders, 2004, p. 38.

considered. *Magic: The Gathering* is such a game in which the state of cumulative effects plays a vital importance. As a response to this design challenge, *Magic* has developed the gold standard of effect rules: the “stack,” which means the last effect declared is the first to be resolved. Even with this simple rule, resolving effects can be very difficult to parse without a flowchart.

A flowchart also provides the clearest visualization of how to transition between states in a game. They usefully supersede the paragraph format of written rules when dealing with very complex, multi-stage games that require players to act either simultaneously or semi-simultaneously. Despite their usefulness, flowcharts are often not provided within tabletop games. Players usually resort to fan communities that share homemade flowcharts clarifying the rules, again creating a paratextual layer of rules interpretation. Fans archive flowcharts on sites such as Boardgamegeek.com, so that others in the community can find them.

## CONCLUSION

Basic principles of instructional design come into consideration whenever rules to games are created, and certain best practices effectively convey authorial intent to the players. Arguments over rules often appeal to this authorial intent, and unclear communication through unreflective rules design can destroy even the most carefully-designed game. Player misunderstandings are a given in the playing of any game, but they can be minimized and productively channeled through a well laid-out set of rules.



## STORIUM'S ANALOG HERITAGE

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BY LILLIAN COHEN-MOORE

***Editor's Note:** Analog Game Studies solicited this piece from its author with regard to design decisions in Storium, and is in no way officially associated with or receiving any remuneration from the Storium creators. We think it is an interesting design study as an analog-digital hybrid, and we hope you think so too. -Evan Torner*

*Storium* (2014)<sup>1</sup> is an analog game for collaborative storytelling adapted to an online, asynchronous mode of play. Writers compose Storium Worlds filled with genre-appropriate tropes and types, which are then used by Narrators to generate conflict-laden scenarios for a group of players. Players advance the story by playing Storium World-determined cards and writing fictional prose to illustrate these cards' effects. The completed Storium reads like a short story with a strong focus on the characters.

Since my early playtesting for the service, I have engaged with Storium both as player and Narrator, and I have also joined many other creators as a Storium World writer during this summer's Kickstarter campaign. To date, it is one of the most fascinating game spaces with which I have interacted. Though Storium is

1. <http://storium.com/>.

situated online, it has inherited much directly from tabletop design<sup>2</sup> and quite literally a part of the “story games”<sup>3</sup> design school.

## INHERITED DESIGN PRINCIPLES

*Storium* is played asynchronously and lacks the verbal/facial expressions of players, which one normally reads for cues in a tabletop or larp setting. Despite this, *Storium* shares much with the design and implementation of tabletop RPGs and larp.

As you play through a *Storium*, you select new goals for your character, create new Strength and Weakness cards signifying her/his capabilities, and take other actions that have significant effects on your character’s narrative arc. The number of Strength/Weakness cards you can play never increases, and you never become mechanically superior to your fellow players. The card hands a player has are much smaller than, say, the kind of skills spread you’d see in *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014), or a *World of Darkness* (1991) game, which limits the number of mechanical moves a player can make in a given round. This structure is reminiscent of D. Vincent Baker’s tabletop RPG *Apocalypse World* (2010) and those games that share its creative DNA, denoted by the label “Powered by the Apocalypse.”

This sort of game manipulates the ways that characters interact with each other and the game world by specifically defining their potential moves. Tight budgeting of players’ mechanical influence on the narrative pushes players to carefully consider

2. For more on tabletop design, see Greg Costikyan and Drew Davidson, eds. *Tabletop: Analog Game Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2011.
3. Story games as a genre have been defined by multiple authors, such as Avery McDaldno and Ben Robbins. Generally, they are defined as games “in which the players create fiction, and the fiction can in turn influence the play of the game.” “How Story Games are Different from Other Games.” *Story Game Codex*. <http://sgcodex.wikidot.com/how-story-games-are-different-from-other-games>; Avery McDaldno. “What Are Story Games?” *Buried Without Ceremony*. <http://buriedwithoutceremony.com/what-are-story-games-and-why/>; Ben Robbins. “Defining Story Games.” *Ars Ludi*. October 29, 2012. <http://arsludi.lamemage.com/index.php/460/defining-story-games/>.

their moves, as well as to think creatively about how to use their small pool of resources (in this case, their cards) to best achieve their narrative goals. The collaborative scene framing and the shared narrative control in *Storium* evokes games like Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2008), and the brevity and scarcity of mechanical tools in player's hands is reminiscent of Will Hindmarch's *Always/Never/Now* (2013).

Card limits keep the narrative moving without letting any one player take over the narrative and shove fellow players out of the scene. In every scene, a player can only play a maximum of 3 cards. Players are free to add more descriptive text to the scene, but cannot influence the narrative's outcome once their cards have run out. In the game's Commentary sidebar, players note how many and what kind of cards they have left at the start of a scene. Though not every *Storium* sees the level of narrative authority distributed to the point where one might ask "Hey, can I fail this challenge because it really fits my character to do that?" players are often exceedingly generous about sharing narrative authority. In the *Storiums* where there is a fairly open (often unspoken) agreement among players to share that narrative authority, the out-of-game discussion often keeps the game itself moving smoothly through the scenes and *Storiums* themselves.

Characters confront adversity and challenges in most tabletop games, be they ones thought of as mainstream, such as *D&D*, *Shadowrun* (1989), *Pathfinder* (2009), or story games such as *Monsterhearts* (2012) or *Lady Blackbird* (2010). *Storium* also focuses on adversity, and encounters are quite explicit about what threat they pose. A *Storium* is propelled forward via Challenge cards.

