

FRAMING STRATEGIES IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

*'MY PLEASURE': Toward a Poetics of Framing in
Tabletop Role-playing Games*

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Framing Strategies in Role-Playing Games

**'My Pleasure': Toward a Poetics of Framing in
Tabletop Role-playing Games**

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Abstract

The dissertation discusses the use and impact of "literary" framing (as by Werner Wolf) in generating and negotiating fictional spaces, narratives and meanings within the medium of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). In a second step, the text describes some of the specific and most salient framing features and strategies used by players during game sessions. By analyzing these through actual gameplay it is possible to identify the 'transceptional' border (Bunia) between reality and fiction to be the constitutive moment of role-play where players are both aware of, and immersed in, the fiction they collaboratively construct. Finally, the dissertation adapts Wolf's theoretical framework in order to discuss and analyze the often overlooked category of "storytelling" TRPGs - one that, as the text argues, rather than focusing on narrative as such, aims at creating gameplay texts with heightened aesthetic and literary value while also enabling players to experience particular forms of immersion and deep emotional involvement. In the conclusion, the dissertation proposes re-conceptualizing literary framing as a defining characteristic of the fictional practice in general across media. In this regard, the dissertation argues, TRPGs reveal how framings are used and adapted in order to enable a specific mode of human interaction which is based on the figuration of emotional complexes via fictional "masks."

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Introduction: Crossing the Analog Border¹

»Ihr«, sagte Jonathan zu uns, »habt, wie ihr leicht feststellen könnt, wenn ihr eure Ellbogen, eure Rippen befühlt, als ihr wurdet, in euerm Inneren ein festes Gestell, ein Skelett ausgebildet, das eurem Fleisch, euren Muskeln Halt gewährt, und das ihr in euch herumträgt, wenn es nicht besser ist, zu sagen: es trägt euch herum. Hier nun ist es umgekehrt. Diese Geschöpfe haben ihre Festigkeit nach außen geschlagen, nicht als Gerüst, sondern als Haus, und eben daß sie ein Außen ist und kein Innen, muß der Grund ihrer Schönheit sein.« - Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus*

By the time season two of *Critical Role* - a weekly *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) campaign live-broadcast - began streaming in January 2018, the first episode of the show had reached over six and a half million views on *YouTube*; it had spawned a comic book series (*Vox Machina Origins*), multiple dedicated review channels (*Talks Machina*, *Critical Scope*; *Critical Highlights*, etc.) and had been featured in a number of articles as representative of what has now become known as the tabletop role-playing game

¹ Earlier versions of chapters two through five have appeared previously in my master's thesis *Great Expectations: An Inquiry into the Use of Framing in Role-playing Games* (2010) and in the article "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games" (2013) published by the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. A good part of the theoretical and conceptual framework has been expanded here to include some of the more recent developments in the field. In addition, parts of chapter six were submitted as an article and later presented at the annual conference of the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA) in 2015 (publication pending). Finally, a similar version of the section on literary- and game studies in chapter one has recently appeared as part of a chapter I co-wrote with Evan Torner from the University of Cincinnati for the book *Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by Sebastian Deterding and Jose Zagal (2018). The paper theater curtain frame on the cover is courtesy of EKDuncan (eveyd.deviantart.com).

(TRPG)² 'revival'³. Indeed, despite the immense popularity of digital gaming, tabletop role-playing has recently been going through a notorious comeback; one that has been marked by a renovated expansion of the industry together with new forms of diffusion. As expressed by Jahromi,

[i]n 2017, gathering your friends in a room, setting your devices aside, and taking turns to contrive a story that exists largely in your head gives off a radical whiff for a completely different reason than it did in 1987. And the fear that a role-playing game might wound the psychologically fragile seems to have flipped on its head. (par. 8)

Not only has this unexpected success directly challenged the assumption that TRPGs are not a viable medium⁴ for public entertainment (cf. Hindmarch; Nephew; Padol),⁵ it has also made game studies' long neglect of these and other forms of pre-

² In the following dissertation I will be using the abbreviations RPG and TRPG to refer to 'tabletop' or 'pen and paper' role-playing games. Other forms of role-playing games such as 'live-action' (LARP) as well as computer-based games (CRPG) will be identified as required.

³ As noted by Damien Walter, "[w]hen the fifth edition of the Dungeons & Dragons Player's Guide was published in 2014 it took the No 1 spot on Amazon.com" (par. 17).

⁴ Following Ryan, I understand the concept of medium as both a "conduit" or system of communication as well as a means of expression or language (*Avatars*, 386). From this perspective, the TRPG is to be conceived as a system of organizing and exchanging information which allows for specific forms of meaning generation (i.e. expression).

⁵ This point of view is generally based on the fact that the players are not only the text's authors, but also its main intended audience (see for example Sandberg; Hindmarch; Skolnik). Teitman, however, notes that "*Dungeons & Dragons* has [now] become a spectator sport," with shows such as *Critical Role* "elevat[ing] this old-school game into something else entirely: compelling television, even for those who wouldn't know a vorpal sword from a Volkswagen" (par. 1).

digital, analog games painfully evident. While there is little doubt that TRPGs have been one of the most influential forms of "new media" over the past 40 years (cf. among others Fine; Kushner and Shadmi; Mackay; Walter), the attention given to them by game scholars has been - until only recently - quite meagre, especially in contrast to their computer-based counterparts. So much so that only four years ago, in their foundational issue of the *Analog Game Studies* journal, the editors began by proclaiming that "the field of game studies needs a hack: not so much a 2.0, but rather a 0.5" (Trammell, Waldron, and Torner par. 2). The statement is a clear reflection of the profound transformations undergone by the humanities in the past decades.

Figure 1 Panel from *Dark Dungeons* (1984)⁶



Fueled by the breathtaking and unrelenting advancements in technology, the latter have diversified at a stunning pace. From the perspective of literary studies in particular, the

⁶ Published in 1984, *Dark Dungeons* has been described as "possibly the most widely distributed piece of anti-game propaganda in the history of gaming" (RPGAdvocate). Indeed, the evangelical "Chick tract" - which tells the story of a group of teenagers' "road to perdition" due to their involvement in tabletop role-playing - is a prime (if also extreme) example of a common attitude towards TRPGs in the public opinion of the time. That such an attitude has changed drastically in the past decades is most clearly reflected by the cult status obtained by Chick's comic among the same community that the author originally set out to attack. As a matter of fact, the comic was adapted to film in 2014 after a successful *Kickstarter* campaign and the movie itself was premiered at that year's *GenCon*; the largest tabletop-game convention in the US.

developments in information technology that led to the emergence of hypertext literature and later to computer games seem[ed] to offer new possibilities, not only of understanding literature, but also textuality in itself. As explained by Cornis-Pope,

[h]istorically, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. The final decades of the 20th century witnessed an explosion of new media forms, expanding the concept of "texts" far beyond the printed word. "Texts" now include web publications, advertising, film, television, video and digitalized sound graphic media, mixed media texts, and even installations.

(2)

Nevertheless, while academic scholarship has become more and more specialized, traditional disciplines such as literary studies have been forcibly reassigned a seemingly shrinking place in the discussion of current forms of cultural representation. And yet, it is these disciplines that are key in establishing a theoretical link between new and old media forms allowing us, ultimately, to better understand the former by reevaluating the latter. Indeed, role-playing games are not only - to use Landow's well-known statement concerning hyperfiction - "an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment" (32) of post-structuralist theory but, as Miller has pointed out, actually exceed digital media in that they offer participants with a more rewarding "reading" experience:

[R]ole playing games accomplish what hyperfiction tries but fails to do: by combining purposeful narrative and lack of conventional closure, role

playing games produce narratives that can critique conventional narrative closure without making interacting with the text itself seem futile. (par.30)

In this context, more than a mere sign of reactionary nostalgia,⁷ the current “rediscovery” of tabletop RPGs is a direct reflection of the medium’s lasting impact, both on the gaming community and, more broadly, on contemporary culture in general⁸.

Figure 2 Cast of *Critical Role* (2015)



From fan and online gaming communities to collaborative storytelling and deep immersion, TRPGs have radically affected our understanding and practice of fiction. In this respect, Williams, Hendricks and Winkler have pointed out that

⁷ According to Paul Booth “[w]e are in the midst of a board game renaissance [that] represents a reaction to [...] digital culture” in the sense that they “remind us of our face-to-face past, and recall a type of pre-digital ludism where we all circle around the “campfire” of the game board” (“Introduction”).

⁸ For a general overview on the topic, see MacCallum-Stewart, Stenros, and Björk.

what once could be strongly characterized as fantasy gaming subculture is now becoming distinctively less subcultural, as the fields of role-playing games, fantasy and sci-fi literature and film, and video and computer games continue to dialectically shape one another. (2)

More importantly, the medium has developed steadily further, with an ever-growing array of thematic concepts and game-systems that have evolved far beyond the early days of "dungeon crawling" and "loot collecting."⁹ As such, TRPGs are not only to be seen as "forerunners of today's digital games", but as a "continuing vital force" (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person* 7).

Digital vs Analog: The Human Factor

The above leads us to one of the most interesting aspects of these texts, namely, their distinct technological simplicity. Indeed, in their traditional form, RPGs - also known as "tabletop" or "pen and paper" role-playing games - are in principle no more technologically complex than a game of bridge; all they require is the physical presence of a group of players - commonly around a table, hence "tabletop" - who collaboratively participate in developing a narrative, and a system of rules which allow resolving the outcome of situations in which different levels of chance may be involved - the need to write down statistical information making them "pen and paper." Evidently, this apparent lack of sophistication makes role-playing games - as a clearly contemporary cultural

⁹ For an explanation of these terms, see chapter two ("Historical Overview").

phenomenon¹⁰ - stand out in the context of a world that is becoming ever more dependent on technology. All the more so, considering the persistence of TRPGs in the face of their "descendants" in other more technologically advanced media and despite what has become the popular notion of "the bigger, the faster, the better." As stated by Punday,

-unlike film and electronic writing- these games do not rise from technological developments. When a game depends entirely on charts, dice, and imagination and yet has virtually no precedent before the last half-century, we must ask what it is about our attitudes toward narrative that makes such a game a natural part of contemporary culture.

(115)

Nevertheless, that which occurs during a role-playing game session - the level of interactivity, player immersion in the narrative, flexibility of the rules, etc. - generally surpasses, even today, what many of its "successors" achieve. How does this occur? Through what mechanisms do TRPGs allow such sophistication when relying solely on the "old fashioned" technologies of (hand-) writing and oral narration? According to Schick, the failure of computer RPGs so far "in capturing the feel of group role-playing games, [is] largely [due to the fact that] they do not provide the creativity and flexibility that a human GM brings to the game" (16).¹¹ The opinion is shared by

¹⁰ See among others, Punday; Nephew; Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin (*Second Person*); Mackay.

¹¹ A GM (abbr. of game master or game moderator), is the "director" or referee of the role-playing game session. A detailed explanation of his role and functions will be discussed in chapter two.

Hindmarch who states that a "human Storyteller [sic.] is still the machine best suited to the job of understanding, reacting to and influencing the dramatic choices of human players" (55).¹² Making a similar observation, Montola has pointed out that the seemingly impossible difficulty of negotiating fiction in TRPGs is made possible because of the co-presence of the players, the existence of an arbitrator and the constant re-actualization of the diegetic reality ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle," 68). The question, however, still remains: What mechanisms shape these interactions?¹³ Can we describe such phenomena in conventional terms, or is it necessary to develop a whole new theoretical framework to deal with these texts?

Previous Work

Approaching the above questions from the general perspective of literary studies, my master's thesis problematized what can be called a "naïve view" of communication technology by addressing the complex relationship between the printed texts used for role-playing - such as rule- and sourcebooks - and the narratives created during game-play. The study revealed the fundamental influence that framings such as rules, character sheets and setting, as well as paratextual elements contained within or at the borders of these texts, including cover illustrations, prologues and epilogues, just to name a few - have on

¹² His conclusion, however, is quite dire as he predicts the triumph of the machine over the man, since "capable, engaging Storytellers [sic] are few" (Hindmarch 55). Furthermore, as Hindmarch explains, "[t]he number of Storytellers who can raise fear like fog with nothing but dialogue, blot out the sun with improvised narration, and hatch whole characters from dice is smaller still" (ibid.).

¹³ Clearly, flexibility in the context of collaborative narrations such as those created during role-playing games is a complicated issue. Indeed, despite their inherent openness, RPGs still require a certain amount of delimitation or, more precisely, an instance which allows for a unified reception and production of the story. It is this instance that will be the main focus of the following study.

participants' interpretation and, most importantly, creation of TRPG narratives. The following dissertation is a direct continuation of this effort, whereby I have further adapted and expanded the conceptual and theoretical framework to include current developments in game design and game studies. Where the original objective was to understand the general function and impact of framing on role-play, my main focus here is to describe some of the particular strategies, forms and implementations of framing in TRPGs. In order to do so, I will be complementing the theoretical observations with both participatory and external gameplay analysis as well as the close reading of selected game-systems. Before we move on, however, it is important to take into account some of the methodological and theoretical difficulties entailed by such an enterprise.

Diversity of the Field and the Corpus of Study

One of the first problems encountered in the study of TRPGs concerns the wide variety of existing approaches to the topic, a situation that makes for a theoretical framework which is neither concise, nor unified but rather extremely broad in scope. Because they consist to a great extent of collaboratively telling a story, role-playing games may be submitted to narrative theory (Nephew, Padol); since such a narration is "acted out" verbally, they can also be subjected to performance theory (Mackay); as the events of the story are the result of player interaction, TRPGs may be approached as a form of hypertext or interactive fiction (Miller);¹⁴ because they have,

¹⁴ A Hypertext can be defined as a system of information organization based on discrete elements known as 'lexias' which are connected with each other via links. A typical example of hypertext is almost any webpage on the internet. Hyperfiction is a literary text form which is based on a hypertextual organization principle. Although there are some notable exceptions, hyperfictions are mostly 'digital born.' Interactive fiction, on the other hand, can be described as a form of fiction that reacts to the input of a reader or audience (Montfort). As a consequence, IFs require the active participation of the reader in order to produce a text. It can be

in last instance, a ludic function, they are - almost redundantly - subject to game theory or *ludology* (as by M. Wolf and Perron). In addition, the medium's particular features pose interesting questions for other areas of studies such as the social sciences (Fine), psychology (Nephew; Bowman), philosophy (Punday),¹⁵ education (Sheldon; Hammer et al.), etc., all of which have found fertile ground in the study of tabletop role-playing games.¹⁶ However - or rather because of this - a specialized, coherent corpus of theory for what may be seen as a medium of its own has been difficult to achieve. As expressed by Harviainen, the situation in RPG studies could, for a long time, "be likened to that of early analysis of cinematography [where] the subject itself is seen more often as a collection of preexisting methodology and art forms, not as a separate phenomenon connected to those elements" (66). In this context, it is quite telling that the first extensive academic volume on role-playing game theory has only appeared this year.¹⁷ Taking all of this into consideration, my intention throughout this investigation project has been to integrate, whenever possible, the relevant knowledge provided from different areas of research in order to better understand our object of analysis.

A similar problem that must be taken into consideration in the following study is the fact that the field of fantasy role-

seen as an umbrella term that can cover anything from "choose your own adventure" to hyperfiction, to role-playing games.

¹⁵ Daniel Punday has written an insightful essay where he discusses the relationship between the philosophical notion of "possible worlds" and role-playing games.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive overview on the various approaches to role-playing games, see Zagal and Deterding.

¹⁷ Published in 2018, *Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* is the first major attempt at collecting the current state of RPG-related research across a number of disciplines and media. Nevertheless, the mere scope of the work is still a clear reflection of the complex state of the field and the difficulties of generating a unified corpus of knowledge (see Deterding and Zagal).

playing includes an extremely diverse and heterogeneous corpus of texts. Thus, one must keep in mind that "fantasy gaming [i]s a fluid, unstable category that is somewhat difficult to map [since] it is made up of multiple genres of games and gaming subcultures that overlap in some ways, yet differ in others" (Williams, Hendricks and Winkler 2). For the purpose of this study, therefore, I have reduced my focus to games that favor storytelling rather than adventure and combat. It is this particular category of TRPGs, I will argue, that best showcases the function and impact of framings.

Methods of Approaching an Ephemeral Text

An additional point of complication is related to the fact that, from the perspective of literary studies, TRPGs present us from the beginning with an intrinsic theoretical dilemma, namely, the unavailability of a "proper", fixed, "main text." Indeed, the actual stories in role-playing games emerge during the game session and exist, as such, only within its boundaries - the boundaries themselves becoming, as we will see, one of the more problematic issues for textual analysis. This has led some researchers to question the feasibility of studying TRPGs from an "outside" perspective.¹⁸ As Nephew puts it, any attempt "to take [on] the passive role of viewer of an RPG-in-progress fundamentally does not work, since in the physical act/performance of role-playing there is no fixed object to observe" (166). As a possible alternative to the above, however, the implementation of participatory investigation is a method that has its own drawbacks. In this regard, one must keep in mind that although being involved in a RPG implies constantly engaging in acts of interpretation, "these acts are typically

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see chapter six ("Participant Observation").

carried on 'in real time,' [...] mak[ing] reflection and revision difficult if not impossible" (Miller par. 33). While the (self-)recording of game sessions may offer a possible solution to this issue, it may often be problematic for other, very different, reasons. First of all, TRPG gameplay generally requires extensive organization and preparation by at least one player. This, together with the fact that it is a collective rather than an individual activity, makes TRPG gameplay tightly bound to personal and spatio-temporal constraints. In other words, it requires a group of people to meet at a specified place and time and - ideally for research - on a regular basis. This may often make the recollection of data difficult to plan. In addition, the sheer amount of material produced by a single session - which may have a duration of three to seven hours - as well as the time required merely in order to process it, make such an approach extremely time-consuming. Moreover, as shall be explained further on, an RPG session involves player interaction on more than one level of meaning, making the isolated focus on a purely diegetic analysis (i.e. focusing exclusively on the story) to a certain extent superfluous. In view of the aforementioned, I have opted for three distinct methodological approaches throughout this investigation. On the one hand, I will be engaging in the **close-reading** of TRPG sourcebooks, using them initially as paradigmatic examples of the TRPG activity in general and, later on, as representative of a new understanding of the TRPG as a storytelling medium. On the other hand, for my analysis of gameplay framings, I will be relying on both **participant observation** through my personal experience as a player and game master, as well as the extensive scrutiny of TRPG gameplay through the **external observation** of openly available, web-based sources. In this regard, my interest is not so much in the interpretation of a specific role-playing game campaign, but rather in the conditions, elements and structures that make their creation and interpretation possible.

Theoretical Framework

As Werner Wolf has pointed out, research in the area of literary framing is notoriously rare despite the fact that the importance of such elements has long since been recognized.

In linguistics, the concepts of 'frame' and 'framing' were introduced a long time ago, and have been widely used and recently much discussed. In research dealing with literature and other media, frame-theoretical reflections have, however, not been nearly as common. [...] [This] widespread neglect of frame theory is particularly surprising in literary studies. (*Framing Borders* 8, 10)

Such a lack of extensive research concerning framing in literature might be explained by the fact that framings present critics with "a rather complex and ambivalent phenomenon" (Dembeck 268). Furthermore, framing devices - understood as specific "codings of abstract cognitive frames that exist or are formed within, or on the margins and in the immediate context of the framed situation or phenomenon" - are not to be reduced exclusively to their use in literary texts (W. Wolf, *Framing Borders* 6). Quite to the contrary, framing as a practice is a general characteristic of "non-conventional" speech situations, and thus typical to all forms of art. Thus, as Wolf has mentioned, "framings - as much as frames - are *transmedial* phenomena, phenomena that exist in more than one medium (actually in *all* media)" (ibid. 10). This fact allows for an interdisciplinary approach to framing, and my focus on role-playing games in particular. In this regard, however, and although the notion of paratextuality - as the most prominent

example of framing - has gained widespread use within the game studies' community in recent years, our knowledge on the topic is still rather lacking. As Rockenberger has observed, this is partly related to the fact that Genette's theories are rarely applied satisfactorily by most researchers. Those who do, tend to "evince a strong dominance of contextualist approaches [...] focusing merely on (actual or quasi) epitexts" ("Video Game Framings" 279). While the interest in paratextuality and framing is still relatively recent within the field of literary and game studies, research concerning such elements in the areas of analog role-play is even less prominent. This, as Rockenberger has aptly put it, means that in terms of empirical research and our current understanding of framing activities and phenomena "we may not even have passed the threshold yet" ("Video Game Framings," 280). From this point of view, the aim of the following dissertation is not only to offer a new perspective on the TRPG medium, but also to explore the possibility that our knowledge of the latter may allow us to reassess our understanding of literature in general. In this regard, I agree with Plaice, who has stated that:

[d]ie neuen Horizonte, die sich für die Literaturwissenschaft aus dem interdisziplinären Denken ergeben, betreffen dabei nicht nur ein alternatives Verständnis der komplexen Beziehungen zwischen dem Menschen und der Wirklichkeit, wie das der zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen, sondern auch ein erneutes Selbstverständnis der Literatur und des literarischen Schreibens. (13)

In this context, the following dissertation continues to be to a great extent exploratory; an attempt at arriving a step closer

to comprehending the fascinating relationship between ourselves and the shared spaces we create to engage in fictional and literary play. Consequently, I would like to finish this introduction quoting again from Wolf, who has stated that, "as is usual in first explorations of a field, completeness cannot possibly be achieved" (W. Wolf, *Framing Borders* 11). Rather than being taken as a pre-emptive excuse, this statement must be seen as an early call for further investigation on the matter.

Dissertation Structure

The dissertation begins by discussing the close relationship between literature, play and games. This will be particularly relevant in order to address some of the central theoretical issues raised by game studies and to re-evaluate the importance of literary studies for our understanding of games as semiotically complex cultural artifacts. More importantly, it is argued that tabletop role-playing games can allow us to build an important theoretical "bridge" between these two research fields which have often been conceived as being fundamentally at odds.

Chapter two gives a general overview of role-playing games including their history, development, game mechanics and main components. Additionally, relevant definitions of these texts are given in order to discuss their essential formal characteristics and conceptual features.

Chapter three is dedicated to understanding role-playing games as fundamentally multilayered texts and the problems this implies for academic investigation. Furthermore, the notion of discursive frames of reference is introduced in order to explain how player utterances are ascribed to different levels of meaning during gameplay.

Chapter four presents the main findings made by applying discourse analysis to role-playing games, focusing mostly on how it describes the simultaneous multiplicity of participant identities during the game session. To continue, it is argued that such an approach, while providing important knowledge, ignores certain central aspects of the game, understood as an exercise in the construction of fictional 'worlds' that contain and generate meaning. These aspects, the text proposes, may be best described in terms of paratextuality and "literary" framing as introduced by the works of Gérard Genette and Werner Wolf respectively.

Chapter five has its main focus on describing the framing function of the TRPG rulebook, which is conceived as a paradigmatic example of how TRPG narratives are negotiated and generated. In order to do so, a distinction is made between the main components of these texts followed by a discussion of their relevance as framing devices. Finally, the function of framings in role-playing games will be explained by recurring to performance theory.

Arguing that players' creative interaction during gameplay is fundamentally related to expectation and therefore desire, chapter six focuses on the use of framing as a mode of pleasure negotiation. Focusing on some of the most salient and unique forms of player-based framings, the chapter introduces several new concepts and ideas such as 'mock-role play', 'pervasive framing' (Montola, Stenros, and Wrn) and 'textual poaching' (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). Concerning the latter, we will examine how players not only recognize "borrowed" framings from other media, but also how they adopt and further experiment with them during gameplay. This reveals the extent to which the activity of framing is an essential part of the cultural practice of fiction in general.

Chapter seven contains an in-depth analysis and close reading of a selection of role-playing game sourcebooks in order to show both the variety as well as the impact of different framing strategies and mechanics on a game's potential diegesis. Focusing specifically on framings that emphasize a TRPG's "literary" qualities, a new definition of "storytelling game" is proposed.

In the conclusion, the main arguments of the thesis will be reviewed, giving insights into further research possibilities in the field of role-playing game framing and its possible intersections and effects upon literary studies.

Chapter 1: A Game of Theories

[Y]ou stretch out your legs, you draw them back, you stretch them again. But something has changed since yesterday. Your reading is no longer solitary: you think of the Other Reader, who, at this same moment, is also opening the book; and there, the novel to be read is superimposed by a possible novel to be lived, the continuation of your story with her, or better still, the beginning of a possible story. This is how you have changed since yesterday, you who insisted you preferred a book, something solid, which lies before you, easily defined, enjoyed without risks, to a real-life experience, always elusive, discontinuous, debated. Does this mean that the book has become an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous? This does not mean its reading will grip you less: on the contrary, something has been added to its powers.- Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*

There would seem to be a blatant paradox at the core of any literary studies-based approach to the medium of tabletop role-playing games. Indeed, despite acknowledging their object of study as being essentially rooted in play (see among others, Anz and Kaulen; Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*; Sutrop; K. Walton; etc.), literary scholars have been generally reticent to fully incorporate games to their field of studies. Neither has there been a noticeable implementation or development in recent years of game-theories - pre-existent or new - as useful tools for textual analysis. This, as Ensslin points out, can be at least partially ascribed to the fact that, traditionally, "play and games were not held in high scholarly esteem" (Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* 9). This feeling is shared by Clara Fernández-Vara who speaks of the "pervading skepticism" within the

humanities and social sciences “about whether games, digital or not, can become a medium worthy of study, as literature, theater, or film already are” (2). Ironically, however, much of the discussion among early game scholars or “ludologists” was focused on establishing clear borders between those same “traditional” disciplines - in particular those of the humanities - and the newly founded field of game studies.¹⁹ Even today, as Wesp explains, “game studies continues to have a vexed relationship with older media and their attendant fields of academic study” (par. 1). The mere fact, however, that such a distinction between disciplines has been so avidly fought is more of an indication of how much they actually intersect (Schweighauser). In the following section we will be therefore focusing on the “ludic” aspect of literature and the foundational importance of literary studies for the development of game studies in general. Conversely, we hope to shed light on the relevance of game-related theories for the development of a new understanding of the literary enterprise.

Back to the Future: Literature & Role-playing Games

Despite the widespread use in game studies of methods and terms derived from literary studies,²⁰ there still seems to be a common misrepresentation of the latter in the work of many game scholars; the condescending assumption that literary scholars might “overlook” the ludic qualities of a game in favor of the

¹⁹ A prime example of this attitude is the well-known issue of the “ludology vs. narratology debate” discussed further below. The latter revolved around two main perspectives: One of them, descriptive, sought to understand and analyze the medium’s narrative features. The other, ideological, attempted to define games as being fundamentally *different* from other media; an approach that has been appropriately deemed “essentialist” (Deterding “Fiction as Play” 1).

²⁰ Some representative cases of this can be found in Janet H. Murray (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*); Flanagan; Bogost (*How to Do Things With Videogames*).

literary ones.²¹ Exemplary of this attitude is the following statement by Clara Fernández-Vara:

The methods and approach of literary analysis are relevant and useful to understand videogames. The literary scholar, however, should be careful not lose sight of what makes games different from other media, forgetting about their participatory nature or the social aspects of playing. [...] Traditionally, textual analysis in the humanities tends to limit itself to the information within the text – what is not included in the text is not part of the analysis, because the text should speak for itself. This way of analyzing text may not be the most productive, since it overlooks the fact that we never approach a text in a void. (18, 32)

Evidently, points of view such as the above tend to oversimplify the history of literary and critical theory as well as that of literary production in general, in particular when considering the developments that have taken place over the past 70 years. Writing in 1950, for example, Walter Gibson was already explicit in describing the activity of reading literary texts as an act of role-play:

[E]very time we open the pages of another piece of writing, we are embarked on a new adventure in which we become a new person – a person as controlled and definable and as remote from the chaotic self of

²¹ See for example Gonzalo Frasca's discussion on the relationship between narratology and ludology as well as well as Jesper Juul's analysis of game's potential for storytelling ("Games telling stories?").

daily life as the lover in the sonnet. [...] We assume, for the sake of experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away. [...] I am arguing, then, that there are two readers indistinguishable in every literary experience. First, there is the "real" individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume [...]. Second, there is the fictitious reader - I shall call him the "mock reader" - whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation. (1-2)

Beyond establishing an intimate affinity between the activities of reading and role-play, the passage above also includes important ideas that would later become core notions in TRPG theory. Thus, the distinction between a text's "real" and "mock" reader is clearly reflected in Gary Alan Fine's seminal work *Shared Fantasy* from 2002, where TRPG player and character identities are differentiated on the basis of their respective "awareness contexts" (187).²² More importantly, Gibson's observations were far from being a singularity. Indeed, early 20th century scholars and authors not only elaborated on, but also experimented thoroughly with the concepts of play and games in relation to literature and, as such, established an important precedent to current game studies.

²² We will explain these ideas in detail in chapters three and four.

Literature as Play

Although the specific interest of literary studies in role-playing games may seem to be relatively recent, the notion of literature as a form of play is almost as old as literature itself (see among others, Anz & Kaulen; Iser; Sutrop; K. Walton; Ensslin *Literary Gaming*). In this respect, however, perhaps the most notorious foregrounding of the "ludic" notion of literature can be seen to have emerged within the context of 20th century critical theory. Postulating the dissolution of intrinsic, conventional and absolute meanings, post-structuralism conceived the literary text as a self-contained and "free" medium, which offered a "pleasurable escape" from the obligations and constraints of imposed systems of power and signification. As a consequence, the text was seen as a space that enabled a plurality of readings and interpretations where polysemy, ambiguity and intertextuality were considered to be the core features of the literary game-text. Literature, far from being fixed, was therefore to be understood as part of an unstable, open-ended and thus emergent activity which was both individual and social. In a similar fashion, theorists of the "reader response" school such as Jauss and Iser established the literary text as a game-space between author, text and reader where the latter and not the former was the defining subject in the hermeneutic process. Not just a mere 'recipient', but an active "player" of the text, the reader could not only resist but actually subvert authorial intentions and imposed meanings. In general terms then, these approaches were key in presenting literature not solely as rooted in play, but as an inherently game-like activity. The latter was to be characterized in terms of its structured autonomy and open-endedness developing from the interplay of more or less "fixed" textual structures and the aleatory possibilities of reading and interpreting them. As a result, these approaches underlined the social aspect of literature while shifting the interest towards questions

concerning the literary context and the anthropological nature of the practice of fiction. As to the specific arguments concerning an analogy between literature and game, Brandes, among others, has pointed out that:

- Their conditions are enabled through virtual frames
- They are defined by rule-systems
- They are cultural practices
- Both are voluntary activities
- Both require/are done for pleasure (fun)
- In both cases the opposition "play vs. serious" is generally assumed (115-34)

Ultimately, as stated by Anz and Kaulen, literature and games are related in that "the theories and debates concerning them have followed similar patterns" (2). Echoing this observation, Sebastian Deterding has pointed out that

the study of (literary) fiction went through a very similar maturation from (1) claiming an ontological difference between fiction and non-fiction, easily discernible from syntactic surface properties, to (2) analytic accounts that sought out a semantic rather than ontological difference, to (3) pragmatic accounts that state that the fiction/non-fiction distinction is really grounded in social conventions. ("Fiction as Play" 1: 14)

Literary Play

Not only literary theory, but literature itself has constantly staged its own playful nature with its varied forms of playfulness and "ludic" self-awareness (Jahn and Schilling).

Game-like competition was featured prominently in early literary forms such as the Greek eclogues which often included "contests" between poets as their defining structural moment (agonality). A closely related genre²³, the baroque pastoral, was notorious for its self-referentiality and its focus on the relationship between poetry/literature and reality (Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*), foregrounding the idea that literature and art were forms of *play with meaning*. Authors of early gothic and detective fiction from the 18th and 19th Century, on the other hand, consciously utilized paratextual markers of non-fictionality - footnotes, fake newsletter or scientific reports - to enhance the emotional effect on the reader by making texts seem realistic (Efron). As a result, the texts emphasized an understanding of *fiction as a form of make believe and role-play*. As Ensslin has pointed out, however, most works of print literature should be better described in terms of 'literary play' rather than 'literary game' (*Literary Gaming* 1-12). This is because reader participation or interaction with these texts is generally confined to the cognitive level. In other words, different readers or audiences encounter the same material text yet may interpret it (i.e. "read" it) differently, allowing us to speak of a form of 'cognitive ludicity' (ibid.). Literary games, on the other hand, are defined by requiring readers to actively participate in generating the text. Borrowing from Aarseth, Ensslin calls this 'ergodic ludicity' meaning that

²³ Generally speaking, genres can be described as conventionally established organizing principles that affect the production, reception and categorization of textual artifacts within a given interpretive community. Genres are often used to describe what are taken to be easily recognizable sets of formal and/or aesthetic features as well as types of content or subject matter. Because they are established conventionally, however, genre classifications are also contextually dependent and are liable to change over time. In spite of the above, however, the concept of genre is still considered to be essential for the discussion and analysis of literature and other forms of art (Harmon et al. 2006; Cuddon 1992; Macey 2000). As a result, genre classification and analysis has also become a common subject for game studies in general and rpg studies in particular (cf. among others Fernández-Vara 2014; Loponen and Montola 2004; Montola 2012; Fatland 2006). For more on the topic of genre theory, see Nünning 2004.

readers have to put "non-trivial effort" into their interaction with the text (ibid.). As Hayot and Wesp have observed, "ergodic texts actively encourage the reader to make decisions, and moreover make visible and central the act of decision-making" (406). Although print media are often seen in general as being non-interactive, postmodern works of fiction featured ergodic forms of ludicity quite prominently. Tristan Tzara's "To Make a Dadaist Poem" (1920), for example, is a simple set of instructions the reader can use to assemble her/his own work from random scraps of language. Similarly, Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch* (1963) provides a set of additional chapters and instructions for the reader to reorganize the book, thus creating one or more alternative versions of it. Focusing more on the playfulness of writing, the French literary movement *Oulipo* "gamified" literary production by establishing constraints for the authors to overcome when creating a work. Indeed, postmodern writers - perhaps acknowledging the limitations of the print medium - were keenly interested in the deconstruction and playful nature of literature itself, paralleling and, more often than not, preceding critical theorist discussion with experimental works of fiction.

TRPGs' "Literary Heritage"

In addition to the above, literary texts - especially the genre of 'fantasy' - have been one of the major influences on RPGs since their origins. According to Michael Saler, this relationship can be genealogically connected to the emergence of "public spheres of the imagination" during the late 19th century (18). As Saler argues, the fan communities that developed around the public discussion of fantasy, detective fiction and early science fiction texts in magazines, clubs and conventions, provided a new form of social network based on the

"willing belief" in fictional worlds (28-30).²⁴ By encouraging the continuous participation of the public in the construction and interpretation of the worlds of these texts, this form of shared pretense not only heightened people's sense of emotional investment and immersion, but transformed relatively "static" fictional worlds into persistently inhabited "virtual" ones (101-104). In this regard, as Michelle Nephew states,

th[e] pre-generated background afforded by a literature-based setting is a boon to roleplaying games [...] because using the literature as a creative base fulfills that wish on the part of the readers of a book, or the audiences of a movie, to take the story beyond the ending the original writer provided. (67)

In a similar fashion, and seeing the medium as a form of literary-based fan culture, Punday states that TRPGs "are fundamentally a way for players to engage in favorite books and popular subgenres, to make beloved texts into a place where one can play" (121). Furthermore, he also suggests that the medium allows players to establish relationships between literary subgenres such as fantasy and science fiction:

Since players usually come to these stories as fans of the subgenre of writing they emulate (medieval fantasy, futuristic science fiction, westerns), play is less a matter of escape or story than a matter of sifting through the relations between

²⁴ Saler actually speaks of a "willing activation of pretense" as opposed to Coleridge's notion of "suspension of disbelief" (28).

genres and what it means to be a fan. In this regard, RPGs are exemplary artifacts of fan culture and reflect the cultural work done by objects that achieve "cult" status. (ibid. 128)

In such a light, TRPGs reflect the importance of literature in particular and fiction in general as a form of social practice and human interaction.²⁵ Not only do these games allow us to become involved in fictions but, as "public spheres of the imagination", they allow us to do so simultaneously as a group, thereby establishing fiction as a place of "real" encounters (Harari; Castronova).

Hyperfiction and the Digital Humanities

From a historical perspective, the "literary studies approach" to RPGs can be closely tied to the 'digital humanities' and the theoretical discussions surrounding the emergence of hypertext fiction (or 'hyperfiction') in the mid-1980s. If both early 20th century theory and print literature discussed and even successfully experimented with authorship and authority; the (inter-)active, "ludic", participation of the reader and the non- or multi-linearity of narratives,²⁶ it was the affordances

²⁵ We will discuss these topics in more detail in chapters six and seven.

²⁶ Linearity here refers to the sequential arrangement of a text. Traditional "legacy" media texts are generally described as linear since popular forms typically present audiences with a single, pre-established, sequence of events. Non-linearity occurs when the sequence of events presented by the text depends on the choices made by the reader/player. More importantly, since the events themselves might be completely different from one "reading" to another, we may speak of multi-linearity. The latter term reflects the fact that one and the same textual artifact can offer several different "story-lines." This becomes even more relevant in RPGs where players not only make choices to "navigate" through the gameworld, but also create events on the fly. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out, the term generally appears in relation to discussions about narrative and what is considered to be the "conflict between the inherent linearity of plot and interactivity" (Avatars "The Metaphorical Approach").

of digital media that put these issues in the spotlight. As a result of their often complex "branching structure," hyperfiction narratives generally lacked fixed (i.e. linear) plots or clear endings (closure). Instead of turning pages, readers were required to choose among a number of 'links' in order to "navigate" through a text, thus creating their own textual trajectory or "path" through it. These particular features revealed a new form of textuality - both in its production as well as reception - which resulted from an emergent process of decision making and interpretation that took on increasingly game-like quality (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Second Person*; Ensslin, *Canonizing Hypertext*). Correspondingly, scholars interested in early hypermedia asked questions that would establish important precedents to the latter move towards game analysis: How does interactivity affect our understandings of authorship, readership and authority?; how do multi-linearity and textual mutability challenge our notions of close-reading and interpretation? Despite the rather limited success of hyperfiction in the long run, these discussions would become all the more relevant to comprehend newer digital phenomena such as video games which, as Janet Murray notes, "w[ere] growing into an entertainment form to rival movies and television" (9). Indeed, not only did video games prove more commercially profitable and captivating for the general public but, in the case of computer-based RPGs, they seemed to also display inherent narrative qualities and elements - plot, conflict, drama, fictional worlds, characters, etc. - that distinguished them from "abstract" games such as chess or *Tetris*. This realization has led, in recent years, to a re-appreciation of earlier forms of (analog) games. In the case of TRPGs, it quickly became apparent that, these too, were complex "ergodic" texts, based on collaborative and interactive narration and, as such, were unprecedented in the way in which they destabilized "the notion of a cohesive, central creator of a work" (Nephew 166).

Questioning the idea of "reader freedom" in hyperfiction, Miller argues that - at least in early examples of the form - the reader is in fact often powerless to the (authorially) imposed "topographical" structure of linking of the text, leaving him both disoriented and unsatisfied with the experience (10). Role-playing games, on the other hand, "accomplish what hyperfiction tries but fails to do ... by combining purposeful narrative and lack of conventional closure" (ibid. 30). As a result, they are capable of "produc[ing] narratives that can critique conventional narrative closure without making interacting with the text itself seem futile" (ibid.).

Play and Tell: The "Ludology vs. Narratology" Debate

Perhaps one of the most avidly discussed - and often misunderstood - terms in RPG studies is that of narrativity and, for that matter, the notion of storytelling (in) games. This can be at least partially traced back to the notorious confrontations within the game studies community revolving around the so-called "ludology vs. narratology debate." Recognizing 'storytelling' as an important element in the design and appreciation of many contemporary games, narratologists were interested in understanding the particular ways in which these and other interactive media could integrate and/or produce narratives. In this regard, TRPGs were often considered to be a combination of game and story. Nephew, for example described roleplaying in terms of "a literary game - an intersection between the open / non-linear / game and closed / linear / story, in which the producers of the experiential text take the role of authorial amalgam [sic.]" (7). Early game researchers or "ludologists", on the other hand, conceived narratives as being predetermined and linear in a way that precluded the "essential" quality of games; namely their interactivity (and, consequently,

players' enactment of choice).²⁷ As Costikyan put it, "[t]o the degree that you make a story more like a game - with alternative paths and outcomes - you make it a less effective story. **It's not merely that games aren't stories, and vice versa; rather they are, in a sense, opposites** [my emphasis]" ("Games, Storytelling" 13). Nevertheless, this distinction has been revealed in more recent years to have been based on false assumptions.²⁸ Indeed, as Ryan (*Avatars*) and Bode, Dietrich, and Kranhold (among others) have convincingly argued, narrative is less a specific collection of formal features than a cognitive template to organize information:

Story, like narrative discourse, is a representation, but unlike discourse it is not a representation encoded in material signs. Story is a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities. (Ryan, *Avatars* "Positions Hostile to Transmedial Narratology")

²⁷ In fact, some researchers were so openly hostile towards the idea of stories in games as to completely disregard them as being either purely ornamental or, at their worse, as completely jeopardizing a game's ludic qualities. Ryan exemplifies this stance quite clearly through the following quote from Eskelinen: "Stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy" (*Avatars*, "The Theoretical Question").

²⁸ The main problem with the ludological position was that its arguments were mostly ideologically/politically motivated. At a time when game studies were only beginning to develop as a specialized field of investigation, narratology - originally a subfield of literary studies - was perceived as a potential 'threat' to game studies' chances of 'emancipation.' Correspondingly, as Grouling Cover has pointed out, the ludological understanding of narrative was artificially narrow (72-76). Indeed, by the early 20th century, narrative theories were already being applied to cinema, drama and even poetry.

Understood thus, any series of events can be narrativized; a process Ryan has called *emplotment*. In this regard, what is key to our understanding of something as a "story" is not so much the *causal* relationships between its events, but how these are connected to *emotional complexes* that make them humanly relevant and therefore *meaningful*; in other words, "narrativity" is defined by the events' given *significance*. Ryan illustrates this by giving the example of a sports commentator:

To emplot a baseball game, then, the broadcaster must add something that, as Hayden White (1981) observed, is not inherent to the physical events: he must give them significance, by connecting them to themes of human interest.[...]The narrative themes relevant to baseball are the scripts, or scenarios, that describe interesting ways of winning or losing: the incredible come-from-behind victory, the fatal error, the heroic feat, the lucky-break victory, the unlikely hero, the inevitable collapse, overcoming bad luck, persistence that pays off. These themes acquire existential significance through the metaphorical assimilation of victory to life and defeat to death. (Avatars, "The Broadcast as Plot")

Ryan's point of view is shared by Culler, who adds that the ease or difficulty of *making* something into a story is based on its inherent "tellability" or "narrative proclivity" ("Conventions of literature"). In view of the aforementioned, we must acknowledge games and TRPGs in particular, as a *medium* that *affords storytelling* albeit in different degrees (Ryan, *Avatars*). This allows us to be less concerned with *whether*

specific games are narratives as to how they are so. In this respect, both in their analog as well as digital forms, RPGs present the particular challenge of analyzing narratives which "are simulative rather than representational, emergent rather than scripted, participatory rather than receptive, and simultaneous rather than retrospective" (*Avatars "From Old to New Media"*).

As we have seen, recognizing the multiple and important ways in which games and literature are related allows us to better appreciate the extent to which their specific fields of study may actually intersect, complement and benefit from each other. From this point of view, the study of literary texts is not only an important precedent, but also a foundational discipline for the field of game studies. Conversely, our new appreciation for games as valuable cultural and semiotic artifacts may help us in generating new insights concerning earlier forms of representation such as those available in print media. We will be coming back to many of these ideas in later chapters, further expanding on them as we develop our understanding of the TRPG medium; in particular in relation to the latter's aesthetic, poetic and narrative affordances.

Chapter 2: The Tabletop Role-playing Game

I've got a Dungeon Master's Guide

I've got a 12-sided die

[...]

In the garage, I feel safe

No one cares about my ways

In the garage, where I belong

No one hears me sing this song

In the garage. - Weezer, "In the Garage"

In a conventional tabletop role-playing game, a group of players take on the roles of characters within a fictional setting and verbally "act out" a story or adventure. In order to interact coherently within the game's fictional frame of reference, the players follow rules that define *what* things can happen in the story and *how* attempted actions are resolved. In the following chapter I will briefly review the historical development of these games. In addition, I will discuss some of the definitions given to these texts as well as their main components and mechanics.

Historical Overview: From Strategy to Storytelling

Due to their many facets - performative, narrative, ludic, etc. - there are diverse phenomena which in one way or another may be seen as precedents to role-playing games. Lisa Padol, for example, associates them with pre-scriptural, oral literature arguing that, in the context of modern society, where myth has been greatly abandoned, the role-playing game - which is also preponderantly oral in nature - allows players to develop stories that function as personal mythologies.