Challenge cards drive conflicts, form mysteries, and can help create dramatic stakes from nothing. Tasks players can try to perform include swaying an NPC to your side, getting out of a heist gone wrong without killing anyone, or conducting surveillance to catch a monster. But challenge cards are also

easy to write and frame poorly. When a player gets through a Challenge with a “Strong” or “Weak” Outcome, they choose to write exactly how that win or loss looks. The Narrator only deals with uncertain outcomes. Cards with extremely specific outcomes give players very little room inside the narrative to exercise their agency and narrative authority. Open-ended questions help, and offering success-at-a-cost can intrigue players. Some *Storium*s live and die on the strength of the Challenges their Narrators write. This is fascinating to observe with regard to *Storium*’s analog heritage, because it mirrors how different GM styles around a table or at a larp can cause a group to embrace or walk away from a game.

*Storium* players have a genuine choice about whether their characters succeed or fail to a greater degree than some players realize. I do see some *Storium*s where players “hoard” the positive cards that give them the greatest possibility to control the narrative to their characters’ advantage. As players get more acclimated to *Storium*, however, they tend to choose failure more often. Like tabletop games, *Storium* depends heavily on GM facilitation skills, savvy use of its system, and buy-in from players and Narrator alike into *Storium*’s foundation of collaboration.

#### WHOSE TURN IS IT?

For players in a tabletop or live-action role-playing game, one determines turn order by a mix of in-character proximity to an event (narrative determination), and the skills listed on the character sheet (mechanical determination). With *Storium*, there is neither formalized nor mechanical enforcement for determining turn order. Instead, the game offers tools to help people keep taking turns. Every *Storium* offers its players the same feature: the “poke.” It sends an automated message to the person being poked, telling them who poked them and reminding them to log in soon so they don’t hold up the story. As

an engine that drives asynchronous cooperative fiction, *Storium* has little use for a mechanically-enforced turn-taking system.<sup>4</sup>

Through the poke function, a thematic solution exists to keep players engaged and moving the story along. We can remind each other to take a turn, finish turns, and make sure the fiction being written does not grind to a halt. *Storium* needs only enforce that the turns are taken, not who takes them. Such communication can also be achieved by using the Commentary built into each *Storium* to leave messages everyone in the *Storium* can see to remind people to take turns.

Since *Storium* is an environment that allows for asynchronous play, participants of a given *Storium* can stay in touch, regardless of geographic and scheduling differences.

#### THE NARRATIVE OF FAILURE

*Storium*'s design encourages collaborative storytelling, which means it must establish a social and emotional environment that lets the players productively negotiate which character should do what. These negotiations are surprisingly mechanics-centric, as opposed to indie games, where negotiations tend to be about story decisions. Is Myka the better choice to talk someone into letting them into a building because they know her from school? Is Vanessa the best choice to feel out someone for the coven because she's the most charismatic of the witches? These are negotiations about guiding the narrative.

I was introduced to indie RPGs through principles such as “fail forward”<sup>5</sup> and “playing to lose”<sup>6</sup> to make failure interesting. Yet it is still rare, in my experience, to see players “sign up” for failures.

4. Editor's note: One can find digital inspiration for *Storium*'s digital design in mobile-app games that emphasize asynchronous play, such as *Fallen London* (<http://fallenlondon.storynexus.com/>)

5. See <http://www.story-games.com/forums/discussion/comment/434842>.

6. See [http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing\\_to\\_Lose](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_Lose).

In *Storium*, I have watched players negotiate who would provide the “best failure” in a scene. These negotiations deal with failures as beats that would guide narrative forward, allow players to empty their hand and reshape their character cards, bring about introspection for characters, or cause opportunities to bond or fall apart to the characters as a group. They negotiate through the “Commentary” function of the *Storium* website, which is running down the side of the screen.

People playing *Storiums* often become deeply committed to the narrative, without any jockeying to be martyr or hero in a scene. This emotional state comes from *Storium*’s design: narrative authority is genuinely shared, so a player’s decision to have a character fail in the scene is imbued with psychic weight. Players usually agree upon a failure that would be motivated by something beyond pure mechanics, a failure that would pack the most short or long term narrative weight. Horror as a genre works by imperiling its protagonists; *Storium* does the same. Meta-level discussions draw out more than just players’ emotional commitments, but also their very collective notion of how a satisfying story is told.

Mechanical concerns (such as scarcity of cards) and short or long-term emotional pay-off become weighted through these meta-level negotiations about failure. If a demon worshipping bad boy fails a girl he grew up with, that might be the keystone to a redemption narrative. Each failure has the potential to rewrite a character and their future, and meta-level discussions let players process their emotional investment in their characters to determine the “appropriate” failure for the moment. Players retain ultimate narrative authority over their character in any case. As far as mechanical incentives go, being the one to say what failure looks like has its own appeal. In addition, participating in Challenges also means the players plays cards from their hand, which reinforces their connection to the story world as they narrate.

## INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, FANBASES, AND STORIUM WORLDS

*Storium* is unlike fanfic and play-by-post communities in a number of ways, with its relationship to intellectual property (IP) as a core point of difference. Fan-based communities often use well-known IP, like *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars*, whereas *Storium* uses its own IP to avoid copyright infringement. *Storium* makes efforts to attract fan communities while avoiding legal issues, as seen in their successful Kickstarter. More than 30 authors contributed Story Worlds to *Storium*, drawing an audience wanting to play worlds written by their favorite creators.