Myth cannot be kept out of our lives. If we cannot find our myths in the stories of Hercules and Odysseus, we speak of the Camelot created by John F. Kennedy and of Elvis [...]. For gamers, myth is created in-game sessions. Characters become heroes with whom players can identify [...]. Whether a game session centers on an epic battle, Byzantine politics, or a simple day in a town created by the players and the GM, the events of the session are mythical to its audience.²⁹

On the other hand, early examples of improvised theater - the Italian Commedia dell'arte of the XVI century being a notorious example - already presented some of the defining characteristics of RPGs. Indeed, these performances, rather than relying on a fixed script, already developed according to general character archetypes and were adaptive of the audience before which they were performed (Rieks, Theile, and Wuttke). Nevertheless, despite such precedents in both in the (oral) literary and theatrical traditions, it is generally agreed that the first appearance of role-playing games as we know them today developed for the most part from a different area of human experience; the one of gaming.³⁰ Published for the first time in 1974, *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *D&D*, is undisputedly considered to be the first modern role-playing game (Fine; Mackay; Schick; Williams, Hendricks and Winkler, etc.). As a matter of fact, Greg Costikyan has stated that before this event, games could be generally classified into four types, "classic board games, classic card

²⁹ Document no longer available online.

³⁰ For a complete and detailed overview of the historical development of wargames into tabletop role-playing games, see Schick. For a more recent and updated genealogy of the TRPG medium, see Peterson.

games, mass-market commercial board games, and the board wargame," none of which "had any noticeable connection to story" ("Games, Storytelling" 5). Nevertheless, it was this last field, the one of wargaming, which would lay the foundations for conventional TRPGs as we know them today. Indeed, the development of *D&D* was the result of a general desire, in particular from the late 1960s on, to add complexity and depth to traditional tabletop wargames (Fine; Mackay, etc.) - a format that had existed since at least the early 19th century (Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 3).³¹ Thus, by the time *D&D* appeared in bookstores in the mid-1970s, wargames had already undergone some major modifications, such as enabling players to control individual characters instead of entire armies and the inclusion of a referee to describe the surrounding environment and make rule-based decisions which affected the outcome of player actions (Schick 18). Notwithstanding, Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax - the creators of *D&D* - included some fundamental additions to their game which would eventually establish TRPGs as a category of its own. According to Punday, one of the major innovations of *Dungeons and Dragons* was the introduction of the 'hit point' to represent the "number of injuries that a particular player could sustain before dying" (116). As a consequence, tactical decisions could be made while, at the same time, allowing players to "save" their characters from perishing since they could "decide when to engage or withdraw from combat, based on how many injuries their characters and their opponents ha[d] sustained" (ibid.). Thus, not only was it possible to play an individual character, but, by keeping an eye on the character's "health" during combat, participants could make decisions that helped extend its "lifespan"; this allowed gamers

³¹ Wargaming in its original form was generally restricted to a type of strategy board game in which players simulated historical battles and contended with each other by using miniature figures and gridded boards which represented respectively the armies involved in the battle and the terrain where the battle took place (see Schick).

to play the same character during multiple sessions, a fact that, according to Costikyan, was decisive in eventually leading to the games becoming more "storylike" since "[t]he mere fact of a character persisting in an imaginary world over multiple sessions of play offered a clear opportunity for a tighter connection between gameplay and story" ("Games, Storytelling" 5). Furthermore, *D&D* was also groundbreaking because it could be played without the typical accessories used in wargames:

D&D [...] dispensed completely with the need for miniatures, a board, cards, or other physical game assets. It transpired entirely in the imagination - turning the tightly constrained nature of all previous games on its head. If you could imagine it, and the gamemaster was willing to go along, it could happen. (ibid.)

Evidently, the creative possibilities of a game that was not constrained by its material form were endless. However, it would take a while for role-playing games to outgrow the standard established by *D&D*, a game still mainly focused on combat and strategy. As Henry has pointed out,

[i]n the first edition of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Dungeon Master Guide*, there is very little instruction for the GM on how to handle the process of storytelling. Two hundred pages of densely packed information outlines, world background and mechanics, lists of spells, and tables of numbers for determining the results of combat.

Thus, first generation fantasy role-playing games were generally structured around the notion of the "dungeon crawl", a concept that involved a group of players exploring complex tunnel systems in search of adventure and booty. In this context, there was little development of overall story or character concepts. This is made clear by the instructions given to the referee (or "dungeon master") in the original *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebook of 1974:

[T]he referee must draw out a minimum of half a dozen maps of the levels of his "underworld", people them with monsters of various horrid aspect, distribute treasures accordingly, and note the location of the latter two on keys, each corresponding to the appropriate level. (Gygax and Arneson 5-6)

From Role-playing- to Storytelling-games³²

In the years following the first appearance of *D&D* - and its consequent impact on the industry - TRPGs developed rapidly. This was due greatly to the fact that, in its first edition, *Dungeons and Dragons* was still far from being a finished, well-designed game system (Schick 21). Rather than constraining the further development of the game, this resulted in an increasing involvement of players in its design.

[M]any *D&D* game masters, perhaps even a majority, started tinkering with the rules, and this unleashed

³² For a detailed history on the development of the TRPG industry see Appelcline. A more summarized overview - including a general discussion on major trends in game-design - can be found in White et al.

a flood of creativity that might never have come about if the first role-playing game had been complete, self-contained, and slickly professional (Schick 21)

As a matter of fact, players began adapting the game in various ways, ranging from modifying the rules, to expanding the setting and background information. Eventually this led to the development of other, conceptually new, TRPGs. Thus, the spectrum of games evolved from the *class-and-level* character creation system of *D&D* to a *skill based* one,³³ allowing characters to become less bound to "simplistic archetypes" - such as sorcerers, warriors or thieves - but rather give them greater "depth" by focusing on such things as their personality and background (ibid. 23). Furthermore, settings became more detailed and complex to the point that they could be published independently from the main rulebooks. At the same time, rules on a general level became more simplified and flexible, while scenarios were written more and "more like stories and became fun to read" (ibid. 29). Consequently, "illustrations and cover art, which had once been the direst sort of amateur sketches, improved markedly" (ibid.). By the early 2000s, Daniel Mackay described the situation in the field of TRPGs as follows:

It is becoming more common for rulebooks to describe the intricacies of the fictional world that is the setting for the characters' interactions, to suggest

³³ In a *class-and-level* system, characters' possibilities of development are constrained by their class (e.g. warrior, sorcerer, etc.). Thus, a sorcerer is by default a bad fighter while the warrior is unable to perform magic. In a *skill-based* system, on the contrary, the possibilities of the characters are open since their skills may be developed independently during the game. In this respect, a character who is mostly a fighter, for example, can still learn sorcery if this is made possible by "in-game" circumstances.

possible character descriptions, personality types, and skills that may assist the player in constructing a character concept, and to offer advice to gamemasters about how to determine the results of character actions according to the style of the story that is improvisationally created. Rather than filling their pages with tables and charts, these rulebooks encourage gamemasters and players to assert an increasing degree of interpretive control during the role-playing game sessions. (7)

Among the first games to present this marked "focus on storytelling" were those published by White Wolf. More specifically, it was with the publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991 that "[t]he role-playing game industry began [to] shift away from publishing complex game mechanics most pronouncedly" (Mackay 7). White Wolf games became especially notorious for emphasizing storytelling while simultaneously adopting less restrictive rules. Indeed, as I will suggest later on, such a development of TRPGs from a focus on strategy and combat to their current focus on storytelling may also be described and explained in terms of the inclusion of more complex and elaborated paratextual and framing structures; an addition which is decisive in the creation of meaningful stories during gameplay.

Definitions: Play, Games & Role-play

One of the initial difficulties in the discussion and analysis of TRPGs relates to the fact that both the notions of 'play' as well as 'game' have been used differently across a wide array

of contexts and disciplines. Anz and Kaulen state the problem as follows:

[Es zeigt sich], dass trotz der langen Geschichte, die Spielkonzepte haben, von einer linearen, kontinuierlichen oder gar teleologischen Entwicklung keine Rede sein kann. Die historische Semantik des Spielbegriffs ist vielmehr durch Zäsuren, Diskontinuitäten und Umcodierungen bestimmt, die herauszuarbeiten eine wichtige Aufgabe wissenschaftlicher Begriffsgeschichte ist. (4)

Stefan Matuschek makes a similar observation arguing that the term play has found such widespread metaphorical applications throughout literary theory that its definition has become inherently paradoxical. As he explains, the word 'game' (in German *Spiel*) "verleitet auch die exaktesten Autoren zum suggestiven Parcours der Analogien, weil seine breite Verwendungsmöglichkeit nicht zu unterteilen ist in eine klare 'eigentliche' Bedeutung auf der einen und Metaphorisches auf der anderen Seite" (2-3). In view of the aforementioned, a clear understanding of the main theories and perspectives surrounding activities of play will be essential in allowing us to better grasp and describe the particularities of the TRPG medium.

Play

For Johan Huizinga, whose work can be considered seminal for game studies, play is a form of social activity that not only pre-exists human culture, but which lays out the very foundations for its development. As such, he considers it to be generally characterized by:

1. Being a "voluntary" or "free" activity
2. Lacking an external purpose or objective
3. Being "ordered" or rule based
4. Having an element of competition (agonality) that is related to uncertainty
5. Fostering a sense of community
6. Being separated from "normal" or "serious" activities in that it is limited in time and space
7. Being highly engaging / absorbing

Where Huizinga conceives of play as an essentially social and socially regulated activity, other approaches view it as a subjective category; one that depends on an individual's specific mindset. As Eibl has observed, "[n]icht ein bestimmtes Verhalten 'ist' Spiel oder 'ist' Ernst, sondern ein und dasselbe Verhalten kann, je nach Einstellung des Handelnden, als Spiel oder als Ernst betrieben werden" (7). In other words, any activity can become play if engaging in it playfully: Dressing up is presumably part of an adult's regular morning activity, yet when dealing with a three-year-old daughter it can also be about pretending to be a hungry, limb-eating monster. In contrast, an activity that is socially established and recognized as play, such as soccer, can be engaged with in a 'serious' mindset - so, for example, professional athletes. In the latter case, Apter speaks of a *telic* mindset, since the main objective or motivation for playing lies outside the game itself - winning the championship cup; receiving salary bonuses for their performance. In contrast, play activities which are engaged in for their own sake can be deemed *auto-* or *paratelic*.³⁴

³⁴ For a thorough discussion on these concepts, see also J. H. Kerr and Montola ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle").

Game

As to the notion of 'game', it is often used to refer either to the activity of play or to the object or artifact that mediates gameplay ("Did you watch the game last night?" vs. "I just bought a game at the store"). More often, however, the term is used to refer to a specific form - or "subcategory"- of play and thus includes both the material, objective structure that constitutes and/or contains the rule system as well as the activity of engaging with it. An important distinction in this regard has been made by Roger Caillois who introduces the notions of *paideia* and *ludus* (10-30). The first serves to designate free, non-structured play forms, typically exemplified by the pretense and make-believe activities of children. *Ludus*, on the other hand, designates forms of play that are mediated and determined by designated practices and rules. Rather than using this dichotomy to make absolute distinctions, Caillois proposes that play activities exist in a continuum between these poles. This, as Montola points out, is important to keep in mind when studying role-playing games as they "reside somewhere in the middle, combining game rules and implicit rules with the relative freedom of improvised expression" ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle," 26). Recognizing this, Harviainen proposes a definition that neatly synthesizes current understandings of play and games:

[Play is] a voluntary activity or occupation that is executed according to freely accepted rules, has itself as its primary aim, is accompanied by feelings of tension, joy and the awareness that it is different from ordinary life, and may treat non-existing elements as temporarily real. The rules may be completely tacit, and at their simplest simply

be "this is not real", but they may well be more complex. Should the rules become formalized, the activity starts approaching the concept of a "game." The activity of playing, in turn, consists of performing actions within the parameters of play or a game. (Harviainen, "Systemic Perspectives" 29-30)

Magic Circle

A central concept in the understanding and discussion of games and play-related phenomena is Huizinga's idea of the "magic circle." Popularized within game studies by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, the notion refers to the fact that playful activity - which ultimately includes all forms of art - generally occurs within a specially demarcated space; a football field, a stage, a game board, etc. Within such a space, everyday activities and objects - even language - undergo a process of re-signification by means of which they acquire a function and value that only applies within the game space (Salen and Zimmerman 80). This produces what Costikyan calls systems of "endogenous meaning" ("I Have no Words," 21-24). Domsch likens this idea to the way in which readers engage with fiction in print media:

Within the game, everything that is not part of the game has no meaning, but the things that are in the game can have a meaning that is nowhere but in the game. Thus, players understand and accept game rules in a way that is analogous to the way that readers of fiction understand and accept fictional propositions. (18)

Montola, for his part, is emphatic in pointing out that the magic circle is to be conceived as "a social and cultural structure" that, far from being impenetrable - isolating the real world from that of play -, is to be understood as a set of transformation rules that "selectively filters and transforms exogenous meaning to endogenous meaning" ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle" 51). Because of this, he concludes, "everything in the magic circle carries one additional layer of meaning" (ibid. 53). Similarly, Harviainen describes it as the "border of the temporary space [of gameplay] that either blocks or transforms incoming information" ("Systemic Perspectives" 4). "Within it," he continues, the game world "is its players' primary frame of reference, and the activities within seem separate from mundane existence" (ibid.). Because of this function as a filtering "membrane", the magic circle is also often understood as enabling a "safe space" in the sense that activities within it are not constrained or sanctioned according to the rules and values that apply in a real-world context. For this reason, it has often been associated to the idea of role-play as a form of psychological *alibi* that allows players to explore and enact taboo activities and desires which might be forbidden or otherwise socially stigmatized (Montola and Holopainen 21).³⁵ For Deterding it is this essential function of the magic circle that unifies all forms of play, fiction and art:

Scholars of fiction and art have long argued that there must exist a social convention or "contract" that likewise sets fiction apart from everyday life and frees it from the demands of truth, consequence, liability, and economic value. [...] In short, games

³⁵ For more on the topic see also Stenros and Bowman. For its application to the medium of computer-based RPGs, see Brown.

and fiction share the same pragmatic suspension of function and consequence: "it's just a game", "it's just a story." (Deterding, "Fiction as Play" 1: 11)

As a result, not only games but all forms of fiction can be considered to be, at least to an extent, socially "empowering mechanisms" (ibid). In view of the aforementioned, the importance of clearly demarcating the symbolic boundaries of play is made evident as it will allow the freedom of play from real-life consequences. We will discuss this in more detail in chapter six.

Role-playing Game

As has been previously mentioned, role-playing games allow for a wide variety of approaches. Consequently, definitions of these texts may vary depending on the aspect focused on. Approaching them from the perspective of the performative arts, Daniel Mackay defines role-playing games as "an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation system that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* [sic.] in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interaction are resolved" (4). In a similar fashion, Dennis Waskul considers TRPGs to be "a complex form of collaborative improvisational theater [where] fantasy action collectively sustains the dramatic narrative of a co-authored Goffmanian 'realm' that is imaginatively fashioned by DMs and players, by use of dice and gaming rules, in a circumstance that is a game and drama" (20). For Nephew, who is interested in the narratological aspects of the medium, role-playing games involve "the construction of a *shared narrative* wherein players take on the *roles* of characters *navigating* a created world [my emphasis]" (5). Indeed, Nephew's definition reveals important

aspects of role-playing such as it involving the collaborative construction of a story through (verbal & dramatic) performance and interaction. Additionally, the notion of navigation implicitly relates the concepts of narrative space, exploration and immersion; all of which, as we will see further on, are essential for the medium. In an attempt to allow a more precise differentiation of TRPGs from other related phenomena, Lawrence Schick proposed a functional definition according to which a role-playing game "must consist of *quantified interactive storytelling*" (10). Understood thus, the distinctive characteristics of RPGs are described as follows:

Quantified: Character abilities and action resolution must be defined in terms of numbers or quantities that can be manipulated following certain rules (excludes variable-plot novels such as "choose your own adventure" and mystery party games which would better qualify as drama).

Interactive: Player decision-making drives the story forward and the outcome varies depending on what the players do (excludes classic drama).

Storytelling:³⁶ The object of role-playing is to tell a story in which the player characters are heroes. This is the fuzziest definition of the three; there are a lot of board games and miniatures games that are almost RPGs. Many such games have pieces with

³⁶ The idea that the objective of role-playing games is storytelling is one that has been intensely debated during the course of the "ludology vs. narratology" debate. Indeed, while narrative might be an inherent component of role-playing games, or rather an inevitable result of gameplay, the objective of play itself is not always so easily allocated. In addition, the focus on storytelling can be both embedded in the game system or/and part of the chosen play-style of a specific group. We will discuss these issues in more depth in the two final chapters.

character statistics that represent the player, but very few can be considered storytelling games, because plot is subordinated to score or position (Schick 10).

Harviainen, for his part, approaching the medium from a hermeneutic perspective defines RPGs more generally as "the intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks/identities/personas" ("A Hermeneutical Approach" 69). Furthermore, he stresses the importance of separating definitions of 'role-playing' from 'role-playing game' since the former "is the process, the activity, a way-of-being, a fictional *Dasein* [while the latter] describes its framing and context" ("Systemic Perspectives" 22). Additionally, he proposes considering these texts from an *apophatic* perspective; that is, defining them for what they are not. In this respect, he argues that they are neither "proper" drama - since they lack an audience in the traditional sense - nor psychodrama, as they "lack [a] narrative matrix directly tied to a desired function" ("A Hermeneutical Approach" 70). Furthermore, while they might be to a certain extent competitive, most TRPGs are not truly games in the narrow sense because of the fact that they do not include a specific winning condition (*ibid.*); neither are they rituals since they do not "hav[e] 'unyieldable material' (such as articles of Faith) that must at all times be taken into account", providing thus only "liminoid [and not] liminal experiences" (*ibid.*). Although the extent to which an apophatic description is effective might be disputed,³⁷ it does serve to evidence the extent to which role-

³⁷ While an RPG might not be drama, psychodrama or ritual in the narrow sense, it does share essential characteristics with these phenomena (cf. Mackay). This is even more true considering its relationship to games (cf. Costikyan "Games, Storytelling").

playing games are to be considered a medium in their own right. In the same line of thought, Markus Montola proposes the following understanding of the role-playing activity:

1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.

2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.

3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

("The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing" 23-24)

These characteristics, Montola argues, make TRPGs are a unique form of gaming as they are open-ended in nature and lack clear winning conditions. Furthermore, they often include a referee who, as a participant, has a direct influence over the game and is thus "deeply involved" in it ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle," 12). In this regard, TRPGs' particular form of analog, face-to-face human interaction distinguishes them clearly from other forms of gaming and role-play; in particular computer-based ones.

As we can see, many of the early definitions of TRPGs - such as those of Mackay, Waskul and Schick - tended to emphasize formal features that were perceived to be essential to the medium (GMs, quantified rules, dice, etc.). This should come as no surprise considering the lasting and widespread influence of *D&D* and other "first generation" TRPGs which dominated the market from the late seventies up to the mid-nineties. In contrast, later

definitions such as those of Montola and Harviainen have been less focused on formal observations while favoring social constructionist, psychological and phenomenological understandings of the medium. Nevertheless, recent developments in game design together with the wide scope of games currently in circulation continue to challenge many of our assumptions concerning TRPGs. From games that dispense altogether with the position of a game master, dice-based mechanics or quantified (simulation) rules, to those that add elements such as time constraints, winning conditions and narrative closure, the ongoing experimentation with, and development of the medium by contemporary game designers require us to constantly reassess our definitions. Nevertheless, these initial deliberations will serve as a starting point, guiding us in our further understanding of the TRPG's textual nature. In view of the aforementioned, I propose a preliminary "integrative" understanding of tabletop role-playing games as rule-based systems of interaction that allow participants to define and re-define "the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world" (Montola, "The Invisible Rules," 22) collectively and simultaneously through a combination of verbal (oral and written) narration and dramatic performance. As such, they may be considered to be a type of ergodic text (Aarseth, *Cybertext*), since they require non-trivial effort by their participants, who are compelled to make decisions in order to develop the narrative. As Hayot and Wesp have observed, this "active enactment of choice [...] is what makes the ergodic difference stick" (406). In this respect, even more than hypertext fiction, role-playing games are a true example of what Barthes has defined in *S/Z* as 'writerly' texts as they allow not only an active participation of the reader in abstractedly breaching the semantic gaps produced by the game, but the actual "filling" of them through direct input.

Conventional TRPG Mechanics

As mentioned above, TRPGs have gone through important transformations in the past decades. Because of this, a clear understanding of the mechanics of conventional, "first generation" games will be an important starting point in order to better appreciate and explain how these new advancements have come into place and what they mean for our current assumptions about the medium.

Without a doubt, it always seems much more difficult to explain to someone what a role-playing game is than to have them actually engage in it. This is mostly due to the fact that typical expectations towards games tend to involve the utilization of representational objects - a board, figures, etc. - as a base for interaction among players and with the game setting. Tabletop role-playing games, on the contrary, distinguish themselves by requiring "only a few static artifacts, including perhaps maps, representative pictures of character types, and miniatures" (Schick 41). Such artifacts, nevertheless "are not always present, nor are they necessary" (ibid). In fact, as stated in the original publication of *D&D*, "the most extensive requirement [of the game] is time" (Gygax and Arneson 4). Indeed, while the mechanics behind a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* might be difficult to explain, their principle is extremely simple and familiar; this is because, in their core, all of these games are basically a sophisticated way of playing "make believe" with other people. Considering this, perhaps the best way to clarify how they work would be to begin by imagining the familiar situation of a group of children playing pretend:

Having recently read the first *Harry Potter* novel at school, Jan, Ahmet and Patty are eager to play out their own adventures as wizards. Typically, they begin by taking on roles: "I'm *Harry*!" "I'm *Hermione*!" Jan and Patty respectively take on the roles of two of the heroes of the book; Ahmet decides to play

the "bad guy" this time and chooses to be *Voldemort*. Because they are familiar through the book with the antagonism between *Harry* and his friends and *Voldemort*, Jan and Patty immediately begin "dueling" with Ahmet. The "battle" develops amid an array of onomatopoeic sounds and hand movements representing collaboratively imagined spells and fire-bolts. Soon, however, the children discover that they are unable to reach an agreement concerning the outcome of some of their simulated actions. Ahmet (*Voldemort*) refuses to fall despite the fact that Jan (*Harry*) has "hit him" with one of his spells. Furthermore, they also disagree about the outcome of the different "hexes" they use. This is what has been called the "nuh-uh" effect (Nephew) and it illustrates one of the main difficulties of "make-believe without rules."³⁸ Worse even, Ahmet suddenly claims that a group of *death-eaters* - *Voldemort's* allies - have shown up to rescue him. The other two children dispute the fact and after a while, the game ends abruptly - hopefully without any physical "exchange of opinion" - due to the frustration of the different parties involved.

As in the above example, the main goal of a TRPG is to allow the players to immerse in a fictional setting and collaboratively act out a story or adventure within it.³⁹ Therefore, one of the first things participants begin by doing is agreeing on a

³⁸ For Liz Henry, role-playing games can be described as "'make believe with rules.'"

³⁹ It is important to point out that this activity occurs *in situ*; that is, that traditional role-playing involves the physical presence and interaction of the people involved. This allows us to draw a distinction between such games and online or 'play by mail' (PBM) campaigns. In such cases, players may never get to know each other on a personal level. Furthermore, in both of these cases the aspect of performance, which constitutes one of the main aspects of role-playing, is left out. This same performative aspect, however, also serves as a distinction from other RPG variants such as live action role playing games (LARP). In this last case, the performative use of language, which is characteristic to traditional TRPGs, is replaced for the most part by actual physical action. In this case, players dress up and, when possible, physically "act out" whatever it is they choose to do in the "fictional world."

determined fictional 'world.' Typically, this setting is provided by the rulebook of a specific TRPG although, as will be discussed later on, it can also be constructed by the players themselves or - as in the above case - adopted from previously existing works of fiction. Once this has been done - and paralleling again the game of children -, the players take on the roles of characters within the pre-established setting or, as Mackay has dubbed it, the "imaginary entertainment environment" (3). Such characters, however, are not preexisting ones, but are generally created by the players themselves before the beginning of the game. In addition, these characters are typically defined by the statistical representation of their physical and psychological attributes. Furthermore, there are two other main differences between children's playing 'pretend' and tabletop role-playing games. The first of them resides in the fact that, in the latter case, a system of rules is used in order to define how attempted actions are resolved within the story, thus allowing participants to interact coherently within the fictional frame of reference. This allows players to settle disputed situations or those in which a high amount of chance is involved. (Again, these rules are usually established by the rulebook of the specific game the players have decided to play.) Secondly, in order to create a unified narration and to resolve disputes concerning the general application and outcome of the rules, one of the players is assigned the position of referee, also called game master (GM).⁴⁰ Thus, there are two distinct types of participants in most 'traditional' role-playing games: the players and the game master.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Depending on the specific game, this position may also be called 'dungeon master', 'storyteller', 'chronicler', etc. For the purpose of this study, the term 'game master' (GM) and 'storyteller' will be used interchangeably as generic indications of this specific position during the game.

⁴¹ As we will discuss later on, recent games have challenged and, in many cases completely abolished, this traditional distribution of functions among TRPG players.

The Game Master

The game master is usually described as the director and referee of the game. He or she has a number of jobs: In general terms, the GM is the "eyes and ears" of the players during the session, describing what the characters see, hear or otherwise perceive. As Nephew states, "[i]n practice, the game moderator's role is to present an imaginary scenario to the players, which is much like performing an oral reading of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book" (9). Such a task also involves controlling all of the secondary or *non-player characters* (NPCs) encountered by the protagonists or *player characters* (PCs) throughout the game. It is also generally understood as his/her task to sketch out - usually beforehand - the plot of the game, as well as the conflicts and dangers the players are to encounter as the session progresses. Determining the success of player characters' actions by interpreting the rules is another of the GM's main tasks. Indeed, in conventional games it is this last function which allows for a unified, coherent and fluid interaction of players' characters within the fictional framework. Furthermore, it is generally in the GM's hands to judge whether certain actions may or may not be realized, and - if necessary - even to customize the established rules of the game to suit the necessities and/or objectives of a specific game session. Evidently, these functions put the GM in a distinct hierarchical position in relation to the rest of the group. Nevertheless, both due to the collaborative nature of these games and the fact that players are the main audience of the game session, the GM is under constant evaluation by the participants. His position, therefore, is always subject to being challenged. As Schick has asserted, "[t]he game master has complete power over the fictional lives of the player characters but must remain

completely impartial toward the players to retain their trust” (11).⁴²

The Players

Players’ main task, on the other hand, is to “direct” or “play out” - so to speak - the actions of a particular character within the established fictional world of the game. This is done mostly by verbally stating their actions. This fact makes TRPGs an exceptionally good example for speech act theory since describing character action equals the performance of such an action within the diegetic world. Thus, a player’s in-game statement such as “I throw a stone at the window”, means that the character within the diegesis has actually performed that action. The following would be a typical example of an exchange between a GM and a player:

GM: It is late. You have no idea how long you spoke to that woman but by the silence and cold outside you guess it is way past midnight. Somewhere behind you, you hear footsteps.

P: I begin to walk faster.

GM: You hear the footsteps increase their speed behind you.

P: I turn around holding my umbrella in front of me.

Generally speaking, players of conventional TRPGs may only directly influence the story through the actions of their characters. Nevertheless, the possibilities of such action are

⁴² We will discuss the complexity of the power relationship between players and GMs in more depth in chapter six (“Modes of Play”).

limitless as long as they comply with the general convention of plausibility within the fictional world.⁴³ In this respect, role-playing games enable players to affect the fictional environment in ways that greatly exceed those offered by computer-based and, to a much greater extent, "by either print or electronic fiction, [since they] are free to make choices that are not already built into the game by the author" (Miller par. 15). Therefore, despite the GM's leading role in the development of the game, he cannot directly control the actions of the player characters as long as they follow the rules of the game and of diegetic plausibility.

⁴³ Thus, when playing in a setting in which characters have superpowers, it would be perfectly acceptable for a player to declare that he displaces himself from one place to another by "flying" while the same would be inappropriate for a game in which players embody "normal" human characters. We will discuss this in more detail when addressing Lubomir Doležel's fictional semantics in chapter five.

Chapter 3: The Text

Leonard: "We enter the dungeon"

Sheldon: "You see a dragon"

Howard: Really? So, we're playing Dungeons and Dragons and we walk into a dungeon and see a dragon? Not a little on the nose?

Sheldon: When you play chutes and ladders, do you complain about all the chutes and all the ladders?

- "The Wiggly Finger Catalyst," *The Big Bang Theory*

So far, we have discussed the mechanics of tabletop role-playing games in detail. However, in order to apply any conventional methods of textual analysis to them and, especially, to understand the central role framing devices play in their development, we must inevitably begin by answering the following question: What is the text of a tabletop role-playing game?

[W]hat is the story? What is the text of a role-playing session? If a supplement is used, is that the text? But what if the GM has made changes to the supplement? What if the GM is working from notes or from improvisation alone? (Padol)

Lisa Padol's inquiry already evidences some of the complexities involved in addressing this issue. As we will discuss later on, TRPGs may comprise the simultaneous existence of different texts and media; superimposed layers of discourse and multiple instances of authorial control and agency. This makes any conception of a monadic text problematic "because it is not clear where to draw the line between game and non-game, between

'the game' and its 'surroundings'" (Rockenberger, "Video Game Framings," 260). As such, TRPGs fundamentally challenge our ability to distinguish between "main" (or "core") text, textual periphery and that which is formally external to the text. Indeed, whether we recognize a game's published material, player interaction, or emerging story as separate or consolidated texts is not a trivial decision. Addressing a similar problem in the analysis of paratextuality in digital games Rockenberger points out that,

any answer depends on your definition of 'game.' If the game is what I play, then this is not about the (temporary) ratio of extra- and intra-diegetic elements or about the (narrative) development of a plot, but a question of control, 'autonomy', and interactivity with (diegetic) objects [...] if the game is what I *bought*, the term might also refer to the DVD as a material object or to the determinate, copyrighted digital content stored on the DVD. (260)

In view of the aforementioned, we will have to begin by making a conscious methodological decision as to what our main-text will be and why. Indeed, when approaching TRPGs from the perspective of literary studies, the story or narrative constructed during play is often considered to be the main focus point.⁴⁴ This generally implies differentiating between an in-

⁴⁴ It could be equally plausible, for example, to propose that it is the game session that is to be considered paratextual regarding the sourcebooks as "primary texts." This is the position taken by Booth, who considers board games based on pre-existing texts - and consequently gameplay - to be examples of paratextual production. I would, however, prefer to see these games as forms of adaptation which - although intertextually related to a fictional "canon" - are texts in their own right.

game world as opposed to other elements which are external to it. Padol refers to it obliquely as the interaction among players which is "directly related to the game." Thus, "ordering a pizza or talking about football scores during a session involves interaction between the gamers, but is not part of the text." Similarly, Daniel Mackay refers to the "theater" of a RPG as the "'visible/sonic set of events,' which is sometimes written as well, that occurs around the table *within the context of the game* and that is available only to the player characters and to the non-player characters controlled by the gamemaster" (53). For his part, Gary Alan Fine speaks of the game/fantasy world as the level inhabited by the characters (194) while Harviainen borrows from narratology - and, more specifically, from Genette - by calling this level the *diegesis* ("A Hermeneutical Approach"). Indeed, *diegesis* seems to be the most adequate term to define the events which take place within the fictional world during a TRPG session and constitute the story of the game. Montola makes a similar observation, calling a focus on this level "internal" as opposed to "external" approaches which address the game's social level:

Looking at gameplay from the outside, the external domain of play is in the center of attention. That domain is understood through the concept of the magic circle of play. When looking at gameplay from the inside, the internal domain of play is central; it is understood through the concepts of game world and *diegesis*. ("On the Edge of the Magic Circle," 47)

Clearly, despite their theoretical differences, all of the above approaches convene in the depiction of a level on which fictional

elements may be understood as independent, working according to an internal, diegetic logic. Role-playing, as stated by Harviainen, "is a form of heuristic fiction ... [where] everything follows an internal (diegetic, i.e. "true within the context of the story") system ... [that] works directly upon indexical and symbolic concepts, transforming basic representations into a fantasy reality" ("A Hermeneutical Approach," 69). Nevertheless, the diegesis itself is only a part of the complex informational and semantic system that is the role-playing game session. As Harviainen has stated, "to treat a role-playing situation solely as a singular text removes a part of the game experience from the equation" (70). Indeed, to define and analyze the diegesis of a role-playing game it is also necessary to recognize the nature, function and origin of the different elements which surround it and enable its production. Such a task, however, presents us with certain inherent difficulties since - as both Fine and Harviainen have pointed out - a role-playing game session is a text in which different levels of meaning are simultaneously involved, all of which may also be considered texts in their own right. Because of this, it becomes necessary, in the first place, to deconstruct the role-playing game session in order to adequately enable its interpretation. As Harviainen has stated,

[t]hrough knowing how a diegesis is constructed and how a player potentially perceives it, we can transfigure both the diegesis and the perception into texts. Essentially this means "backtracking" them to a base set of texts that has never actually existed! Yet by creating these artificial "originals", we can see the interpretative processes at work in a game. ("A Hermeneutical Approach," 73)

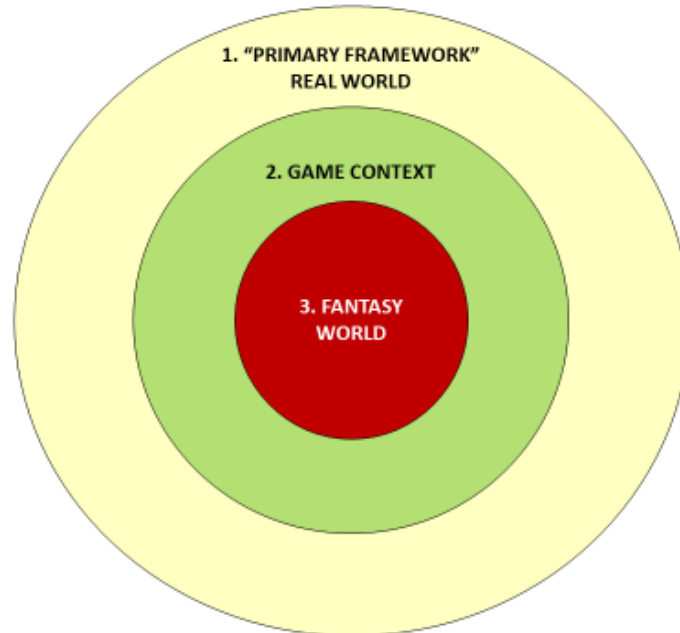
Frames of Discourse in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

According to Gary Alan Fine, "fantasy gaming comprises three interrelated systems of meaning: commonsense reality, the gaming rules, and the content of the gaming fantasy itself" (3). These systems of meaning or discourse levels are defined by Fine according to the role adopted by the participants during the game session (see Figure 3):

1. "primary framework" or real world, inhabited by *people*
2. game context/world of game rules, inhabited by *players* and grounded in the game structure
3. fantasy world, inhabited by the *characters* (Fine 186)

In the first case, utterances are understood as being completely separated from the diegetic "reality", and thus only apply to the primary framework. This would be the case, for example, if a player stands up from the table stating that needs to "go to the bathroom," or when a player requests another one to "pass the chips on." In both cases, the utterances are understood as to refer to the "real world" and as such, they express desires or necessities of the players as real people. The game context, for its part, is a discourse level where the utterances refer to the game as such. That is, it comprises statements referring to the game structure, content and rules without being part of the diegesis.

**Figure 3 TRPG Levels of Meaning
(Fine)**

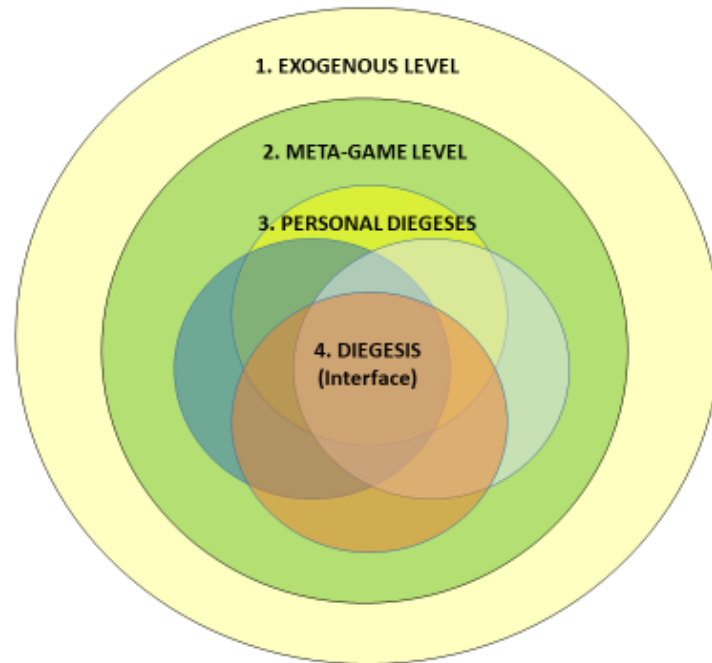


As such, it can be described as a meta-level. For example, the statement of "wanting to be a magician," an argument over the application of a specific rule or referring to the quality of the game as "boring" - which, just as a side note, is presumably the worse nightmare of any respected GM - would be cases of utterances of the participants as players. Although these utterances directly influence the game, they do so from "outside" of the fictional world (Harviainen, "A Hermeneutical Approach" 74). Finally, utterances within the third frame are those which are understood as corresponding to the characters of the game and, as such, are interpreted directly in relation to the diegesis. According to Fine, such utterances are to be understood as occurring within a "hypothetical primary framework" (194) which is the fictional setting. Such a world, Fine adds, is "in theory known only through the character and through action in the game. This knowledge is, then, often inaccessible" (ibid.).

In general terms Harviainen's taxonomy of the RPG's layers of meaning overlaps with Fine's. Nevertheless, the former's focus is more centered on the diegesis and the participant's attitude toward it; that is, he considers aspects such as motivation and player expectations. As we will discuss later on, these elements will prove especially relevant when discussing the function of framing devices in role-playing. Harviainen also recognizes an additional level of meaning in the subjective diegesis of the players. The text of the RPG is then to be understood as being composed of four distinctive levels (see Figure 4): The completely exogenous level - Fine's "primary framework" - "where participants' social interaction and external [player] motivators (EPM) exist" ("A Hermeneutical Approach" 73); a level comprising meta-game dialogue - Fine's game context - "formed of the events on the diegetic level [and] IPM⁴⁵ factors the participants bring with them" (ibid.); a level of subjective diegeses - i.e. each player's individual visualization of the diegetic events - "consist[ing] of IPM factors being transformed into character motivations (CM)"; and the diegetic level or "the world the characters live in" (ibid.). Moreover, Harviainen defines this last level as "pure diegesis" and coincides with Fine concerning its inaccessibility, stating that "[t]he players may speak of this level, but they never actually come in contact with it" (74). Thus, the game can be considered a number of texts where: "the gaming process itself can be treated as interpretation done by the participants, and analyzed as such" (75). In this respect, the experience of role-playing is to be understood as a "personal hermeneutic circle" (ibid).

⁴⁵ Internal player motivators.

**Figure 4 TRPG Levels of Meaning
(Harviainen)**



It may be argued, however, that Harviainen's distinction between subjective diegesis and the diegesis "inhabited" by the characters is misleading. Clearly, from a phenomenological level, it is impossible for players to actually access the fictional world in which the narration takes place. However, each of their subjective visualizations of it - including that of their "own" actions within it as characters - originates from a common text which, although ephemeral, has an objective, material existence. In other words, Harviainen's notion of a subjective diegesis is analogous to the common experience of reading and visualizing a book, an experience which will undoubtedly also vary from reader to reader. What we have then is what in structuralist terminology is described by the distinction between artifact - the text in its constructed, material form - and aesthetic object - the personal, "sensory" experience of the text. From this point of view, we **may define the game session as the TRPG's textual artifact. Within it, the**

diegetic level of discourse can be conceived of as a textual "center."

Diegesis as Interface

Because of its dynamic nature, Lisa Padol proposes conceptualizing the TRPG diegesis in terms of an interface rather than a fixed text. As such, it is based on the interaction between two or more players which, as already mentioned above, "must be directly related to the game." This includes:

the GM's descriptions of settings, along with any diagrams or handouts provided [...]; the players' and the PCs' reactions to the GM's descriptions [...]; the GM's personification of the various characters who interact with the PCs, and the PCs' reaction to them. The interaction between GM and players covers everything from combat between NPCs and PCs, resolved with dice, and sometimes diagrams and miniatures as well, to simple dialogue. A GM can interact primarily with one player while the others look on [or, t]he players can interact while the GM watches. This is also included in the definition of material which reaches the interface, and is also part of the text.

So understood, the interface comprises all verbal and otherwise encoded "utterances" which occur within the diegetic frame of discourse (i.e. the diegetic level) during the session.⁴⁶ In

⁴⁶ Since TRPGs are a fundamentally plurimedial phenomenon, "utterances" is used here in a broader sense as including all encoded information - visual, verbal, auditory, etc. - that is understood to occur within the game's diegetic level.

contrast to Padol's categorical exclusion of all 'non-interface' elements (supplements, rules, GMs' texts, etc.) from the game text, however, **our understanding of the session as the game's artifact allows us to theoretically separate center from periphery while conceptually maintaining a sense of unity between the two.** This is of great importance since, as we will discuss later on, framings are in fact an essential part of the TRPG's textual architecture and ongoing genesis.⁴⁷ In this regard I agree with Liz Henry, who also criticizes "Padol's session-focused view of the game" pointing out that "source texts, new texts created by players and GM, and game session are all part of the narrative system that makes the story" (26). From this point of view, she concludes, "[t]exts, rules, dice, cards, characters, GM, and players are all agents who have varying degrees of authority to create the story" (ibid.). Furthermore, as Harviainen notes, the diegesis itself is a "theoretical construct that does not actually even exist" ("A Hermeneutical Approach" 74) and can be conceived as "an emergent property of the three other [discourse] layers" (75). A similar point has been made by Jaakko Stenros who states that "the role-playing text contains all the diegetic elements, from the back-story to the experiences of individual characters" ("Notes on Role-Playing Texts," 76). As such, he continues, it is "almost an abstract Platonic idea of [a] particular role-playing game, or series of games" (ibid.). Ultimately, he concludes, "[t]here is nothing in the roleplaying text that at least one of the participants does not know, but in practice usually no one knows the entire role-playing text" (ibid.). In view of the aforementioned, rather than excluding surrounding textual phenomena, we will use framing theory to understand their

⁴⁷ Additionally, I consider the diegetic interface in a broad way; that is, not reduced to intradiegetic communication exclusively but rather including all forms of discourse that appear during the session and are directly related to the emergent diegetic events.

inextricable relationship to the TRPG's primary text; the diegetic interface (or emergent narrative) generated and sustained by players during a game session. Moreover, as will be made clear later on, a clear-cut boundary between the diegesis and the frames of meaning surrounding it is still practically impossible. Because of this, the interest in liminal phenomena such as framing devices or paratexts - defined by Genette as 'thresholds' of interpretation (*Seuils*) - is especially relevant as they constitute the border between the "inside" and the "outside" of the text. Thus, it is precisely in a medium where the existence of clear borders has been reduced to the minimum that borderline phenomena, or rather, those elements which mark the borders of fiction, become most relevant. In this respect, framing devices in TRPGs may be described in terms of what Remigius Bunia has called 'transception':

'[T]ransception' designates the transgression of a border, a transgression, however, which at the same time marks the border and invokes its existence. It is not an absurdity to conceive that a borderline is defined by transgression. Indeed, this is an important way of demarcating a border; if no transgression is to be expected or feared, there is often no need for demarcation. (373)

This understood, I will dedicate the following chapter, to discuss the importance and function of frames and framing devices for the construction of narratives in role-playing games.