Storiums are created by an active fanbase, and writers willing to adapt their existing works onto a different platform may choose to clear the rights and do so. *Storium* is not held back by the absence of widely known IPs such as the *Marvel* superheroes or *Star Wars*, but rather enabled by fans and writers being on equal footing. Fans get to follow the work of their own favorite creators on the site, and creators get the support of world building tools for their writing.

When *Storium* becomes more widely available, it will give digital gamers and storytellers access to many mechanics and techniques currently used by the analog role-playing game community, and analog role-players will finally have an online role-playing system playable with people from around the world that requires a very similar skill-set to that required by the type of role-playing they already do.

## REGARDING BOARD GAME ERRATA

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BY JAN ŠVELCH

Like any other product, physical manifestations of games come with their share of errors, typos, glitches and other phenomena which possibly undermine the designer's intention of how the game should be played. Game designers create errata documents to have players "fix" these problems. In this respect, errata work to retroactively enforce the producer's control over the game. Interpreting errata as paratexts can help us understand corrections within a historical context as well as see them both as a surrounding text and a part of the whole game artifact.

Games are complex entities which can be seen both as systems and processes (activities).<sup>1</sup> While the definitions of games are contested and some scholars even question the need for the "ultimate" definition,<sup>2</sup> for the purpose of this article we can settle on a basic classification of game constituents – worlds (and the narratives that structure them), rules and play. Errata can emphasize and prioritize some of these "building blocks," but we

1. Note that some languages (for example Czech) have only one word for both game and play.

2. See Jonne Arjoranta. "Game Definitions: A Wittgensteinian Approach." *Game Studies* 14.1 (2010). <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/arjoranta>; Jesper Juul. "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness." In *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*. Edited by Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens. Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003, pp. 30-45.



should bear in mind that these parts can be neither easily isolated nor changed without altering the game as a whole.

#### ERRATA AS PARATEXTS AND PREFERRED USE

Gerard Genette coined the term “paratext” to talk about surrounding texts that inform the reader about the main work, frame the text and also influence the reader’s interpretation of it.<sup>3</sup> While Genette focused on literary works, we can easily find parallels between literary paratexts and game paratexts. Analog game errata often fulfill the same functions and take similar forms as “later” prefaces and notes.<sup>4</sup> “The first minor function [of later prefaces] consists of calling attention to the corrections, material or other, made in this new edition. We know that in the classical period, when it was hardly common to correct proofs, original editions were usually very inaccurate. The second edition (or sometimes an even later one) was therefore the opportunity for a typographical cleanup that it was entirely to an author’s benefit to point out.”<sup>5</sup>

Later notes can perform a similar function of “calling attention to corrections made in the text of this new editions, stressing [the author’s] modesty in the face of justified remarks,”<sup>6</sup> even though they usually refer to particular segments of a text instead of a text as a whole. Many physical manifestations of errata consist of such notes put together, as longer texts which, in fact, step-by-step address individual parts of a game.

Pointing out the improvements and corrections is only a minor function of errata. Their main role is to reinforce the preferred use after it was hindered either by designer’s fault<sup>7</sup> or

3. Gerard Genette. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

4. “Later” means that a paratext was published after the original publication of the main text. For example, second and later editions often introduce new prefaces, postfaces or notes. In Genette’s framework, such paratexts are labeled as “later paratexts.”

5. Genette, p. 240.

6. Genette, p. 329.

unprecedented emergent gameplay: “to rectify *in extremis* a bad reading that has already been completed.”<sup>8</sup> I draw the terms “preferred use” and its opposite – the *aberrant* use – from the work of Umberto Eco<sup>9</sup> and Stuart Hall<sup>10</sup> who held similar perspectives on the reception of media content in the 1970s. Any actual play of an analog or digital game can then be positioned in a continuum with both preferred and aberrant uses as extremes. Various levels of aberrant uses can be to some extent predicted and simulated by playtesting, but they are also frequently reported by players interacting with a published game product.

## FORMS AND DISTRIBUTION

We can trace the default form of errata to the practice of second (or subsequent) editions, also noted by Genette in the context of literary works. Such updated editions often come with the explicit information about corrections and improvements made to a game, potentially becoming an incentive to buy a new version of a product. For example, the second edition of *A Few Acres of Snow* (2011) board game<sup>11</sup> comes with an updated rulebook explicitly stating the changes made and also supplying designer’s comments on what led him to such decisions. In this particular case, the errata was prompted by feedback from the Board Game Geek community and various critics who complained about the lack of game balance between the two playable factions.<sup>12</sup>

7. For example of impact of vague rules see Ibrahim Yucel. "Rules for Writing Rules: How Instructional Design Impacts Good Game Design." *Analog Game Studies* 1.3 (2014). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/the-rules-for-writing-rules-how-instructional-design-impacts-good-game-design/>.

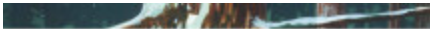
8. Genette, p. 239.

9. Umberto Eco. "Towards a semiotic inquiry into television message." *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 3,(1972), pp. 103–121.

10. Stuart Hall. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham, UK: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973.

11. Martin Wallace. *A Few Acres of Snow*. Treefrog Games, 2011.

12. For a more detailed account of this, see Jesse Dean's account of the game's criticism on Board Game Geek: <http://boardgamegeek.com/blogpost/9073/few-acres-snow-and-critical-silence-biggest-flawed>.