Chapter 4: From Frame Analysis to Literary Framing

And those readers who lead busy and careworn lives can take a certain kind of heart, as well: even if you, Overworked Reader, have never found the leisure to read *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or *Don Quixote* or *Faust* or the *Commedia*, you can console yourself with the reflection that you have at least read - and, in the last second or so, just re-read - a minute but essential part of those books. - Kevin Jackson, *Invisible Forms*

Understood in the context of linguistic analysis, the term 'frame' may be described as "the sum of various factors that influence and predetermine discursive exchanges, contribute to their coherence and meaningfulness and distinguish specific discursive exchanges from other possible ones" (Wolf, "Framing Fiction" 98). As such, frames are generally equated with "a 'speech situation' in its broadest sense including the rules and contexts stabilizing the meaning of the discursive exchange" (ibid.). Moreover, they are to be understood as cognitive meta-concepts that "generally function as preconditions of interpretation" (Wolf, *Framing Borders* 5). Because of this, games in general offer an ideal situation for observing the relationship between frames:

Games seem particularly appropriate to the application of frame analysis because they represent a bounded set of social conventions, namely a social world. [...] Unlike dreams of madness, these worlds have a logical structure, recognizable as parallel to the mundane world. Games are quintessential examples for frame analysis because of their

capacity for inducing engrossment. [They] provide alternative social worlds in which individuals can become involved. (Fine 182)

Furthermore, considering what has been discussed so far, it becomes evident that frame analysis should apply especially well to TRPG theory.⁴⁸ Indeed, Fine has argued that "fantasy gaming provides a setting in which the dynamics of framing are particularly central to the enterprise and are evident to the participants" (203). Basing himself for the most part on Erving Goffman's seminal work on frame analysis, Fine goes on to describe how player identity is constructed within a role-playing game session. According to him, TRPG players are constantly shifting between levels of meaning by 'keying' their utterances in order for them to be interpreted correctly within a specific frame of discourse. This is due to the fact that participants of role-playing games must be able to interpret the utterances of others involved in the game, not only in order to "determine *who* the speaker is," but also to "discover [...] the source of the words [and determine] which of the speaker's selves is doing the talking - the person or the referee, the player or the character" (Fine 201). Fine's description of these acts of 'keying', however, focuses not only on the players' changing interpretation of utterances according to the frame in which they are to be understood, but also in terms of how players must negotiate their identities according to the knowledge they have of such frames. Following this distinction, Fine explores the effects of the game's requirement for different *awareness contexts* (as by Glaser and Strauss 1965):

⁴⁸ For a similar approach to the medium of video games, see Deterding ("The Game Frame")

Every frame has meanings associated with it, but these meanings are not necessarily shared with figures (persons, players, characters) operating in other frames. [...] Contours of awareness coupled with engrossment permit us to speak of frames as being different from each other. Thus, a joke is considered funny, even though its content is "seriously known to be false." (187)

Here, Fine points out to the fact that players must constantly negotiate their identity in terms of the knowledge they *have*, are *supposed* to have or are supposed *not* to have concerning the frames of reference in which their utterances occur. Thus, participants are expected to separate player knowledge from what their characters, who are "within" the game world, "actually" know. In this respect Fine has stated that "[e]ngrossment [in a role-playing game] implies the setting aside or ignoring of alternative awarenesses [sic.]" (ibid.). Such a separation consists of what Glaser and Strauss have defined as a *pretense awareness context* (ibid.); that is, TRPGs present a situation in which those involved must enact different identities (generally two in the case of players and several in the case of the GM) which are constructed on the pretense of being "separated" from each other. This pretense is accepted by all players involved in the game. For Fine, this implies that "the existence of frames outside of primary frameworks depends on the individual's being willing to *assume* an unawareness of their other selves" (188). This situation has already been well described by Goffman in the context of theatre performances:

[D]uring the play, the person playing the hero acts as if he doesn't know what the villain is going to

do, and the person playing the villain acts as if he can hide his intent from the hero, although both these individuals have a common and full knowledge of the play and of the distribution of this knowledge. (134)

Thus, in the same way in which an actor embodies a character that pretends not to know anything about the actor himself, "the [RPG] character must know only that information which is available within the game frame and not what the player or the person knows" (Fine 188). That is, "the character is supposed to operate under the constraints of a closed awareness context with regard to his animator" (ibid.). Nevertheless, while this appears to be a self-evident practice in theater, maintaining such a pretense awareness in TRPGs proves to be a much more problematic issue, due to the fact that they "necessarily involve two distinct, yet simultaneous roles during the same activity [since] participants are [both] fantasy personas and the players who enact the personas" (Waskul 28). In other words, unlike the actor of a play, the player in a role-playing game has a personal interest in the success and survival of his character,⁴⁹ a fact that, as Waskul has pointed out, "poses a moral dilemma for role-players" (29). Indeed, the question is whether "in crucial gaming moments, [the] *players* [will] use information they know, but their fantasy *personas* would not" (ibid.). For example, a player who witnesses the dialog of two other characters who are plotting against "him" (i.e. his character) is expected to play as if he were unaware of the impending danger. This might include, for example, associating

⁴⁹ As we will discuss in depth in our analysis of Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* in chapter seven, current games have challenged this idea, for example by encouraging players to engage in 'play to lose' attitudes in order to generate more interesting narratives.

with the aforementioned characters for an undercover mission. Nevertheless, due to the high level of identification between a player and his character, this becomes a problematic situation that may result in the player making decisions that seem incoherent from a diegetic point of view. In the case of the example this might involve turning down the mission, although there would seem to be no evident danger for the character from the latter's own perspective. On the other hand, players must also deal with the fact that they might ignore essential information that their character, for its part, would actually know. This paradoxical situation means that, in theory, a player might choose to realize an action his character would have avoided for "obvious" diegetic reasons ("everybody knows that you never, ever, laugh at *Klingonian* jokes if you want to keep your head on your shoulders"). Consequently, Fine describes the separation of awareness as constituting the main difficulty in playing RPGs since "the player must block information about the game and the contemporary world that the character would not know, while simultaneously not letting his own ignorance of the fantasy world affect the successful action of the character" (195).⁵⁰

Evidently, Fine's analysis of the role-playing game situation is effective in describing how player utterances are to be understood (i.e. concerning which frame of reference) as well as the cognitive processes - the conscious 'awareness-

⁵⁰ Awareness bracketing has been further problematized by notions such as 'bleed.' The latter refers to the emotional crossover that occurs when diegetic events directly affect the players' actual (i.e. real-world) thoughts and feelings. A romantic relationship with another player character; discovering the betrayal of an entrusted ally or being forced to leave a wounded friend behind in a dangerous situation can not only be drastic and highly personal emotional experiences for game participants, they often have repercussions on the way players feel towards each other. This might range from romantic and/or sexual attraction or deep trust and friendship to outright dislike. For more on the relationship between players' experiences of immersion and bleed, see Montola and Holopainen; Gerge and Winding; Torner and White; Bowman and Lieberoth.

bracketing' - necessary for players to construct utterances which are appropriate to the identity they embody and the discourse frame they address during gameplay. However, if we consider the diegetic level as the "hypothetical primary framework" described by Fine (194), we must ask ourselves what elements determine the meaning of utterances which clearly occur *within* this frame of reference. The answer, as we will see, may be found by having a closer look at the use of 'literary' framing devices.

Literary Framing and Paratextuality

Criticizing what he considers to be a general lack of academic research concerning framing in literary works, Werner Wolf, has called attention to the "well known fact that literary texts, more than non-literary ones, are usually accompanied by framings referring to the specificity of the text and giving hints as to how to read it" ("Framing Fiction" 102). Implicitly, therefore, Wolf proposes a specific use of framing devices (or 'framings') in literary texts which is to be distinguished from their function in "normal" or stereotyped speech situations. In the latter cases, "frames will be more or less taken for granted, as such situations seem to call for certain frames automatically as default settings" (*Framing Borders* 5). With fictional texts however, not only has the frame of reference first to be established (Hruschovski) but it has to be assigned a meaning as well. In such cases, "special (additional) agreements between 'senders' and 'receivers' have to be made and signaled" (Wolf, *Framing Borders* 6). These special agreements are established by what Wolf defines as instances of literary framing.

The Paratext

Generally speaking, Wolf's idea of a framing device appears to correspond with what Gerard Genette has defined as the paratext. In his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, Genette introduces a formal framework, terminology and typology for the study of what he describes as the "accompanying productions" of literary texts (1). The latter encompasses a wide variety of phenomena such as the name of a book's author, titles, subtitles, footnotes, prefaces, commentaries, and illustrations; all of which, as Genette argues, surround and extend the text in order to make it available, allowing its reception or, as he puts it, to "ensure the text's presence in the world" (ibid.). Furthermore, because paratexts influence the way in which a text is interpreted, Genette considers them to be defined on the most part "by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility" (3). Accordingly, such textual phenomena may be considered to be an instance of authorial control; a point from which the author - or other "authorized" agencies such as editors, publishers, etc. - can influence the way in which his text is read.

Indeed, this fringe (the paratext), always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone not only of transition, but of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies).

(2)

Thus, the paratext is to be understood as secondary to the main text and as such, as "fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d'etre*" (12).

This something is the text. [...] The paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence. [...] The functions of the paratext cannot be described theoretically and, as it were, a priori in terms of status (ibid.).

Based mainly on the material characteristics of the print medium, Genette originally made a formal distinction between two main types of paratext: peritext and epitext. While the former refers to the paratextual elements which are directly appended to the main text, the latter includes all materially "external" elements (344).

[T]he epitext is a whole whose paratextual function has no precise limits and in which comment on the work is endlessly diffused in a biographical, critical, or other discourse whose relation to the work may be at best indirect and at worst indiscernible. [...] [It is] a fringe of the fringe [that] gradually disappears into, among other things, the totality of the authorial discourse. (345-346)

Evidently, the inclusion of the epitext makes Genette's notion of the paratext a problematic one since it implies that "every

context serves [in principle] as a paratext'" (9). Thus, the paratext could include even background information about the author concerning such things as, for example, his age, sex, etc. (ibid. 7). Clearly, there is little value in using a term which could "in principle" apply to almost anything. Additionally, as Birke and Christ have noted, in the context of transmedial texts and narratives, the "spatial metaphors" of the paratextual definition become problematic, making scholars have to "struggle with the question of how to differentiate text and paratext in a more systematic way" (69).

Literary Framing

Recognizing the limitations of Genette's overly "fuzzy" definition, Werner Wolf proposes the concept of 'literary framing' as both an alternative and a complement to the idea of the paratext:

[D]as Konzept literarischer Rahmung [bietet sich] sowohl als Alternative zum Paratextbegriff an als auch als dessen Ergänzung: als Alternative insofern, als es an die Stelle von Paratexte als Dachbegriff für die verhandelten Phänomene treten kann; als Ergänzung insoweit, als ein klar konturierter (auf verbale, werkinterne Texte beschränkter) Paratextbegriff unter diesem Dach weiterhin seinen Ort haben könnte – als eine wichtige Form der Rahmung neben anderen. ("Prologe als Paratexte" 95)

As Genette, Wolf also indicates that the main function of framing in literature – of which the paratext is, indeed, a prominent form – is to guide and control interpretations within the "abstract cognitive frames" presented by fictional texts

(*Framing Borders* 6). In addition, he also points out that there are four "potential 'agencies'" of such framing, adding to the authorial instance ('sender') that of the reader ('recipient'), the text ('message') and its context (ibid. 15). Of the four, however, it is primarily the textual and contextual framings that can be directly observed and analyzed since 'sender' and 'recipient'-based ones are mainly internal cognitive processes (ibid.). Because of the fact that the most effective framing devices are those that influence the reading of a text from its beginning, focusing on those elements which precede the main text is recommended. According to this approach, 'literary framings' are to be understood as,

easily identifiable markers [...] that exist in the immediate context or within a work of fiction *previous* [emphasis in the original] to the reader's framing activity and indeed serve as its most important basis. These framings are or seem to be located on another level than the framed text, they contribute, for the reader, to the constitution or stabilization of a (real or imaginary) communicative situation in the literary exchange and also help him or her to select frames of interpretation or reference relevant for the work under consideration. ("Framing Fiction" 103)

In addition, Wolf proposes a principle of contiguity to the definition of framing while redefining the term paratext as a framing sub-category:

[I]n contrast to Genette, for whom 'paratexts' comprise both 'contextual' and 'textual' framings,

I would like to restrict 'paratextual framings', whether authorized or not, to a variant of 'textual' framings, namely to [those] which are parts of individual works and are positioned at their borders, but are discernible not only through their liminal position, but also, and, above all, through their function as introductory, explanatory etc. that forms the 'threshold' to the main text of the work in question. (*Framing Borders* 20)

Not only is Wolf's re-definition of the term 'paratext' necessary, but it is also an important one to notice here, especially considering the broad use given to the latter in recent years within game theory (Rockenberger, '*Paratext*' und *Neue Medien*). Mia Consalvo's coining of the term "paratextual industries" in her influential book *Cheating* is a good example of this:

I believe that the peripheral industries surrounding games function as just such a paratext. Gaming magazines, strategy guides, mod chip makers [etc.] work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways. Those ways have played a significant role in how gameplay is now understood. [...]The central tendency remains though: the creation of a flourishing paratext has significantly shaped games and gamers in the process of creating new markets.
(9)

While Consalvo's application of the term has proved enlightening and useful in a general sense, adding an important perspective to the study of games and the seemingly endless production of

text that surrounds them, it is not without its drawbacks. Indeed, she fails to point out exactly what her understanding of "the text" actually is. Is it a specific gameplay experience; the game as an artifact; or just a theoretical idea of digital games in general? From this point of view, it remains to be discussed, in what way the commercial production of meta-game information can actually be considered to serve an immediate paratextual function. In other words, a more detailed approach must acknowledge that in order to determine specific types of paratext and their uses, the particularities of the medium itself must be first put under consideration. As we have discussed previously, this means beginning by identifying the nature (and location) of the primary/main text. Only then will it be possible to recognize and differentiate relevant paratexts and framings. In the case of TRPGs, such a distinction has special importance due to the complex nature of its text(s) (see, for example Padol; Stenros, "Genre, Style, Method and Focus"). Since my approach to TRPGs is mainly from the perspective of literary studies, I will consider the diegetic level as the primary text of the game session.⁵¹ In a general sense then, TRPG framings can be understood as elements that serve to 'trigger' relevant 'meta-concepts' (i.e. frames) for the interpretation of discourses within the game's diegesis.⁵² In this respect, it is necessary to indicate an important aspect of framings, particularly those found in initial position. Indeed, these framing devices not only guide textual interpretation; they do so by creating expectations concerning

⁵¹ This distinction, however, is done mainly for practical purposes: The fact that the TRPG game session is, in itself, a multi-layered text is one that is acknowledged and the necessity of such a reduction will be justified later on.

⁵² This notion ties in closely with Ilieva's enlightening analysis of the negotiation of cultural codes in 'live-action' RPG (LARP) discourse. My focus here, however, is more directed towards the specific materiality of these triggering elements and their relationship to the negotiated, diegetic text.

the content of the text which follows. As we will see, this latter feature is important to keep in mind in order to understand the particular use of framings in the TRPG medium.

Identifying Framings in TRPGs

Before attempting to locate framings in role-playing games, there are certain unique aspects of the medium which must be taken into consideration. It is common knowledge that any meaningful discourse exchange may only occur within a pre-established frame of reference. As Wolf has stated, "there is no human signifying act, no meaningful perception, cognition and communication without 'frames'" (*Framing Borders* 1). Nevertheless, of all types of discourse it is that whose function is not primarily pragmatic and therefore referential where framings arise most notoriously. Indeed, framing devices are not an exclusive characteristic of literature, but rather of non-pragmatic, artistic discourse in general; a fact already recognized by Genette who stated that "it is obvious that some, if not all, of the other arts have an equivalent of our paratext" (407). This understood, it becomes evident that different media must allow for particular uses of framing devices. Indeed, in the introduction to the collection of essays contained in *Framing Borders* Werner Wolf begins by formulating the following question:

[W]hat means do individual media have at their disposal to influence reception processes? How do individual media collaborate in the field of plurimedial framings or in works where framings and the framed belong to different media? (12)

Clearly, although they share characteristics with a wide variety of artistic phenomena and media, TRPGs cannot be distinctly ascribed to any one of them and are thus best to be understood as a medium in their own right. Such a medium, as has been mentioned earlier, presents certain inherent problems for research, some of which become especially acute when the intention is the analysis and description of its framing devices. For example, the fact that TRPGs are, on the one side, multi-authorial texts as well as the simultaneous convergence of author and audience, on the other, already subverts some of the basic criteria used to describe instances of framing.⁵³ Paramount to these complications, however, is the fact that role-playing games lack a fixed, material "main text." Not only that, but, contrary to theater performances, TRPG sessions are instances of non-iterable discourse; that is, the events that occur during role-play may not be re-staged as is the case with more traditional plays, which generally follow a pre-determined, fixed script.⁵⁴ Indeed, both due to the aforementioned complexities as well as the obvious fact that the framing possibilities during TRPG gameplay are practically limitless,⁵⁵ we are forced to make a series of reductions. In this respect, I have chosen to follow Wolf's **criterion of relevance**, based on

⁵³ Indeed, both Genette's assumption that paratexts are defined according to authorial intentions as well as Wolf's attempt to classify framings according to the framing 'agency' become problematic when dealing with texts which have multiple authorial instances who are at the same time the texts' recipients.

⁵⁴ Although they still differ from a dramatic script in that the actions of the characters are not fixed from the beginning - and, for that means, neither are the number or type of characters themselves -, TRPG game modules or "pre-fabricated adventures" do in fact present players with a more or less fixed setting and plot that has to be "played out" during the session. While a closer look at these texts exceeds the scope of this dissertation, it would be recommendable for further investigation in the matter of framing in TRPGs.

⁵⁵ Not only do TRPGs include several authors and media but they also present a text which is often temporally open-ended since long-running campaigns can, at least in theory, go on indefinitely.

framing saliency and effectiveness in influencing reader expectations and interpretation:

Since framings are more relevant the more they influence recipient-response and the more easily they are quotable and discernible, it is advisable to privilege not only, as already said, contextual and, above all, textual framings but in addition those that are salient or overt (as opposed to covert ones), and in temporal media those that appear in initial position. For it is at the beginning of an intended reception process that important frames of reference are traditionally signaled and expectations are created, and when frames are signaled, this is usually done in a salient way and refers to the entire work under consideration. (*Framing Borders* 22)

In addition, by considering the previously mentioned contiguity criterion, we may justifiably argue that the search for literary framing devices in TRPGs should begin at the game level (Harviainen's meta-game dialog), which is the immediate frame to the diegesis. Within this frame of discourse, we may further reduce our initial search to rulebooks as they present us with an ideal textual corpus to work with both due to their relevance as mediators of the game, as well as the advantage of their physical materiality. This step can be justified because of the fact that "(con-)textual framings lend themselves more easily to quotation or illustration and interpretation than sender- and recipient-based ones" which are often cognitive processes that take place in the subjects' minds. (Wolf, *Framing Borders* 16, 17). Although significant, the above mentioned reductions will

prove to be a necessary starting point for our study since, "the inclusion of all [...] forms [of framing] in a research project would result in such a multitude of heterogeneous phenomena that it would be difficult to come to any meaningful results" (ibid. 22). In this regard, I also agree with Wolf's assertion that "not all the manifold varieties of framing are equally interesting and useful for the interpretation of given works" (ibid.). Considering the aforementioned arguments, our focus in the next chapter will be to understand the framing function of role-playing game rulebooks. This will allow us to build the foundation upon which we will later describe player framing strategies as well as the more recent developments in TRPG game design (chapters six and seven).

Chapter 5: The Rulebook

I change, I am remade, I am both the sword and the smith who forges it. - Greg Stolze, *Rites of the Dragon*

One of the arguments that could be used against in-depth rulebook analysis might be the fact that they are not absolutely necessary for gameplay and are, therefore, neither part of, nor relevant framings to it. Indeed, the importance of these texts has been, to a certain extent, disputed. On the one hand, they are considered to be indispensable for the game as they supply the structural and diegetic basis necessary for allowing player interaction and a unified experience of the fictional world. Thus, Nephew states that "to play a roleplaying game, you really only need to buy some of the specialty dice available at most hobby stores, and the core rulebook for the roleplaying system you're interested in" (11). Wallis goes even further in this respect arguing that "even in the most cutting-edge examples of the state of the art, it is not the players who will tell the story, it is the game" (69). This, he contends, is due to the fact that "clever game design hid[es] the rails to give the impression of an open-ended narrative," thus creating in the players the "illusion of being in control" (ibid.). On the other hand, it is also argued that TRPGs can be played even in the absence of source texts and rulebooks which are therefore to be seen solely as tools that make the playing of the game easier, especially for game master purposes. As Mackay has asserted:

It is possible for a game to be played without the normal accouterments (rulebook, dice, compendium of reference charts, miniature figures) of the game; however, it is impossible for a role-playing game to be played without performance art. (2)

Insofar as sourcebooks in their published, material form are not absolutely necessary for a game of role-playing, this is true. Some years ago, my RPG gaming group and I would regularly engage in what we deemed "eraser" role-playing.⁵⁶ On occasion of boring or ending parties, this "freestyle" mode of role-playing allowed us to enjoy a good time despite the bad music or the late hour. Nevertheless, despite its improvised nature, it still required us to agree on a fictional world setting⁵⁷ and on a loose system of quantification to allow resolving situations in which chance was involved. This would regularly be done using some form of coin flipping. Admittedly, the resulting sessions were less of a storytelling experience than a chance for comic relief as they generally developed into adventures which involved "fooling around" within the fictional environment while lacking definite objectives as well as overall coherence.⁵⁸ However, in their core, they still followed the same principles as most conventional TRPGs, working on the basis of *quantified*,⁵⁹ *interactive storytelling*. What is made clear by this example is that, although the rulebooks themselves may be spared, the functions they serve are indispensable for a game to take place. In the absence of these texts it is the players who must replace them by conjunctly agreeing on a fictional world - the

⁵⁶ The term "eraser" referred not only to the fact that there were generally no written stats or maps but also that the game was understood as not having any continuity beyond the given occasion on which it was played.

⁵⁷ This could range from *Matrix* to *Star Wars*, generally depending on the participants' familiarity with the chosen fictional environment.

⁵⁸ This lack of an overall coherence and game objectives can, as will be made clear, be associated with the notorious lack of an elaborate framework of paratextual information.

⁵⁹ In this specific case, quantification was based more on a loose 'social agreement.' For example, a character that was described as "big and strong" would be given, impromptu, better "coin flipping" chances in accomplishing feats that involved strength, even though there were no specific statistics to represent these features.

hypothetical primary frame of reference - and the rules that will govern it. In other words, the information contained in rulebooks effectively constitutes the structural basis of the game; what Domsch calls the latter's "architecture" (48). Moreover, it is their framing function, as we will see, what makes the unified, aesthetically coherent process of collaborative storytelling possible (a function which was notoriously underdeveloped in our "eraser" games). This further legitimizes our initial focus on such texts as they can be seen to a certain extent as being symptomatic; a fixed representation so to speak, of the framing activities realized by players during the game. Additionally, fan/player influence in published TRPGs is particularly important, a fact that results in ongoing rulebook modifications as subsequent editions of games respond dynamically to player feedback (Nephew). Therefore, even within the rulebooks we may find traces of player involvement. As a matter of fact, the extent to which fan influence is relevant for game designers may be observed in the following statement taken from White Wolf's online platform:

As we're evolving our business and figuring out the best way to explore the deepest shadows of the World of Darkness, we've come to realize that we can better serve you, the fan. You breathe life into the pages of our books. You are the pulsing hearts that animate our board games and card games and the Machiavellian surprise behind the latest Mind's Eye power struggle. To that end, we've got some changes coming. (White Wolf Online)⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Webpage no longer available.