**A Few Acres of Snow**

'A Few Acres of Snow' is a two-player game about the struggle between Britain and France for control of North America, fought out during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

When actions you can perform in the game are determined by the cards you have in your hand and stack. Each nation has its own set of location and empire cards. You increase the range of actions available to you by adding cards to your discard pile, which eventually becomes your draw deck. Cards come in two general types: location cards and empire cards. You add location cards to your deck by selling some location or capturing them from the enemy. Empire cards are simply drafted, although some of them have to be drafted.

Each player starts with control of a number of locations and has the accompanying location cards in his starting deck. Location cards may be used to settle new locations, thereby settling territories, build fortifications and launch attacks. Location maps also provide a means of transport, income, settlement and relief.

Empire cards comprise a variety of different types of cards. Many of these have a military function, such as regular military and siege military. Other cards increase

the range of actions available to you, such as the governor card, which allows you to remove cards from your hand. You need to follow the cards in your deck to set your objectives. If you wish to develop your theme, specify that it will help to have more empire cards in your deck. If you want to win through sheer force of arms, then draft military cards.

There are also neutral empire cards which can be drafted by either player. The most interesting of these are the Native American cards. Native Americans allow you to ambush and raid your opponent. Skills in diplomacy can be used (contributing to your victory) especially if you're British.

The game can end suddenly if one player captures a particular location, e.g. if the British take Quebec, it will also end if one player captures a certain number of cities and/or from his opponent, or whether he manages to place all of his flags or tables on the board. In the latter two cases players add up points to see who has more.

**Components**

All card sets in this book use the playing board you should also have the following items:

- 1 Copy of this book
- 1 French territories deck
- 1 British territories deck
- 1 Neutral territories deck
- 1 Empire map deck
- 1 Settlement deck
- 1 Trade goods deck
- 1 Empire cards deck
- 1 Governor cards deck
- 1 Flag cards deck
- 1 Table cards deck
- 1 Neutral cards deck
- 1 Flag cards deck
- 1 Table cards deck

**Board cards**

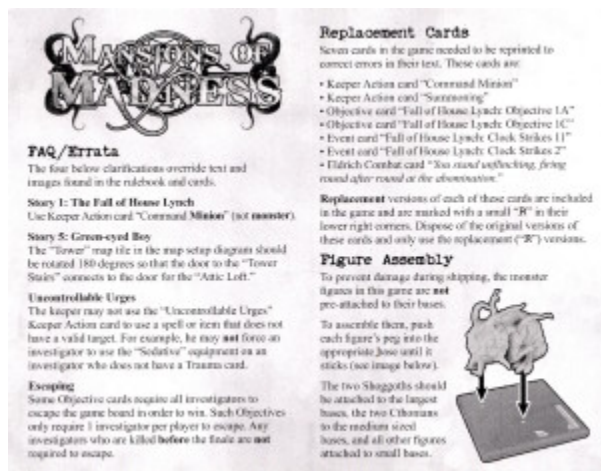
There is one set of board cards for each nation. The board cards are the playing board you should also have. The board cards are the playing board you should also have. The board cards are the playing board you should also have.

A Few Acres of Snow Second edition rulebook contains errata. Image courtesy of Treefrog Games.

Errata can also be incorporated—if rather loosely—into a game product by way of an *errata insert*. This form and type of distribution happens thanks to the production cycle of an analog game. Publishers often outsource manufacturing to specialized companies, such that quality control, assembly and shipping can sometimes take place at entirely different locations.<sup>13</sup> During the whole production cycle, mistakes and design flaws can reveal themselves, leaving an opportunity to put errata (and any corrected game components) into a box even after the rulebook was printed. For example, the first printing of the *Mansions of Madness* (2011) board game<sup>14</sup> included an Errata/FAQ sheet and several replacement cards. Nevertheless, even this paratext could

13. For example, Fantasy Flight Games are quite open about the production processes on their website and reveal different stages of a production cycle: [http://www.fantasyflightgames.com/edge\\_upcoming.asp](http://www.fantasyflightgames.com/edge_upcoming.asp).  
14. Corey Konieczka. *Mansions of Madness*. Fantasy Flight Games, 2011.

not account for all the errors present in the first printing of the game. Subsequent corrections were distributed via the Internet on the official website of the publisher Fantasy Flight Games in PDF file format.



*Errata insert from the first printing of Mansions of Madness.*

*Image courtesy of Fantasy Flight Games.*

Digital distribution of analog games errata is a very common practice. Yet this rather inexpensive mode of distribution poses serious problems for players. While such errata may be officially released to anyone interested, the information about their existence may not reach the whole player base. This may lead to potential "bad playing" and an unsatisfactory game experience. We can argue, from the designer's perspective, that preventing an aberrant form of use is more effective than rectifying it. In this aspect, we can see that video games in general have a much easier position in this form of prevention, as they can often force the patch – along with patch notes that are effectively an errata paratext – onto a player if she/he wishes to continue playing.<sup>15</sup>

15. Many video games require online connection. Online multiplayer games can bar a player from entering the game without the latest patch.

## RECEPTION AND RESPONSE

It is rare indeed to simply release a flawless game that does not require any rule clarifications and errata. One needs errata to both enforce the game's authorial vision and satisfy players. Reception of corrections, however, can vary from gratefulness to annoyance. For example, the errata insert sheet approach (accompanied by corrected game components) was praised by some players in the case of *City of Remnants* (2013),<sup>16</sup> but it was criticized in the case of *Mansions of Madness*.<sup>17</sup> It is important, however, to note that *City of Remnants* errata dealt exclusively with misprinted game components, whereas *Mansions of Madness* errata also introduced alterations to its rulebook. Quite curiously, Plaid Hat Games later released a digital eleven page errata for *City of Remnants* focusing on rules clarifications. Yet it seems that the first impression of *City of Remnants* might have experienced a more positive reception, even though – down the road – both publishers had to digitally distribute a more detailed errata.