Rulebook as Framing Device

As mentioned previously, one of the main complications in dealing with framing devices in TRPGs is the fact that the session's diegesis has no actual existence prior to gameplay. Moreover, even during play, the diegetic level is an imaginary construct that lacks any permanent physical form, any objective nature and as such is also unavailable.⁶¹ Such a lack of materiality makes it indeed difficult to delimit the boundaries between that which is "inside" and that which is "outside" of the text. Making a similar observation in her analysis of digital games, Rockenberger states that "it seems natural to ask: Where does the 'introduction' or the 'prologue' end? Where does the game actually begin? And where does it not?" ("Video Game Framings," 260). In this regard, Jessica Hammer has suggested that, from the point of view of its construction, the TRPG diegesis may be conceived as a "tertiary" product of other texts (69-72). Where sourcebooks act as a TRPG's "primary text" by establishing the broad fictional premises (setting) and the rules by which the fictional space is to be negotiated, "secondary" texts - such as those generated by players and GM's - provide the specific premises on which a particular game-session is based (plot) (ibid.). Correspondingly, Hammer distinguishes three types of TRPG authorship: primary, secondary and tertiary (ibid.). In this context, rulebooks can be said to exemplify how "primary authors" extend their influence upon the game. As a result, they may allow us to better understand how the different authorial instances involved in gameplay negotiate the generated fictional environment.⁶² This is particularly

⁶¹ However, as mentioned in chapter three, the diegesis is based on the events that take place at the level of the game's interface, which can be seen as the underlying material text (i.e. the artifact) of the session.

⁶² As we will discuss later on, however, while these distinctions are useful for an initial analysis, they misrepresent the true complexity of authorial negotiation in TRPGs. In this regard, the idea of the diegesis as a "tertiary" text fails to reflect players' relationship to the particular fictional world of the game-session and their actual authority over it. Indeed, in contrast

relevant since both Genette as well as Wolf have stressed the importance of paratexts and framings as an instance of authorial control. Consequently, the study of these elements is key to understanding how this negotiation takes place. In addition, rulebooks have the (seeming) benefit of presenting us with a more conventional, more familiar and, most important of all, a physically delimited medium. Indeed, as Nephew has observed, published role-playing games "have an advantage [...] in that as physical artifacts they are undeniably books" (21). Moreover, these texts also seem to comply with several of the criteria mentioned in Wolf's definition of framings: they exist in the *immediate* context of the diegesis and, since they *precede* the actual game playing, they also exist *prior* to any reader/player's input or framing activity. At the same time, they are physically separated - and thus appear to be *easily identifiable* - from the diegesis of the game. Clearly, these texts guide the interpretation of in-game events, either by laying out the rules which underlie the possibility and outcome of certain actions or by providing a (fictional) context within which character action becomes meaningful. However, because of the fact that sourcebook information may be directly adopted in the *interface* (Padol), the nature of such information becomes ambiguous: is it within or without of the diegesis? Or is it perhaps both?

While rules are always formally external to the story, their implementation has direct effects on the in-game events; setting and plot material, for their part, are always potentially diegetic. Evidently, far from being a singular text, the rulebook comprises in itself a great amount of heterogeneous information which is relevant for different levels of meaning

to designer authority which can only affect play indirectly, TRPG participants may modify or even completely override preceding texts if they desire to do so. We will discuss this in terms of the relationship between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' forms of authority in chapter six.

within the complex system of information that is the TRPG session.⁶³ At the same time, not all of its components must necessarily be seen as framing devices and, even if they are, do not have the same relevance. Thus, it becomes necessary to further reduce our focus within the rulebook itself. I propose therefore a (very) general distinction of the information contained in these texts which may be roughly classified into: rules, setting information and (meta)framing devices. In the following segment we will have a closer look at each of these components as we attempt to describe the extent to which they involve diegesis framing. Therefore, before we continue, it might be of help to shortly restate the functional notions of frame and framing as expressed by Wolf. According to his definition, 'frame' describes an "abstract cognitive meta-concept" while the term 'framing' is to be understood as an "activity and in particular a concrete coding of frames" (*Framing Borders* 7).

Framings may thus be defined as codings of abstract cognitive frames that exist or are formed within, or on the margins and in the immediate context of the framed situation or phenomenon and - like the corresponding frames - have an interpretive, guiding and controlling function with reference to it. (ibid. 6)

In other words, a framing or paratext must be made available - i.e. coded - to other participants either within the interface or at its borders and it must (be marked as to) "point towards" the actual diegesis. Because of their explicit focus on

⁶³ For an in-depth analysis of role-playing as a system of information, see Harviainen (*Systemic Perspectives*).

'storytelling', I will be drawing most of the examples in the following section from games based on White Wolf's *World of Darkness* (WoD) TRPG.

Components and Framing Functions

As discussed previously, rules are clearly a central element in structuring role-playing games; as such, they are generally the most prevalent component of any game book. Despite this fact, TRPG rulebooks do not consist by any means solely of statistic information. Quite to the contrary, they may include varying degrees of setting and background information with more recent games even containing extensive theoretical reflections on the topic of storytelling.⁶⁴ In this context, the games published by White Wolf in the early 90s can be considered to be forerunners of the current tendency in TRPG design to focus on the production of aesthetically refined and meaningfully complex narratives. As stated in one of their core rulebooks, "[i]n this type of game, the traditional elements of a story - theme, mood, plot and character - are more important than the rules themselves" (WoD 22). In fact, the company explicitly replaced the denomination role-playing game in its sourcebooks with that of "storytelling game",⁶⁵ a fact which - as we will see - in itself, already indicates the importance of framing for the playing of these games. In view of the aforementioned, I will dedicate the following pages to discuss the three main rulebook components

⁶⁴ For example, over half of the rulebook chapters in Ravachol and Barmore's 2005 game *Dread* are dedicated to the specifics of storytelling in the horror genre, focusing on the differences between "suspenseful," "supernatural," "mysterious," and "gory" narratives (among others). Likewise, Robin Laws' game *Hillfolk* (2013) includes a whole section on the topics of narrative serialization and engaging storytelling.

⁶⁵ Hindmarch actually considers "storytelling" games as different from traditional TRPGs, arguing that the former are "collaborative narrative game[s] built around an RPG" (48) rather than merely an expansion of the latter. We will go into detail into this discussion and propose our own definition of storytelling games in the final chapter.

which I have previously identified - rules, setting information and (meta)framing devices - and their functions. Furthermore, I will be considering whether or not (or in what aspects) these different elements may function as framing devices to the diegesis created during play.

Rules

Traditionally, the notion of rules in TRPGs has been intricately related to the simulative aspect of these games.⁶⁶ From this point of view, they are generally taken to constitute the basis of the textual interface that allows for multiple player interaction during gameplay. Indeed, by creating a system of quantification to statistically represent the elements within the fictional world, it is possible to treat them as "real," allowing their interplay as if they had actual, intrinsic properties. Accordingly, Punday states that role-playing games "define the world as a structure not of events but of objects" (117). As a matter of fact, he further argues that it is this "objectification" of fiction through a "regularized statistical definition," that makes TRPGs a fundamentally intertextual medium, allowing "players to mix characters and situations drawn from a variety of science fiction and fantasy novels" (115). In view of the above, what we must ask ourselves is whether these elements are merely constituents of the 'game frame' or whether they are also a framing (i.e. whether they act as frame "triggers") of the diegesis. Necessarily, they are the first,

⁶⁶ As we will discuss in depth in chapters six and seven, there are at least three additional aspects of TRPG rules that have been generally neglected by game scholarship; namely those governing the authorial, narrative and poetic aspects of the game. This lack of attention is largely due to the lasting influence of traditional TRPG mechanics on game design. More recent games, however, have found innovative ways to implement rules and mechanics beyond their mere function as a basis for simulation. For the time being however, and for simplicity's sake, we will restrict ourselves to discussing only the framing function of conventional simulation rules.

since the idea of 'rules' is an essential part of the meta-concept 'game';⁶⁷ at the same time, however, rules also allow player interpretation of in-game situations, functioning simultaneously as diegetic framing devices.

Figure 5 *Dungeons and Dragons* Character Sheet (1974)

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® Character Record Sheet

Player's Name _____ Dungeon Master _____

Character's Name _____ Alignment _____

Class _____ Level _____

Armor Class _____ Hit Points _____

Character Sketch or Symbol _____

ABILITIES:

STRENGTH _____ adjustment _____

INTELLIGENCE _____ adjustment _____

WISDOM _____ adjustment _____

DEXTERITY _____ adjustment _____

CONSTITUTION _____ adjustment _____

CHARISMA _____ adjustment _____

SAVING THROWS:

POISON or DEATH RAY _____

MAGIC WAND _____

TURN TO STONE or PARALYSIS _____

DRAGON BREATH _____

SPELLS or MAGIC STAFF _____

LANGUAGES: _____

SPECIAL SKILLS: Spells, Thief's abilities, Cleric's turning, etc.

TARGET AC: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

HIT ROLL NEEDED	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
-----------------	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® Character Record Sheet

EQUIPMENT CARRIED

MAGIC ITEMS	NORMAL ITEMS
-------------	--------------

OTHER NOTES including places explored, people & monsters met

MONEY and TREASURE

PP: _____ GEMS: _____

GP: _____

EP: _____

SP: _____

CP: _____

TOTAL VALUE: _____

EXPERIENCE

BONUS/PENALTY: _____

Needed for next level: _____

(This form may be reproduced for personal use in playing DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® GAMES.)
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As Domsch has observed, "most games can be defined as rule systems, but within those systems, different rules have

⁶⁷ In this respect, Wolf has stated that "a frame is, as a rule, designated by a single term and as such corresponds to one metaconcept but usually governs a plurality of subconcepts and expectations" (*Framing Borders* 4).

different functions and work in different ways" (15). In this context, he differentiates broadly "between rules that describe existents in the gameworld and those that describe values that hold in [it]" (ibid.). This distinction can also be described in terms of simulation rules and value systems. In this respect, Will Hindmarch has asserted that "TRPG rules help the players and the Storyteller understand and explain how their characters, as their agents in the game world, affect and respond to the actions that unfold in the story" (51). Furthermore, in their specific form - by including (or *excluding*) rules for certain actions instead of others - rules affect player (as well as GM) expectations for the game, thus influencing their input in the narrative. For example, a game with an elaborate set of rules concerning combat will presumably guide players towards creating more situations of physical conflict than a game with extensive rules for dealing with politics and diplomacy. As Hayot and Wesp have pointed out, "those elements of the game that lay [sic.] at the heart of the game's strategic considerations are also a form of representation" (410). This observation is also supported by Domsch who states that "there is a general tendency to semanticize the rules along with the gameworld, to legitimise [sic.] them in a way that turns them into narrative" (21). Ian Bogost, for his part, speaks of *procedural rhetoric* to describe the way game rules and the processes these entail during play may affect players' understanding of the game as a mode of persuasion (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*). Thus, a TRPG's rules not only allow the interpretation of in-game i.e. diegetic situations, but also shape them as they meaningfully delimit the choices available to players from the "outside." The above becomes especially evident when considering the issue of character construction (cf. Lankoski). For example, games such as those published by White Wolf not only have rules to statistically represent "physical" elements and character attributes, but also for representing a number of "inner"

attributes such as personality and, most interestingly, moral values (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 World of Darkness Character Sheet (2004)

World of Darkness

Name: _____ Concept: _____ Chronicle: _____
 Age: _____ Virtue: _____ Faction: _____
 Player: _____ Vice: _____ Group Name: _____

ATTRIBUTES			
POWER	Intelligence ●0000	Strength ●0000	Presence ●0000
FINESSE	Wits ●0000	Dexterity ●0000	Manipulation ●0000
RESISTANCE	Resolve ●0000	Stamina ●0000	Composure ●0000

SKILLS

Mental
(-3 unskilled)

Academics.....00000
 Computer.....00000
 Crafts.....00000
 Investigation.....00000
 Medicine.....00000
 Occult.....00000
 Politics.....00000
 Science.....00000

Physical
(-1 unskilled)

Athletics.....00000
 Brawl.....00000
 Drive.....00000
 Firearms.....00000
 Larceny.....00000
 Stealth.....00000
 Survival.....00000
 Weaponry.....00000

Social
(-1 unskilled)

Animal Ken.....00000
 Empathy.....00000
 Expression.....00000
 Intimidation.....00000
 Persuasion.....00000
 Socialize.....00000
 Streetwise.....00000
 Subterfuge.....00000

OTHER TRAITS

Merits

.....00000
00000
00000
00000
00000
00000
00000
00000

Health

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Willpower

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Morality

10 _____ 0
 9 _____ 0
 8 _____ 0
 7 _____ 0
 6 _____ 0
 5 _____ 0
 4 _____ 0
 3 _____ 0
 2 _____ 0
 1 _____ 0

Flaws

Size _____
 Speed _____
 Initiative Mod _____
 Defense _____
 Armor _____

Weapons _____ **Dice Mod.** _____

Equipment _____ **Dice Mod.** _____

Attributes 5/4/3 • Skills 11/7/4 (+3 Specialties) • Merits 7 • (Buying the fifth dot in any area costs two points) • Health = Stamina • Size Willpower = Resolve + Composure • Size = 5 for adult humans • Defense = Lowest of Dexterity or Wits • Initiative Mod = Dexterity + Composure • Speed = Strength + Dexterity + 5 • Starting Morality = 7

In the case of the *World of Darkness* games, characters' personalities are depicted partly in terms of 'virtues', 'vices' and 'morality', thus triggering the frame 'moral conflict' as a guiding interpretive meta-concept of the potential stories created during game-play. By doing this, not only does the game implicitly encourage players to create characters with psychological depth - thus creating stories which involve the portrayal of inner conflict - but, because of the nature of the attributes it focuses on, it also influences the type of inner conflict portrayed. It is important to point out, however, that quantification is not necessarily the only (although it is

probably the most common) mode of representation within a TRPG's rules system (Hitchens and Drachen). An example of this is the fact that, while the 'morality' trait is indeed represented numerically, the 'virtue' and 'vice' attributes are expressed solely in qualitative form. As stated in the *WoD* rulebook, "Virtues are not extensions of a character's Morality [sic.]. Rather, they are *ideals* that inform his actions and provide a framework by which he interacts with society [my emphasis]" (92). Still, the representation (statistic or otherwise) of inner traits implies an important hermeneutic inversion regarding most other types of fiction; that is, where in conventional fiction readers may deduce and/or interpret a character's inner feelings and struggles by his actions or - itself a classic example of a framing device - internal monologues *within* the text, in TRPGs, the inner characteristics have been (numerically) fixed to guide and help participants in understanding and, therefore, playing their characters. This, as expressed in the *Vampire Players' Guide* represents a "convenient heuristic if a player isn't entirely certain how his character is likely to respond to a certain situation" (21). Thus, players are expected to interpret in-game situations concerning their characters in terms of a quantified/qualitative representation of inner traits. From this point of view, stat sheets are clearly framing devices, but such that they not only guide interpretations but also determine to a certain extent that which they frame. It is important to note, however, that the translation of a rating into the game through character action is in itself also a matter of interpretation since not all characters with the same rating necessarily reveal it the same way. Take, for example, the trait of 'Humanity' in *Vampire*, a trait that represents "humankind's better, more humane and caring aspect" (ibid. 22). The *Players' Guide* states that:

[M]oral decay does not affect everyone the same way. Not every mortal with a Humanity of 2 [a very low rating] or less is going to become a Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin. Moral bankruptcy wears many faces, and not all of them coincide with the more simplistic expressions with which we may be familiar. (ibid.)

Evidently, the way in which a trait is portrayed depends on how it is to be interpreted within the context of a specific game. Nevertheless, in-game events can also modify the statistics that represent them. Thus, a "good" character might reasonably act in a way that is contrary to his "nature" - the trait only determining the *probability* of a character acting in a certain way -, resulting in a change in its statistic representation on the game level. This change, for its part, might then influence future actions of the same character.⁶⁸ The following passage of the rulebook makes this clear:

[M]ortals have a much greater penchant for change and growth than vampires. As living things, they are free to change their courses at any time. Mortals can "turn over a new leaf," while vampires don't really have that option. To reflect this, mortal characters regain humanity at a different rate than Kindred.⁶⁹ (*Requiem* 23)

⁶⁸ We will see an example of this in our discussion on "mock role-play" in chapter six.

⁶⁹ *Kindred* being the self-designating term used by vampires in White Wolf's *Vampire* setting (cf. *Requiem* 14).

This understood, one may describe the role-playing game session as a constant hermeneutic "loop" between diegetic and game frame.⁷⁰ This is made especially evident in the character creation process; more specifically, in the transition from the character as a statistic entity to a narrative one. Indeed, after constructing the framework of a character, all a player has are "some traits and a general sense of who [his] character might be" (*Players' Guide* 23). However, in order to "flesh it out", the player must be able to "make the leap from seeing the character as a collection of numbers and begin to view him as a full-fledged living, breathing individual" (*ibid.*). This transition is based on a fundamental need for providing inner-diegetic plausibility. In other words, it does not suffice that character stats have been appropriately chosen from a strategic point of view - which would make sense if a TRPG were truly only a world simulation - if they cannot be explained in a logical way from a diegetic one. Therefore, the *Vampire Players' Guide* recommends GMs ('storytellers') to "demand a certain degree of realism from the game [so] that players can *suspend their disbelief* and *immerse* themselves in their characters [my emphasis]" (*ibid.*). Failing to do so, the text warns, will have repercussions on the game as it "will never take on a feel of a shared world and [...] always feel like a bunch of people sitting around a table rolling dice" (*ibid.*).

Setting Information

Setting information constitutes what can be seen as the "substance" of the RPG; it consists of information pertaining

⁷⁰ Markus Montola describes this as the process of "defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world" ("The Invisible Rules" 23). Harviainen, for his part, speaks of the players' "personal hermeneutic circle" ("A Hermeneutical Approach" 75). Thus, the game can be considered a number of texts where "the gaming process itself can be treated as interpretation done by the participants and analyzed as such" (*ibid.*).

to the fictional world that can be selectively used and introduced into the game interface. The exact kind of information can vary widely from game to game and can be expanded according to player interests:

[A] sourcebook for a fantasy role-playing game might describe a particular country in which the game moderator can set the game, including maps of locations such as cities or castles, profiles of some of the most influential people in the imaginary realm and information on the power relations that might impact the PCs who visit this region [...] Sourcebooks like these are designed to give GMs raw material to work with to create their own adventures; they present information that the game moderator uses, disregards, or modifies to suit his own tastes and those of his players. (Nephew 15)

Accordingly, it is important to understand this information as potentially and not proto-diegetic, distinguishing it - in theory at least - from its actual implementation within the story created during play. As Hite observes, "any given published role-playing game setting must support any number of campaigns taking place in any number of versions of the "standard" setting, or even in a wide variety of divergent game worlds" (67). Borgstrom goes even further, arguing that the setting of the actual game is *never* the same as that contained within the published book:

[T]he setting that one group plays in is not the setting that another group plays in. In effect, role-playing games in their static, published form

do not describe a specific fictional world or story. They describe a large multidimensional space of fictional worlds and stories organized by unifying data. (57)

This amounts, for Hite, to the conceptual difference between (potential) setting and (actual) game world where the former is generated by the game designers and, as such is "distinct from the [spaces] constructed by the players either using the designers' material or from whole" (67).⁷¹ Nevertheless, unless disputed or explicitly modified during the game, the setting can be seen as being part of an implicit agreement; an imaginary "common ground" constituting the diegetic level's frame of reference, i.e. the "hypothetical primary framework" (Fine) on which the game is based. Thus, if the discursive interface of the players is to be seen as the artifact of the role-playing game, the setting information can be considered a coding of the frame within which this discourse becomes meaningful. In this respect, setting information complies with the general function of "substitut[ing], simulat[ing], modify[ing], add[ing] to, or [...] represent[ing], those frame constituents and framings which in ordinary discursive exchange are implied in the communicative situation or are agreed upon" (W. Wolf, *Framing Borders* 103). In other words, even when the setting is not described in-game, it is generally taken for granted among the participants of an RPG session. Indeed, players are generally expected to know the

⁷¹ For Hruschovski, this difference can be solved if we consider both setting and game world in terms of an 'internal field of reference.' As he explains, "[i]n defining a work of literature through its Internal Field of Reference, we may consider as one a work of literature which has several versions, or a folktale with a variable text, changing in various performances" [capitalization in original] (237). From this point of view, one could conceive of the sourcebook as a literary "work" of which gameplay - and its particular game world - constitutes one possible version.

basics of the game's rules and setting before engaging in the actual role-playing (or to be filled in on the details as the game progresses). Because of this, even if the particularities of a specific setting do not become part of the session's interface, these elements still frame to a great extent player interpretation of the diegesis. Additionally, it becomes evident that, as with the game-rules, setting is a framing both by inclusion as well as by exclusion since the focus on one aspect against another influences players' expectations concerning the type of narrative that will be created. Thus, extensive geographical information - typical for fantasy games such as *D&D* - would tend to trigger the meta-concept 'exploration' or 'quest', while setting information concerning social inequality or despotism would rather serve as a trigger for 'politics' or 'rebellion.' In *Vampire: the Requiem*, for example, by giving extensive details concerning hierarchies and "business" relationships among *Kindred* (i.e. vampires), the rulebook encourages games that focus on vampiric politics and society. Consequently, an in-game event such as the kidnapping of a *Kindred's* living⁷² relative might be interpreted as being politically motivated, even though the "actual" (diegetic) political details have not been mentioned during the session and therefore do not appear in its interface.

Fictional Semantics

The framing power of setting information becomes especially notorious if we consider Lubomir Doležel's notion of 'fictional semantics.' The latter, as Doležel explains, addresses the "macrostructural conditions of story generation" rather than the story itself (*Heterocosmica* 31). This implies a conceptual shift from the notion of 'story' to that of 'narrative world' (ibid.)

⁷²'Living' being an important distinction in the world of the un-dead.

that allows us to describe setting information in terms of a "narrative macrostructure" (ibid.). As such, it is information that validates or constitutes the "possible world" of the game by establishing its specific global constraints - or "modal restrictions" - and the individuals that are compossible within it (20). In this regard, Doležel distinguishes four main modal systems that affect the generation of narratives in literature;⁷³ namely:

1. The alethic System of "classical" modalities which consists of the concepts of possibility, impossibility and necessity.
2. The deontic System formed by the concepts of permission, prohibition and obligation.
3. The axiological system which is assumed to be constituted by concepts of goodness, badness and indifference.
4. The epistemic System represented by concepts of knowledge, ignorance and belief.

("Narrative Modalities," 7)

In this context, the modalities available in, and foregrounded by, a game's setting are to be understood as essential narrative-structuring features for the development of a TRPG. As Doležel explains:

⁷³ Doležel however, is also clear in emphasizing that "our repertoire of modal systems is open; [so that] it is possible that some other concepts will be interpreted as modalities and will then be included in the repertoire" ("Narrative Modalities," 7).