Audiences may negatively perceive the acknowledgement and the correction of a mistake or a design flaw. But an ongoing ignorance of game's errors can cause even worse player responses. A conscious approach to errata and post-release support in general can help establish a publisher's good reputation and influence the sales of future games. Errata incorporated into later editions can also function as selling points to players who haven't purchased prior "flawed" editions.

We also should not overlook the dual nature of errata as both an isolated paratext and as part of a larger text. Channeling Alexander Galloway's notion of the "interface effect,"<sup>18</sup> I propose

16. Isaac Vega and Colby Dauch. *City of Remnants*. Plaid Hat Games, 2013. For the praise, see the discussion about the errata insert on Board Game Geek forums: <http://boardgamegeek.com/thread/919953/errata-included-box>.

17. For example, see the review on Old Board Gamers Blog: <http://obgb.blogspot.cz/2011/03/review-mansions-of-madness.html>.

that we not categorize a work's paratextuality based on the position, structure and subordination of ancillary texts, but rather on the relation between the text and the historical context. In this way, we can see errata as being both an important part of a game – usually of its rules – and also commentary on the social world from which it emerged – the acknowledgment and correction of a game's flaws *vis-à-vis* its audience. The *paratextual* effect may open a game to criticism as it explicates errors, but the *textual* effect of errata actually maintains the authorial vision and preferred use of a game, therefore controlling its long-term reception.

## CONCLUSION

Errata, rules clarifications and FAQs are a part of analog game ecosystem and – as such – they should not be overlooked as marginal texts made only for the most dedicated players. While the forms and modes of distribution may vary, publishing errata is a common practice within the industry. Both Genette's paratextual approach and Galloway's notion of interface effect let us see them as an important tool of designer's vision and audience management which allows for maintaining a working game system, re-negotiating the preferred use and communicating valuable historical context of an analog game. In this schema, games are no longer static objects, but become unfinished artifacts with histories mutually shaped by developers, players, critics and other stakeholders.

## THE CURSE OF WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GAMES

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BY LIZZIE STARK

My family's story is one of epic generational tragedy. It begins with the three children in my grandmother's generation, the sisters Trudy, El, and Meg (my grandmother), in order of age. They'd suffer a combined six cases of cancer that took two lives. Trudy probably began developing breast cancer in her late 20s. She was a nurse and knew she had the disease, but feared the only treatment at the time—an extreme mastectomy that took parts of ribs and collarbone—so much that she didn't seek treatment until it was too late. By age 31, Trudy was dead. Unfortunately, she was my family's canary in a coal mine. Six years later, the middle sister, my Great Aunt El developed breast cancer after the birth of her fourth child. She was in her late thirties, and remembering her sister's tragic death, she did not delay treatment, but had a disfiguring and life-saving mastectomy. Five years later, the youngest sister, my grandmother Meg, who was then in her thirties, also developed breast cancer. She had a botched mastectomy that affected her self image for the rest of her life.

For the next decade, things were quiet for my grandmother and her surviving sister. But in 1974, the 50-something El was diagnosed with the late-stage ovarian cancer that would kill her,

and my grandma, still in her 40s, was diagnosed with a second bout of breast cancer in her remaining breast. By 1976, El had died horribly of ovarian cancer after spending years in and out of comas, confined to a wheelchair after the cancer moves to her spine. Meanwhile, my grandmother survived her second bout with breast cancer. In 1981, I was born. In 1982 my grandmother developed late stage ovarian cancer, and miraculously survived. One year later, my mother was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer at age 30. One of El's daughters later told me, "When I found out about [your mother] I thought oh, it's going into the second generation. The prophecy is being fulfilled. This horrible thing is now coming into the second generation." Within five years, every woman in my mother's generation would have her healthy breasts removed.

In 1994, the BRCA1 gene is discovered. Certain mutations on this gene dramatically raise a woman's risk of breast and ovarian cancer, along with certain other cancers, and raise a man's risk of developing breast and other cancers. My grandmother tests positive for such a mutation, and so does my mother, and at age 27, so do I. I'm given the choice of having many medical tests each year to watch for cancer or chopping off my breasts and ovaries to permanently lower risk. Now, I have the ultimate unwanted hipster cred: I had a preventive mastectomy before Angelina Jolie made it cool.

I put my family experience into a short freeform game called *The Curse* (2013) for two reasons: I wanted to prove an aesthetic point about larp to myself, and I also wanted to prove that my decision was not, as many mean internet commenters and clueless strangers had asserted, extreme and irrational. At the time, I was working on my second book, *Pandora's DNA*, a reported memoir about the history and science of the breast cancer genes. For years, I had been telling people that larp was simply a medium for storytelling. This was a chance to put my game design where my mouth was—why not adapt *Pandora's DNA* into a larp? I also



felt that popular narratives about BRCA mutations had left a vital angle out—that watching multiple family members sicken and die of cancer, that this fear of cancer, has a powerful and understandable effect on the decision-making process of patients. I also wanted to show the considerable emotional cost of near-constant cancer screening.

In adapting my story to the freeform format, I had to make some adjustments. A novel is not the same as a movie, and a game is not the same format as a nonfiction book. I wanted my game to fit into the typical constraints of scenarios that run at the Danish convention Fastaval, where it eventually premiered. That meant it would require only a handful of people, a strong game master, and a nondescript room. No fancy props or costumes would be necessary.

Writing a short game is a bit like writing a short essay—you have to be selective about which points you hit, since time and space are limited. My BRCA ordeal offered several potential episodes—the process of learning about my family history, my relationship with my mother, deciding whether to take the genetic test, taking the test, making decisions about what to do, and so on. Initially, I struggled to settle on a particular topic, because I felt conflicted about what I wanted to do and what I thought I ought to do. At that point, I felt pretty bored by the “whether to test” question, but I thought it might be interesting to players. Thankfully, Fastaval assigned me a sparring partner—an experienced designer I could bounce ideas off of. Mine was Troels Ken Pedersen, who suggested I focus on what interested me most right now. I decided to concentrate on how patients decide what to do after testing positive for a BRCA mutation.

For me, the most crucial component of my BRCA experience was being forced to choose a path from a series of unappealing options. Would you prefer to eat the gristle soufflé or the snot

soup? Unfortunately, for BRCA patients, choosing another restaurant is not an option. The emotions around making a terrible decision in uncertain circumstances would sit at the center of the game experience. This design choice, in turn, suggested others, and meant I had to sacrifice fidelity to my personal biography in the service of producing the emotions I was interested in. If I wanted the players to feel the struggle and weight of these decisions, then within the frame of the game, the decisions had to be unfettered and have meaningful consequences. Players had to be free to choose differently than I had chosen. *The Curse* quickly became an experiment of whether, given similar starting conditions, strangers would make the same choices I did. Were my own choices the product of an over-determined backstory, or of my individual personality?

*The Curse* has four characters, the sisters Rita and Elle, and their partners, Jared and Peter. Rita and Elle represent different facets of me. Rita was a writer in her mid-thirties ruled by emotion, who had a mastectomy a few years back and was now facing decisions about whether to have children and whether to have her ovaries removed. She represents where I am now in my life. Her younger sister, Elle, is a logical businesswoman in her late twenties, who has just tested positive for a BRCA mutation and has to decide what to do—situationally, she’s me as I was in my late twenties. Rita’s husband Jared is a methodical scientist, and Elle’s boyfriend Peter is an unreliable artist. Each couple has one partner who relates to emotion and the body, and another who venerates science and intellect. This difference propels the dramatic energy within each couple. As much as this game is a story of women making decisions, it also belongs to the men and their feelings of being pushed aside. The men’s story asks them what they would do if they were forced to be supportive—it is also a story about how it feels to be powerless bystanders, reflecting some of my husband’s experience of my diagnosis.<sup>1</sup>

1. I feel that it is important for Peter and Jared to be male characters (though they need not be

The sisters Rita and Elle are not mere translations of my own experience. I also tried to use these characters to represent experiences of other BRCA patients I interviewed for *Pandora's DNA*, and of other women in my family. For example, I interviewed many women who felt strongly about their bodily integrity and really questioned the necessity of the surgeries, so I wanted it to be possible for the characters to choose something other than surgery.

Likewise, I've heard numerous stories of boyfriends and husbands who can't deal with a partner's BRCA diagnosis. My Great Aunt El's two daughters both had unsupportive husbands at the time they were making decisions around their inherited risk, and in both cases, the decision to have a mastectomy ended up being a flashpoint in their marriages that pushed the already unstable relationships over the brink into divorce. I chose to reflect some of this in the relationship of Elle and Peter, which begins the game on somewhat shaky ground. I think I succeeded: during one play test, Peter's player was wearing a shirt with his girlfriend's name on it. He changed out of it during a break because he wanted his real-life relationship nowhere near this fictional and somewhat dysfunctional one.

The starting conditions for the characters in the game were identical to my own. My extreme family history of cancer made me terrified of the disease, and this fear played a vital role in my own medical decisions. After altering names and professions, I provided a version of my family tree to players, along with a timeline of cancer diagnoses in my family, and some medically accurate details about inherited BRCA mutations. Presenting so much context for the scenario made for a long workshop before

played by men) because I think it is difficult for men to understand the cultural context of breasts and ovaries that women wear under their skins every day, further upping the tension between the couples. It's true to my own experience with my very loving and supportive husband, as well as to the experience of many other BRCA carriers I spoke with during my reporting.

the game, but hopefully one that heightened the experience for players.

The final format of the game is this—after some brief discussions about players’ personal interaction with cancer and a guided meditation imagining what it feels like to be a cancer patient, the game master assigns roles to the players. Working from the family timeline and family tree, they improvise some scenes from the family history focused around cancer. This prologue is aimed at making players feel the pathos of coming from a cancer family. Next comes a series of five pre-set scenes, played in parallel for each couple and designed to highlight certain parts of the BRCA experience. After an initial discussion about what to do next, each couple plays out the anxiety and tension of medical monitoring, as the women begin bringing home ambiguous screening results. By the end of the piece, the siblings must both make their decisions about what to do about their genetic mutation right now. Rita and Jared must decide whether to have children. If they do want kids, they must decide whether to do so by natural means, or through an IVF procedure that could screen out her BRCA mutation. Elle must decide whether to pursue screening in the long term, whether or when to choose mastectomy, or if she wants to take no action. Peter must choose whether to stay and whether/how to support her. Both couples have to decide what missing breasts and ovaries might mean to their relationships. The game ends with a brief flash forward imagining the effects of whatever the sisters have chosen. If Elle keeps her breasts, is she in the hospital ten years later? If Rita has children, are she and Jared explaining the family curse to them? After the game, players and game master debrief about the experience.