[Modalities] have a direct impact on acting; they are rudimentary and inescapable constraints, which each person acting in the world faces. If, for example, in a certain world a norm prohibits a certain kind of action, then the acting of all inhabitants of that world is affected. (*Heterocosmica* 113)

From this point of view, setting information can be conceived as being part of the 'formative operation' that "shapes narrative worlds into orders that have the potential to produce (generate) stories" (ibid.). In order to better exemplify this, let us have a look at an excerpt from the independent game, *Dogs in the Vineyard (DitV)* by Vincent Baker:

The setting is a fantasy inspired by pre-statehood Utah, the Desert Territory, in the early-mid 19th century. Picture a landscape of high mountains, icy rivers and cedar woods, falling away westward into scrublands, deserts, buttes and swells. The summer skies are heartbreaking blue, but the winters are long and killing. Picture religious pioneers, fleeing persecution and violence in the East. They're trying to establish a society based on faith and righteousness out in this frontier. They've made the long trek westward but they're still in danger: their towns are small and isolated, vulnerable to attack from without, sin and corruption within. Under pressure, their pride becomes sin, their anger becomes violence, their resentments become hate. Winter and the demons howl...Picture God's Watchdogs, holding the Faith together. (Vincent D. Baker 1-2)

Here, the sourcebook begins by presenting the general time and place of the setting,⁷⁴ thereby establishing the global 'alethic' structure of the fictional world - "concerning what is possible, impossible and necessary" (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 115) - as being analogous to that of the real world. A "natural" fictional world is thus established where natural laws and givens - such as gravity or the linear development of time - are taken to be equally valid within the fictional framework (ibid.). The succinct description of the landscape and the life of the pioneers further determines the particular environmental and social alethic conditions of the setting; in this case, by portraying civilization as isolated and vulnerable. On the other hand, elements such as computers or cyclopean monstrosities are established as being 'non-compossible' within the game's fictional world as they fail to comply with its alethic constraints - 19th century technology in the first place; human biology in the second - that have been established as its premise. While the alethic modalities mentioned above directly affect "natural" world phenomena as well as global causality relationships, time-space parameters and the action capacity of persons within the game world (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 115), the passage also clearly highlights another modal system more closely related to human activities; namely the deontic one, constituted by the "concepts of permission, prohibition and obligation" (Doležel, *Narrative Modalities* 7). This is made explicit by the focus on "religious pioneers" seeking "to establish a society based on faith and righteousness" and further underlined by the notion of "God's Watchdogs" and their mission of "holding the faith together." Evidently the deontic modal system will have a central role in the setting and playing

⁷⁴ In this case we might want to speak of a "limited" or "partial" fictional world in the sense that the setting does not present a complete world view, but rather a very specific section of it.

of *DitV* and the overall narrative core can be stipulated as revolving around such notions as religious and moral laws. The above exemplifies how, by foregrounding certain modal systems instead of others, TRPG sourcebooks allow the creation of homogeneous fictional worlds that are the core for "atomic" stories (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 114-115). In other words, setting information not only influences the content of the fictional world, but also its narrative structure by creating a potential for narrative conflict. This is important since, as Doležel points out, conflict is key to structuring interaction in narratives because it, "aris[es] in a certain agential constellation, under specific motivational pressures and following distinct stages" (ibid. 107). It is the plasticity of conflict, he adds, "that makes it a perennial feature of fictional stories" (ibid.).⁷⁵ In view of the aforementioned, setting information has the important framing function of (pre-)structuring the possibilities for narrative conflict in the game while allowing for the development of additional framings - for example the GM's preparation of plot - as well as the actual game events. This function is key in making it possible for game designers to generate "vast" narrative spaces in the sense of them allowing for extensive, open-ended storytelling involving multiple players (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person 2*). As Hite explains,

[a]lthough the players (including, or especially, the game master) determine the narrative of the individual campaign, the designers often create its game world, or at least the broad outlines thereof. This creation, with a few exceptions, is designed

⁷⁵ For a thorough discussion on how game-designers may exploit characters' potential for conflict to structure gameplay, see the analysis of Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* in chapter seven.

to support multiple campaigns. It is thus this artifact, the designer's creation, that is the most dependably "vast" of a role-playing game's narrative elements. (67)

We will be discussing in more detail the notion of vast narratives as well as the setting's framing functions in the following chapters. For now, however, let us have a look at another general aspect of sourcebook framing.

(Meta)Framings and Paratexts

Among the different elements of the rulebook, it is its own framing devices which present the most interesting features concerning the framing of the diegesis. Indeed, considered as an artifact in its own right, the rulebook, as any other printed text, features a variety of framing elements such as a "front and back cover, which usually displays its title and the names of its designer and publisher" (Nephew 21). However, as we will see, these texts not only serve to stabilize the meaning and guide the interpretation of the information contained within *the rulebook* but, in most cases, they are directly related to the *diegetic level* of the game. Thus, they become framings of the diegesis, creating expectations concerning the stories that may be told during play. Furthermore, since the audience is not to be distinguished from the performers of a TRPG, the influence of these framing devices extends itself through player expectations towards the construction of the narrative, making them decisive in shaping the stories that emerge during the game session. Considering the fact that one of the main functions of framings is to "mark an artifact as such and distinguish it from its surroundings by indicating the special rules (frames) that apply in its reception" (Wolf, *Framing Borders* 26), these

framing devices can be said to have a *double function* by marking *two artifacts*: the rulebook proper and the textual interface produced during play.

The most evident examples of framing in rulebooks are those denominated paratexts in the narrower sense, such as titles, prologues, epilogues, illustrations, and so on. More specifically, these elements correspond to what Genette has deemed 'peritexts' - texts at the borders of a work - as opposed to 'epitexts' - those texts which are materially removed from the work in question. Among these framings, those which exist in initial position tend to have greater relevance in their influence upon reader expectations and interpretation of a text. As Wolf has pointed out, it is "[t]raditionally ... at the beginning of a text, and particularly in the paratexts as its threshold, that important frames of reference are signaled and expectations are created" ("Framing Fiction" 111). Evidently, because of their practically invariable position at the beginning of a text, titles are one of the primary mediators between work and reader. As such, they are one of the main instances of influence upon a text's reception. Moreover, titles of role-playing game rulebooks are interesting cases of initial paratexts, because they do more than just referring to the content of the book that they frame. Indeed, if we consider games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Vampire* or *Paranoia* - a game that situates players in a "big brother" society where they must denounce other players in order to avoid being denounced themselves -, it becomes evident that their titles say less about the books as artifacts than about the type of stories that can be told with them. As Wallis has observed,

[s]tory structure can also come from the game's setting and the assumptions that people take from a game's components and packaging. If you buy a game

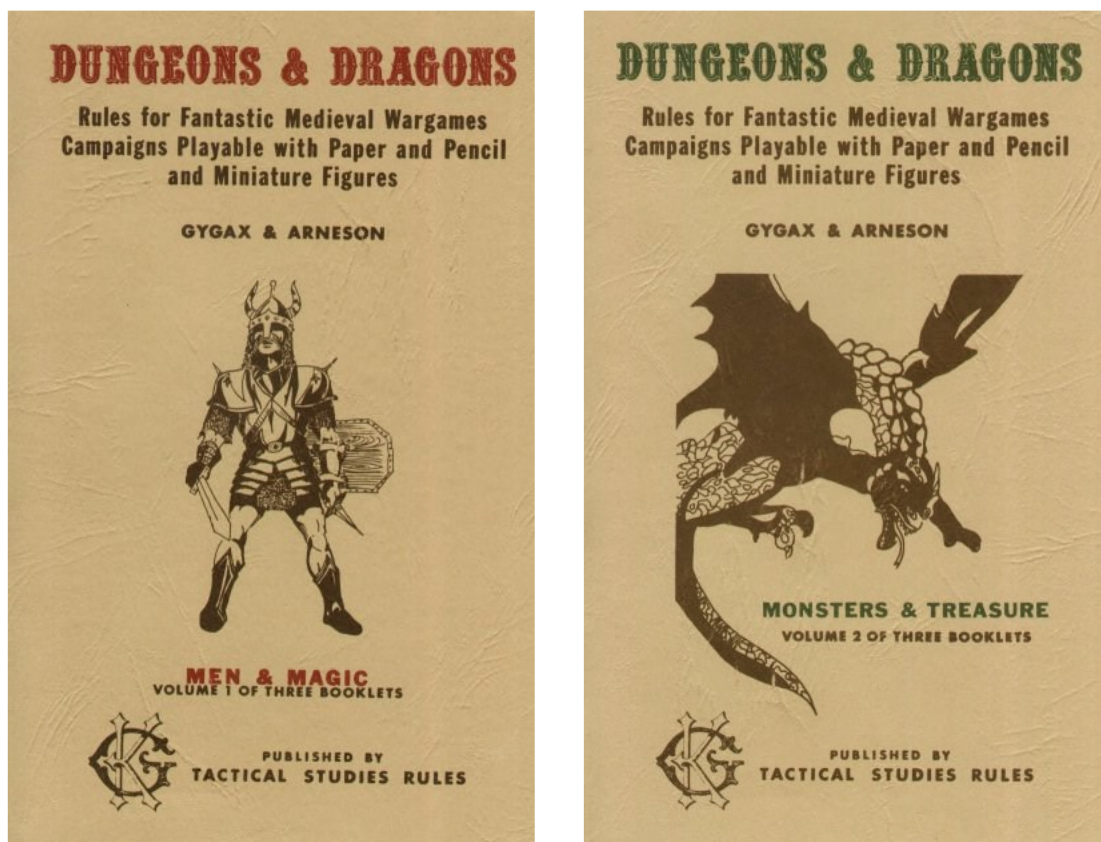
called "Kill the Dragon," you assume that there will be a dragon and to win you must kill it, and that is the direction your play will take. (77)

This can be described in terms of the *double function* of the text's framing devices explained previously, as they mark both the artifactuality of the rulebook as well as that of the potential interface/diegesis created by the players.

The Cover

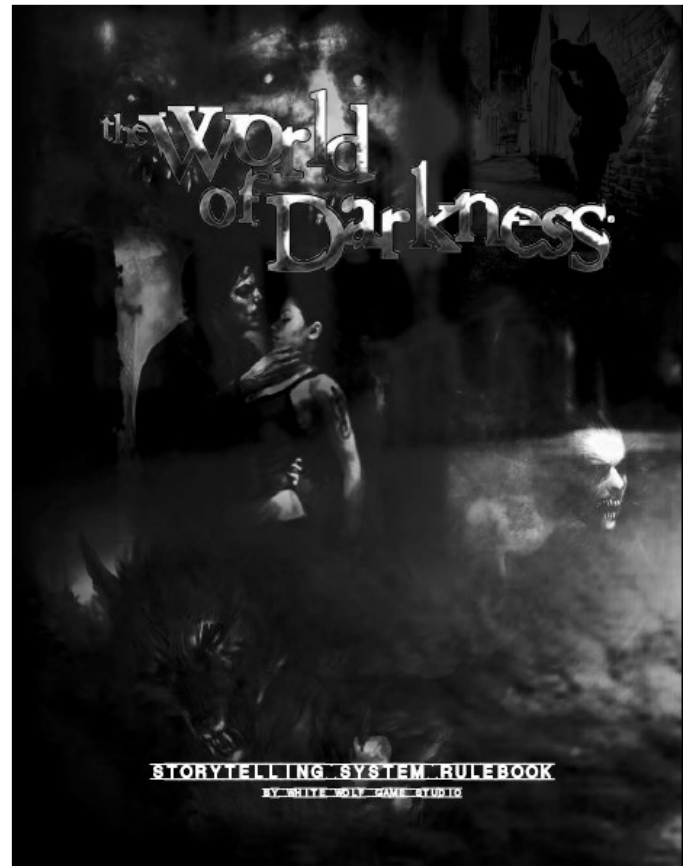
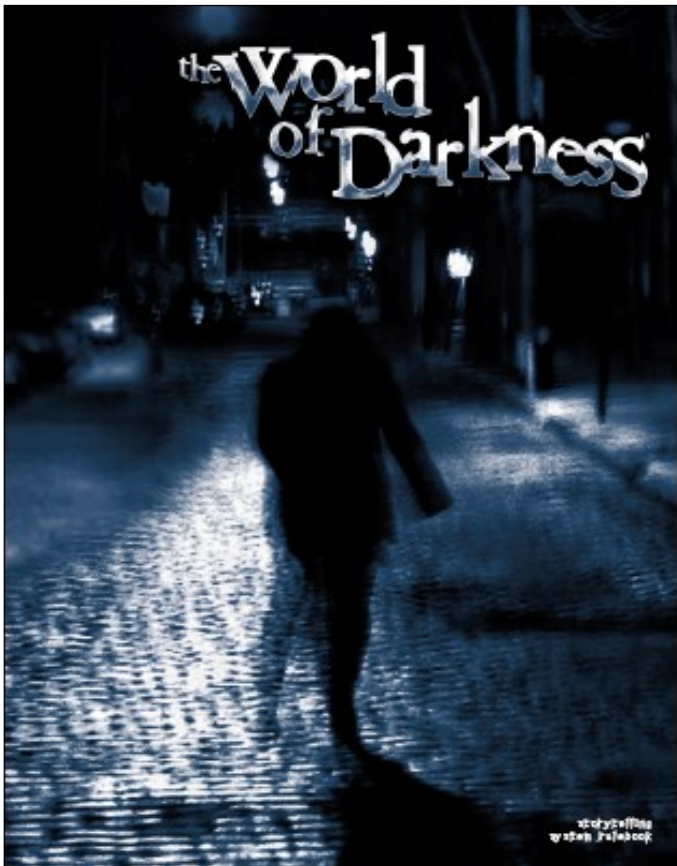
Rulebook covers are generally good examples of how different paratextual elements may be combined to create what can be seen as a unified, plurimedial framing device.

Figure 7 *Dungeons and Dragons* Covers (1974)



Thus, although we can generally deconstruct them into a verbal, a typographical and a pictorial component, we must keep in mind that they function as a framing unity. Furthermore, by observing the simplicity of the original cover of the *D&D* game from 1974 (Figure 7), it becomes evident that the aforementioned "double use" of framing devices was notoriously less prominent in early TRPGs. Apart from the rulebook's title and illustration, it is clear that the subtitle refers primarily to the strategic nature of the information contained within the text itself rather than its possibilities of constructing an actual story within the fictional world. Thus, these elements trigger the frame 'game' rather than 'narrative' (i.e. 'fiction') as the governing frame of the TRPG session. This may be contrasted with Figure 8, which shows the front and inlay covers of the *World of Darkness* core-rulebook. Although the title in itself is still relatively generic, it already conveys an ominous feeling, a certain uneasiness that relies heavily on the general association that is made between darkness and the fear of the unknown; of that which may not be seen. Were it on its own, however, the title would still leave enough space open to speculation: What kind of world is meant? What kind of darkness? Indeed, the "world of darkness" of the title could still point toward any number of settings, with "darkness" referring to, for example, evil (i.e. "dark") forces, the "dark ages" of a particular fictional world, or a particular "dark lord." However, the title could also be related to an outer space setting or to a setting where the characters are all blind. Clearly, taken on its own the title is highly indeterminate. In this respect, although the cover illustration might appear at first glance to be a rather "literal" translation, so to speak, of the title, it is actually an essential complementary element that expands the initial, verbally established, premise.

Figure 8 *World of Darkness* (2004): Front (L) and Inlay Cover (R)



Seen from behind, a solitary human figure is shown walking down a dim lit street at night. The picture is altogether full of dark shadows, with the lighter areas being merely a slight hue of blue or gray. Nevertheless, the image is actually less redundant than it seems. First of all, the "world" of the title is now portrayed as a familiar one, not a valley full of 'orcs' or a spaceship adrift in the vast darkness of the cosmos, but an alleyway that does not appear to differ greatly from those in the real world. Additionally, there seems to be a concretization of the slight uneasiness implicit in the title, now heightened and transformed into definite suspense by the almost topical motif of the lone figure in the dark alleyway. At the same time, there seems to be the implication that this

now impending menace is not of a natural kind - not the "junkies" around the corner - but something more mysterious and unknown. This feeling is conveyed by the blurred and "shaky" nature of the image which resembles a badly taken picture. Within it, the objects appear to lack definite borders, giving almost the impression of "seeing double." It is precisely this idea that is further reinforced by the typographical form of the title itself, whose letters appear to be shifted and slightly displaced. Indeed, what appears at first almost like a printing mistake is yet another indicator of the "otherness" of the "world" presented by the game, giving the idea of an underlying, "hidden" reality.

Figure 9 WoD Title Graphic



Considering the above mentioned, the inlay cover (Figure 8 R) is to be seen as an extension of the front cover, answering but also further developing the expectations generated by the latter. First of all, by recurring in the same position and form, the title reinforces the idea of unity between the previous illustration and this one.⁷⁶ In other words, because it has not

⁷⁶ A similar framing strategy has been described by Roy Sommer in the context of film analysis:

Both the design of, and the information conveyed by, the titles and credits themselves make a significant contribution to the framing process. For instance, paratextual devices such as the use of distinctive fonts in the title sequence of *Star Wars: Episode III*

been altered, the title calls our attention to the changes in the picture. As we can observe, the slight bluish hue of the previous image has been reduced to black and shades of grey. This fact may be correlated with the absence of any source of light - in contrast to the cover where, despite the darkness, there were still streetlamps in the background. The solitary human figure, for its part, has now been replaced by several explicitly or implicitly non-human ones: the outright menacing fanged creatures at the lower left and right, both of whom recall the idea of werewolves; towards the middle left side, a young girl is being embraced by a man who, whether because of the slightly claw-like nature of his fingers, or the mere predatory tension of the pose, calls forth the idea of a vampire; to the upper left, appearing from behind the title, there is a pale shape which resembles a face with glowing eyes - a ghost, perhaps?; a haunted spirit?. Again, boundaries here are not clearly cut and the figures, as well as their background, appear only in parts, as if covered by, or emerging from a surrounding fog. It is only upon closer examination that one may spot the "odd man out" in the upper right corner of the picture (Figure 10). Contrasting with the rest of the illustration, this image displays a clearly contoured depiction of a person - or rather his shadow - in a solitary alleyway. This image necessarily evokes the figure on the cover page and by doing so produces questions, semantic blanks that may be filled during the game: "Is he afraid? Is this what is awaiting him? Will he become - or is he already - one of 'them'?" In a way then, the image represents a window between (front and inlay) covers and, therefore, between the "worlds" of the game.

create continuity between this episode and the other movies of the saga (392).

Figure 10 WoD Inlay Cover Detail



Considering what has been discussed above, these initial framing devices can be said to foreshadow the whole concept of the *World of Darkness* setting in a nutshell. Indeed, later on in the rulebook we find a passage that closely resembles our interpretation of the cover:

Characters in the World of Darkness can blur the line between reality and the occult. Indeed, that's what it's all about. Exploring a world of mystery that tries to keep itself hidden. A world that punishes those who look too deep. But those who refuse to look suffer even worse. They're rocked on seas of conspiracies of which they go unaware. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. There are no easy answers, and knowing is not half the battle. It's only the first shot in a long, grinding war against the shadows. (*WoD* 23)

This considered, the cover may be described as an "anticipatory illustration" (Wandhoff 210) that has the function of "provid[ing] the narrative text with a moralizing maxim or theme that is encapsulated in a picture and put before the reader's inner eye before the narrative proper starts" (212). Evidently, the cover of the example - understood as a composite, plurimedial paratext including verbal, typographical and pictorial components - is of central importance to the interpretation of the information contained in the text that follows it. This fact, as Wandhoff has observed is greatly due to the general convention of "modern and postmodern readers [...] to learn the essentials of a book by looking at its cover information" (223). Moreover, the cover triggers important frames of reference, creating expectations as to the type of narrative that can be developed during the game. As a matter of fact, one is under the impression that this framing alone is enough to engender the ideas to construct a story. As Genette already pointed out, "a title hit upon all of a sudden, and sometimes well before the subject of the book is [...] like an instigator: once the title is there, the only thing left to produce is a text that justifies it" (*Paratexts* 67).

Another element of the *WoD* cover page(s) which should not go unattended is the caption: "Storytelling System Rulebook" which appears in the lower area of both illustrations. Clearly, the indication is a framing to the reading of the rulebook itself signaling that "the content herein is of fictional nature." This function is later emphasized by a disclaimer⁷⁷ which appears within the text:

⁷⁷ Almost since their very beginning, role-playing games have been controversial in the eyes of public opinion. In this respect, the role-playing industry became the focus of attacks from conservatives during the eighties when the disappearance and alleged suicide of a teenager was connected to his role-playing hobby. Consequently, it was argued that the games had pernicious psychological effects on those involved in them. However, different studies have actually demonstrated the contrary, pointing out that role-playing games help develop social as well as linguistic skills

This book uses the supernatural for settings, characters and themes. All mystical and supernatural elements are fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. This book contains mature content. Reader discretion is advised. (WoD 10)

Thus, the caption serves to trigger two major frames - i.e. meta-concepts - within which both the rulebook as well as the potential diegesis are to be understood: that of 'game' and that of 'fiction.' Paradoxically, by doing so, it simultaneously creates a space for suspension of disbelief by establishing that the diegetic level is based on "a set of transformation rules that indicates what is to be treated as real and how it is to be treated as real within the make-believe framework" (Fine 183). In other words, the denomination of a text as "role-playing game rulebook" implies the agreement "to 'bracket' the world outside the game" during play (ibid.). Indeed, more than signaling its game character, the indication on a printed text as "role-playing game" may be seen as a more complex version of the original framing used in child's play (i.e. "let's make believe"). Moreover, the issue of the size of the font - notoriously small in the first cover; slightly larger in the inlay - is to be noted as well since it represents the conscious decision to foreground, in the first place, the atmosphere and tension displayed in the cover while de-emphasizing the ludic/fictional nature of the text. Obviously, this may be seen as a strategy intended to augment the suspense created by the cover, but also a framing that indicates that, while the *World*

while also promoting players' creative abilities (cf. Fine; Punday; Nephew; Schick).

of Darkness is a game, it is a game to be taken seriously.⁷⁸ This idea might also explain the decision to denominate the text a "storytelling system rulebook" rather than a role-playing game. At the same time, this subtitle also underscores the focus of the game in producing interesting stories rather than just fun, "escapist" adventures.