Overall, the reception of the game has been positive, earning mentions in *The Guardian* as part of Jenn Frank’s Boob Jam, a collection of games presenting non straight-male views of breasts. It’s been played in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the

United Kingdom, New Jersey, and New York by a mixture of seasoned freeformers, medical students, and artists. Many players arrive with the expectation that this will be a Very Serious Game About Very Sad Feelings, and later express surprise that though the choices are difficult, *The Curse* is more a game about living and deciding than mourning the dead. Typically, players find the workshop—which asks them to work through some of their own personal feelings about cancer—more affecting and sad than the game on its own. The Fastaval judges critiqued the game for not offering more happy slice-of-life scenes to lighten the mood of scenes focused on cancer and BRCA. I understand the concerns about thematic heaviness, but that focus was true to my experience with BRCA. I know it sounds dramatic, but between my diagnosis and the completion of my mastectomy, I basically lost the capacity for joy. I couldn't bear to be around carefree people and withdrew from social life. If I wasn't forcibly occupied with another activity, my mind lasered in on cancer, my family history, and my future. I wept almost daily. It was the worst ten months of my life.

The response to the game by players and facilitators, and their judgments of the characters have also intrigued me. After one run, the facilitator contacted me to assure me that Rita had made the “right” decision to have a baby through in vitro fertilization (IVF) to avoid passing on the BRCA gene to her children. I found this fascinating because I do not view the question of whether or how to have children as a choice with a “right” answer, and IVF is not the choice I am making for myself. Responses like this make me feel that I succeeded in not unduly prejudicing the game materials in one direction or the other. They also unsettle me, because I wanted to work against the idea that there is a universally correct decision in the context of BRCA. With BRCA, there are no absolutes, only “right for me, right now.” Perhaps my favorite feedback came from a group of medical students, facilitated by a friend in a narrative medicine program, who said

stuff like, “intense, but good,” and “I learned a lot.” This feedback pleased me, because the attitudes of medical professionals shape patient experience. I’ve seen both sides—doctors with great bedside manner make the experience less traumatic. Insensitive doctors, nurses and receptionists who did not understand my situation had the power to make a difficult situation much worse. Knowing that medical students got something out of the game made me feel like it had real-world impact that could benefit future patients.

On a personal level, releasing *The Curse* to the world felt frightening but liberating to me. It did what I most want my games to do—open me to personal connection with other people. After the game debuted at Fastaval, friends talked to me about how cancer had touched the lives of their families, friends and lovers, or the way in which other chronic inherited illness shaped their existence. It also gave them the opportunity to ask questions about my own experience, and offered me to show them my soft inner parts, my trauma and my fear, and to be seen for my artistry as well as the pathos that makes me me.



## AUTHORS

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**Nathan Altice** is a writer, musician, and artist who lives in Richmond, Virginia. In May 2015, MIT published his first book, *I AM ERROR*, a platform study of the Nintendo Entertainment System. He also writes at [metopal.com](http://metopal.com) and [@circuitlions](https://twitter.com/circuitlions).

**Sarah Lynne Bowman**, Ph.D., is a role-playing studies scholar. She teaches as an adjunct professor for Austin Community College and other institutions in English, Communication, and Humanities. Bowman is the author of *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*; the editor of the *Wyrd Con Companion Book*; and the lead organizer of the Living Games Conference 2016.

**Lillian Cohen-Moore** is an award-winning editor, and devotes her writing to fiction, journalism and game design. Influenced by the work of Jewish authors and horror movies, she draws on *bubbe meises* (grandmother's tales) and horror classics for inspiration. She is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Online News Association.

**Will Emigh** is a Lecturer in game design at the IU Bloomington Media School in addition to being a video and boardgame designer at his company, Studio Cypher. His physical work includes *Tattletale!*, a card game based on the Prisoner's Dilemma published in 2014, and *Stickers in Public*, a set of games on stickers that can be placed anywhere. Highlights of his digital



work are The Cyphers, a series of short alternate reality games released in 2007, and four kiosk games for the Chicago Field Museum's Ancient Americas Exhibit. He is currently working with partners to use motion-tracking technology to make physical therapy more effective and bearable for stroke victims and children.

In addition to his day jobs, Will is on the board of the Humanetrix Foundation and organizes Sigma Play, a hands-on conference for games designers of all types, and Bloomington Indie Game Nights, a monthly gathering of hobbyist game designers in Bloomington, IN. He can be reached at [wemigh \[at\] indiana.edu](mailto:wemigh@indiana.edu).

**Luiz Falcão** lives in São Paulo, Brazil, and is a visual artist, graphic designer, and multimedia instructor. Since 2007 he has been working with the creation and promotion of larps for Confraria das Ideias and since 2011 for the Boi Voador group. He coordinates the NpLarp – Research Group on Larपालong with Luiz Prado in São Paulo and is the author of the book *LIVE! Guia Prático para Larp (LIVE! A Practical Guide to Larp)*. In 2014, he published the article “New Tastes in Brazilian Larp”, about the history of larp in Brazil, in the book *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp* from Knutpunkt 2014. You can follow him at <http://nplarp.blogspot.com> or contact him at [luizpires.mesmo \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:luizpires.mesmo[at]gmail.com).

**Katherine Castiello Jones** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Sociology department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she has also completed a graduate certificate in Advanced Feminist Studies. Her interest in role-playing started in college with a game of *Call of Cthulhu*. Moving from player to game master and designer, Jones has been active in organizing Games on Demand as well as JiffyCon. She has also written and co-authored several live-action scenarios including *All Hail the Pirate Queen!, Revived: A Support Group for the Partially Deceased, Cady*

*Stanton's Candyland* with Julia Ellingboe, and *Uwe Boll's X-Mas Special* with Evan Torner. Jones is also interested in how sociology can aid the study of analog games. She's written for *RPG = Role Playing Girl* and her piece "Gary Alan Fine Revisited: RPG Research in the 21st Century" was published in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Role-Playing Games and the Media*.

**Adam Lazaroffis** is a Philadelphia transplant from Connecticut. He is a graduate of the Art Institute of Philadelphia, majoring in Video Production. Throughout his career he has worked in every facet of the video production industry, from entertainment, event production, marketing, to corporate, and currently filling a need in the legal industry.

Roleplaying has been a part of his life since his father introduced him to his first D&D campaign back in the late 80's. Since that time, he has been a troll, a vampire, a ghost, a werewolf, and perhaps most entertaining, a simple man in a strange world. Each of these have existed through the arts of pen and paper, storytellers, and the imagination. LARPing proved to be an evolution in what was once solely in the minds of those around a table, into the ability to step into the flesh and live as your character lives. To date, Adam has involved himself with multiple different styles of LARPing groups including One World By Night, Mind's Eye Society, and Eras Chronicles.

**Nicholas Mizer** is the co-chair of Game Studies for the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology at Texas A&M University in 2015. His research focuses on understanding the experience of collaboratively imagined worlds in the context of modernity's tensions between enchantment and rationalization. His dissertation explores these themes at four ethnographic sites around the United States.

Besides role-playing games his research interests include folklore, mythology, ritual, phenomenology, interpretive anthropology, performance studies, and geek culture. He is co-editor at *The Geek Anthropologist* where his contributions include *Spot Check*, a video series documenting his dissertation research. He can be reached at nicholas.j.mizer <at> gmail.com, and some of his manuscripts are available on his Academia.edu page.

**Jason Morningstar**, M.A., M.S.I.S., is a game designer and information technology professional who lives in Durham, North Carolina, USA. In addition to Bully Pulpit Games, the imprint he co-owns with partner Steve Segedy, Jason works at the UNC School of Nursing. Best known for his game *Fiasco*, which earned him his second Diana Jones Award for Gaming Excellence, Jason's game design credits include *The Shab Al-Hiri Roach*, *Grey Ranks*, *Durance*, and many other games. His most recent roleplaying game, *Night Witches*, will be published in early 2015. Beyond roleplaying, Jason consults on the use of games for teaching and learning in medical education, most recently with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Kaiser-Permanente Health Care and the Innovation Learning Network. In addition to design, Jason has written extensively on game-related topics. His article "Beyond the Game Master", co-written with Emily Care Boss and Ivan Vaghi, appeared in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*. His essay on improvisation, "Agreement, Endowment, and Knowing When to Shut Up" was recently featured in the anthology *Unframed: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters*.

**William Robinson** is a PhD candidate in the Humanities program at Concordia University. He is on the board of the Digital Games Research Association and an active member of the Center for Technoculture, Art and Games, where he completed his Master's thesis on the aesthetics of game play in 2012. His theoretical work focuses on serious game design, the political economy of game creation, media archaeology, digital

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**Lizzie Stark** is an journalist, game designer, and legit genetic mutant. She is the author of two nonfiction books: *Pandora's DNA*, about the so-called "breast cancer genes," which was named an ALA Notable Book of 2015, and *Leaving Mundania*, which explored the past and present of larp in the US and Nordic countries. Her essays and journalism have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Daily Beast*, *io9.com* and elsewhere. While wearing her mystical hat of larp, she's written several freeform games (*The Curse*, *In Residency*, and—with Nick Fortugno—*This Miracle*), published a topical monograph (*Pocket Guide to American Freeform*), co-edited a collection of two dozen Norwegian larp scripts (*Larps from the Factory*), and organized numerous Nordic larps and freeform games for US and Canadian audiences. Currently, she's co-editing the anthology *#Feminism*, a collection of 30+ feminist nano-games from around the world. She blogs about larp at [LeavingMundania.com](http://LeavingMundania.com).

**Jan Švelch** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at Charles University in Prague. He received his B.A. and M.A. in Journalism and Media Studies, respectively. His research focuses on video game paratextuality, glitches, fan communities and fan cultures. Besides research, he works as a freelance journalist covering video games for various Czech magazines, including the Metacritic-aggregated *Level* and *Games.cz*. He can be reached at [honza@svelch.com](mailto:honza@svelch.com) and some of his texts can be found at his blog <http://videogamedelver.blogspot.cz/>.

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Co-Editor-in-Chief, **Aaron Trammell** is beginning a position at UC Irvine as an Assistant Professor of Interactive Media and Digital Games in July 2016. He is presently a Provost’s Postdoctoral Scholar for Faculty Diversity in Informatics and Digital Knowledge at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, and he earned his doctorate from the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information in 2015.

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Emma's research focuses on affective communities that coalesce around intimate performances of touch. She is currently researching the mediated intimacy of ASMR videos on YouTube, and how sex is represented in larp (live-action role-playing games). She is especially interested in how definitions and manifestations of sexuality are negotiated, reified, and transformed through these practices. Her work lies at the intersection of performance studies and media studies, and questions the role of embodiment in sexuality, intimacy, and touch. Her work is informed by feminist theory, queer theory, affect studies, and phenomenology. You can find Emma online at [www.emmaleighwaldron.com](http://www.emmaleighwaldron.com)

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## ABOUT THE ETC PRESS

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