Prologues, Epilogues and Frame/Embedded Narratives:

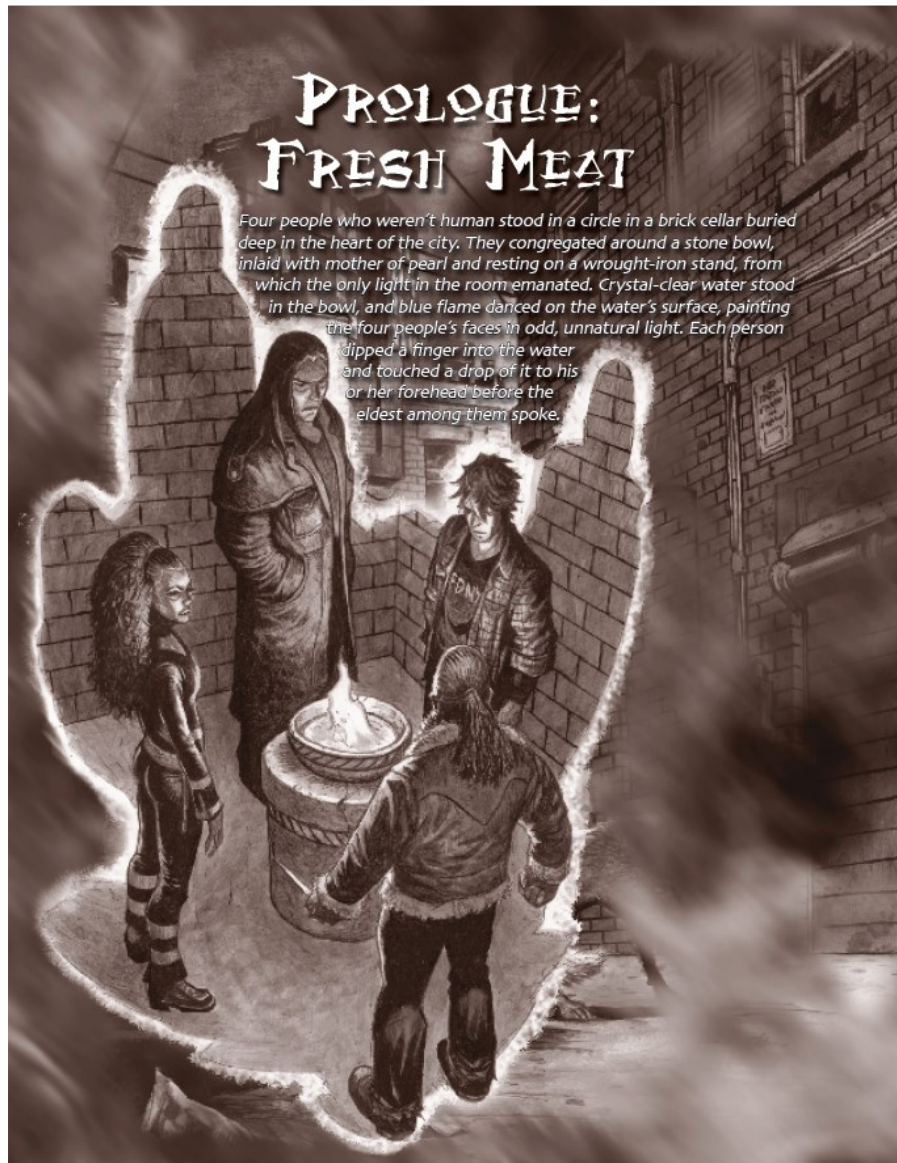
Because of the explicit, salient nature that makes them clearly discernible from the rest of the text,⁷⁹ prologues, epilogues and "frame" or "embedded" narratives⁸⁰ offer us with further examples of paratexts within the rulebook. As has been previously mentioned, there is a notorious prominence of such elements in storytelling-based role-playing games. Indeed, all of White Wolf's published games begin with a prologue consisting of a short narrative text that provides an atmospheric introduction into the fictional setting of the specific game. In most cases, such as *Werewolf: The Forsaken (WwF)*, *Vampire: The Requiem (VtR)* and *Mage: The Awakening (MtA)*, the narrative is continued as an epilogue in the last pages of the book. For example, in *WwF*, the reader is presented at the beginning with a character's (Mark) first transformation into a werewolf and the mysterious circumstances that surround it (Figure 11).

⁷⁸ In fact, the introduction to the players' guide to *Vampire* begins with the following quote by MC. Escher in its heading - indeed, yet another paratext! : "My work is a game, a very serious game" (qtd. in *Vampire Players' Guide* 7).

⁷⁹ This explicitness is given by typographical, stylistic and spatial differences; as well as by the fact that these texts are generally surrounded by, or appear within, accompanying illustrations.

⁸⁰ One must distinguish how both "framing" as well as "embedded" are to be understood: Indeed, these texts may be either embedded in, or framing, the rulebook as a text, however, this function may shift concerning the diegesis. In the latter case it is probably more accurate to consider these texts in general as framing narratives rather than embedded ones.

Figure 11 *Werewolf the Forsaken* (2005) Prologue



In the epilogue (Figure 12), after recovering consciousness in an alleyway, Mark is approached by a group of strangers - a "pack" of other werewolves, in fact - who offer to give him answers to his new condition:

A hard, bitter smile creased Russell's face, and he refused to back off. "First, I thought we'd answer

some of your questions for you, son. Tell you a little about what you are and what it means."

"What I've become."

"No, what you are," Russell said. "After that, there's people you have to meet and some hard tests you'll have to pass. Then your life can finally get started and you can try to put it to some good use."

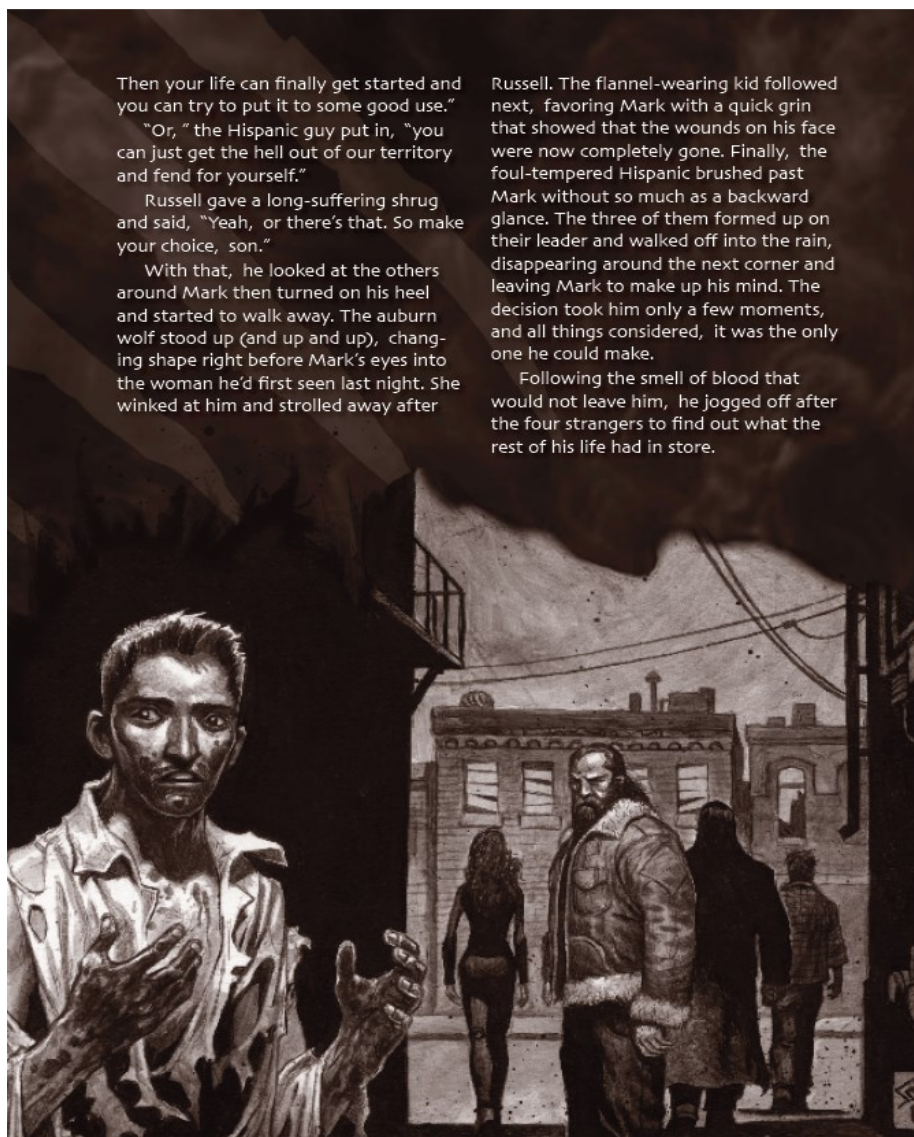
"Or," the Hispanic guy put in, "you can just get the hell out of our territory and fend for yourself."

(312, 313)

Evidently, the use of the framing narrative here creates a bridge between levels of meaning since the player is naturally led to identify with the newborn Werewolf character, Mark. Thus, the framing allows a trespassing to a certain extent of the borders between "worlds" and the invitation to Mark to "learn what [he is] and what it [all] means", becomes a beckoning to the players to take his place and investigate the setting by playing out their own adventures. Apart from such cases of prologues/epilogues, the use of "embedded" narratives in the *WoD* core-rulebook is especially notorious. In fact, within the first 30 pages of the book, there is little mention of players, rules or characters. Instead, and after the prologue proper, the reader is presented with a number of short, fragmentary narratives intercalated with considerations on the basics of storytelling. In general terms, these narratives serve a similar function to that of frame stories in literary texts (see W. Wolf "Frame Stories"). However, because of the fact that the framed story - the one produced during play - is clearly the dominant text during a TRPG session, the function of these texts can be described in terms of what Wolf has called '*mise en cadre*':

In this case, rather than shed light through revelatory similarities in a 'bottom up' process - as in *mises en abyme* - the framing implicitly sheds light on the framed text in a 'top down' process. As narratology has failed to provide a separate term for this reversal of *mise en abyme*, I have proposed [...] to baptize it '*mise en cadre*' (ibid. 198)

Figure 12 *Werewolf the Forsaken Epilogue*



Furthermore, these stories, although mostly fragmentary and unrelated, not only serve the general function of establishing the mood and genre of the game - both of which, as we will see, are explicitly stated in *White Wolf’s* games - but also exemplify

how these frames can be translated into narratives, again influencing player expectations.

(Intra)textual, Implicit Framings

Although they are by far not as salient as the previous examples, intra-textual⁸¹ framings also play a central role in the interpretation of the content of the rulebook. Moreover, because they are neither statistic, nor setting information in the proper sense, these elements clearly serve a different function than that of structurally (rules) or materially (setting information) grounding the game. Indeed, these framing devices influence how meaning is to be ascribed *within* the fictional world. While the sourcebook provides a system of rules and information concerning elements, creatures and phenomena of a fictional setting, this data still portrays a fictional environment which is, to a great extent, without meaning. As Fine has observed, since the events of the role-playing game take place within a fictional 'world,' "[t]he creation of the broad outlines of a fantastic setting is not sufficient to set the stage for a game" (76). Because of this, it becomes necessary to also "establish a world view that directs the game action and represents the implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates" (ibid.). This, precisely, is the main function of rulebooks' intra-textual framings. In the following example, we may observe how setting information is intertwined with intra-textual framing in order to influence the interpretation of the diegetic reality from "within":

⁸¹ Again, intra-textual refers in this case to the fact that these framing devices occur *within the rulebook's main text*, as opposed to the previous examples such as the cover, prologues and epilogues which are on its borders. As in previous cases of embedded/framing narratives, however, it remains difficult to determine whether these framings may be considered intra- or extra-textual in relation to the session's diegesis itself. Nevertheless, it would make sense to consider them as analogous examples of the framing possibilities players have while playing.

The Kindred gain most of their power and strength not from their own innate abilities, but from the influence they wield in the mortal world. [...] *Why risk one's own potentially eternal existence, miserable as it might be at times, when one can manipulate pawns into taking those risks instead?* [my emphasis] (*Requiem* 26)

Clearly, there are two types of discourse available in this paragraph. On the one hand, the first half of it consists of the stating of information from an uninvolved point of view. However, what immediately follows is a sentence that portrays what can be interpreted as the thoughts of a vampire *within* the fictional world. In narratological terms we could describe this as a transition of the "narrative"⁸² instance from an extra-, heterodiegetic perspective to an apparently intra-, homodiegetic one. By creating the illusion of observing the fictional world from within, this transition frames the diegetic world, thus adding new structures of meaning to it. A similar case of intra-textual framing can be observed in the next example where, after elaborating on the main characteristics concerning the vampire clan of the *Nosferatu* - a central aspect of which is the fact that they are generally repulsive, either because of their appearance, their smell, or both -, the text goes on to add information concerning the way in which these vampires relate to other *Kindred*. If it were indeed only setting information (i.e. data) that was being conveyed, it would suffice to mention the fact that other clans generally have little to do with *Nosferatu* vampires. However, this information is again

⁸² This, of course is not a narrative instance in the proper sense, as there is no actual narration of events, but rather a conveying of information.

intertwined with the portrayal of intra-diegetic systems of value and meaning.

If they had their druthers, most other clans would prefer never to associate with the Nosferatu at all, yet the Haunts' [i.e. the Nosferatus'] inarguable talents and brute force make them too dangerous to ignore. So other Kindred offer them a tense hospitality, hide their unease behind wary diplomacies and pray that the Nosferatu leave as soon as possible. (*Players' Guide* 111)

Not only does this passage express the fact that *Nosferatu* are generally disliked, but it further expands its significance by portraying the attitude other Vampires have toward them and the circumstances under which *Kindred* might seek *Nosferatu* assistance. As a result, it reinforces overarching themes (frames) of the game such as 'deceit' and 'conspiracy.'

Genre, Theme and Mood

Genre, theme and mood indications are among the most important frames for the collaborative construction of narrations during role-playing game sessions. Clearly, the triggering of specific genre frames does not affect the reading of the rulebook - which, in itself, has no literary genre; or rather, whose "genre" is precisely that of being a 'rulebook' - as much as it produces expectations as to the story possibilities of the game. As a consequence, players are guided into creating narratives which are conceptually and aesthetically more unified as they follow general literary genre conventions. Although these genre frames can be implicitly triggered - for example by the inclusion of embedded/framing narratives or intra-textual framings mentioned

above - the games published by White Wolf generally contain an explicit stating of these frames. For example, the *WoD* core-rulebook, which comprises the basic, common setting and rule information for most of the company's other games, is defined as a "horror game" (*WoD* 22-23). Thus, by invoking the frame of 'horror fiction' the rulebook invites players to include motifs, tropes and *topoi* typical of this genre into their campaigns. The same can be said concerning its mood ("dread") and theme ("dark mystery"). As for the latter, the rulebook states:

While each story has its own central theme, the looming theme behind them all explores the dramatic ramifications of a world of supernatural secrets. Storytellers and players alike should be mindful of this theme when they feel the need to return to the roots of the game. (ibid. 23)

In the case of *Vampire: The Requiem*, the genre ("modern gothic storytelling game") proves to be important not only for the main theme ("morality") of the game, but also for the aesthetic associated with it:

What you hold in your hands is a Modern Gothic Storytelling game, a roleplaying game that allows you to build chronicles that explore morality through the metaphor of vampirism. In *Vampire*, you "play the monster," and what you do as that monster both makes for an interesting story and might even teach you a little about your own values and those of your fellows [...] The setting of *Vampire* borrows greatly from gothic literature, not the smallest amount of which comes from the "set dressing" of the

movement. Key to the literary gothic tradition are the ideas of barbarism, corruption and medieval imagery. (14)

Evidently frames such as genre and theme serve as guiding meta-concepts within which the TRPG narratives develop. Yet, as Hite has pointed out, “[t]he types of stories that the designers wish to enable also constrain the setting” (71). Their central importance is highlighted by the fact that they are explicitly triggered within the main text of the rulebook. However, many of the other framings already mentioned serve to reinforce these frames. In this sense, one can speak of the rulebook as a system of framings that are constructed on the basis of core frames which underlie the superficial form of the text. In order to better understand this, it might be useful to consider Mackay’s description of the role-playing game in terms of performance art.

From Expectations to Performance: The Rulebook as Dramatic Text

Dragons don’t breathe fire because they’ve got asbestos lungs – they breathe fire because everyone knows that’s what dragons do. – Terry Pratchett, *The Science of Discworld*

In his book *The Fantasy RPG*, Daniel Mackay adapts Richard Schechner’s model for performative arts and applies it to the TRPG medium, arguing that, structurally, the latter may be seen as analogous to theater. Contrary to the models presented by Alan Fine and Harviainen – which contemplate the medium from “outside inwards” – Mackay’s approach has more of a “building-block” quality, as it describes a movement “from inside out”;

that is, a "structuring up" from written text to performance. According to Schechner's terminology, the text of a performance may be deconstructed into four basic layers: drama, script, theater and performance. Generally speaking, the **drama** is to be understood as a - written or otherwise - fixed text which underlies any performance. As such, it is constituted by a "tight verbal narrative [which] allows for little improvisation [and] exists as a code independent of any individual transmitter" (Schechner, qtd. in Mackay 49). The **script**, on the other hand, may be described as an adaptation of the drama, an adaptation which "can be either tight or loose" (ibid.) but that is still prior to the actual performance of the work. The **theater** for its part can be seen as the actual staging of the script, the "visible/sonic set of events [which constitute] the visible aspect of the script" (ibid.). As such, Schechner calls it "the exterior topography of an interior map" (ibid.). Understood in this manner, the performance is effectively determined by the script, being thus intimately linked and dependent on it. Finally, the **performance** is the level from which the audience - "the dominant element of any performance" - observes the events unfolding onstage. As such it is the "widest possible circle of events condensing around theater" (ibid.). According to Mackay a TRPG may be described in similar terms. Consequently, he argues that the role-playing game rulebook - the "code independent of any individual transmitter" - is analogous to the "tight, verbal narrative" of dramaturgical theater (49). However, because of the fact that there is no actual narrative in a role-playing game before the performance, the 'drama' would comprise only the rules and setting provided by these texts:

Whereas the drama of Schechner's model is both the independent code and the verbal narrative, the drama of the role-playing game performance is the

published game system and the imaginary-entertainment environment comprising the rules - both of which exist as codes independent of the individual players. (50)

As for the script, Mackay describes it as

the sum of the game master's preparations for each episode coupled with the players' hopes, plans, concerns, and ambitions for their characters. *These are prescribed by a kind of role-playing poetics: the dictates and requirements of the game system and the imaginary-entertainment environment* [my emphasis]. (51)

Indeed, there is a close relationship between a traditional dramatic text and a role-playing game sourcebook. In both cases we have verbally encoded information which is written for the purpose of generating a text in another medium. In the case of drama, it is the theater performance and in TRPGs, the creation of the diegetic interface. Nevertheless, Mackay's reference to a "prescriptive poetics" as well as the notion of "dictates and requirements" of the game system are somewhat overstressed since it fails to reflect the dynamic relation between the performance and its "base," the sourcebook. As a matter of fact, one of the most distinctive characteristics of role-playing games resides precisely in the notion that rules and setting may be modified if they hinder the goals of the game; goals that are ultimately established by the specific gaming group.⁸³ Indeed, this is an

⁸³ We will address this issue in more detail in chapter six when we discuss players' different sources of pleasure and motivations as "creative agendas."

idea that lies at the base of these games, a fact that is made clear even within the original edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*:

These rules [...] cover the major aspects of fantasy campaigns but still remain flexible. As with any other set of miniatures rules they are guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign. They provide the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity. (5)

However, what becomes evident from Mackay's approach is the fact that it is mostly player expectations that constitute the 'script' of the TRPG. At the same time, due to the fact that the script is a central structuring instance of the game interface, it is ultimately player expectations that serve to inform the resulting diegesis. In this sense, we may consider the script of a role-playing game as being analogous to Harviainen's game meta-level understood as the "level of the structure of the game [...] [where] choices take on narrative qualities inspired by fabula and ethical views become relativist, adaptive to the needs of the game" (74). Harviainen further adds that this is where "[p]re-understanding about the game's style and conventions becomes manifest, and is openly discussed" (ibid.). Player expectations, as has been pointed out, are directly influenced or "triggered" by framings contained in the rulebooks. However, because of the fact that PC actions may also have an impact on these framings, the diegesis cannot be described merely in terms of an "exterior topography of an inner map." Hence, the process by which stories develop during the game is more the result of an interpretive feedback "loop" or 'hermeneutic spiral' between the diegesis and the rulebook than

one of "submission" of the former to the explicit rules and setting givens of the latter. In this respect, what Nephew states concerning the GM is also true - albeit with consideration to their lesser degree of influence - for the rest of the players:

Running a game session involves the same decisions about plot, characterization, pacing, atmosphere, and imagery that creators of other narrative forms use. The GM *interprets published game material and presents his own version of it* to his players, *adapting that material as needed to fit into his campaign world smoothly* [my emphasis]. (168)

Thus, TRPG rulebooks may be seen as dramatic texts which for the most part replace story and plot elements with framings that guide - but do not prescribe - participants in the creation of a story. Perhaps the main difference then, between the staging of a play and the performance during a TRPG session is that in the first case there is still a clear sender - receiver separation, while in the second, both instances formally merge. Thus, whereas in the play the fulfillment of audience expectations is subsidiary to the text, participants in TRPGs can actively generate and seek the fulfillment of their own expectations or those of their fellow players.

Potential Narratives and Self-fulfilling Prophecies

In view of the aforementioned, perhaps the best way to describe TRPG rulebooks would be as a *system of framings*. However, because of the fact that the diegesis only emerges during the actual playing of the game, the framings provided in the rulebook are to be understood as surrounding a diegetic void. This void, however, is not a completely abstract nothingness but, because

framing devices are conveyors of meaning, it becomes what in Iserian terms is called a *Leerstelle* or semantic blank. (In other words, a semantic blank can only exist within an established system of meaning; only within it may a semantic vacuum be "filled.") As Henry has stated, "the existence of these fictional worlds, written without their stories, is an invitation for stories to happen" (7). Therefore, rulebooks are texts that enable the visualization of potential diegeses. One could say then, that the rulebook is also an artifact that produces an aesthetic object; the object being the reader's visualization of *possible* rather than *actual* stories. Indeed, Kurt Wiegel's video reviews of TRPGs on the internet are a good example of this. Wiegel, who is an experienced game-master, discusses in short video clips different role-playing games, commenting on their playability and story possibilities. However, in many of these cases, Wiegel's commentary is done without any actual playing experience of the game. Indeed, as he concludes in one of his reviews: "I hope I can play this one day, either with my current group or with a group I'll have in the future" (Game Geeks #117 *Houses of the Blooded*). Doubtlessly, this type of commentary would be inconceivable in any other medium as it would appear nonsensical to comment on a book one has not read, a film one has not seen, or a game one has not played. With role-playing games, this is possible because rulebooks, in preceding narrative action, are texts that have the main function of triggering player's horizon of expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*). When reading it, a player/GM is led to visualize latent narrative possibilities. As a result, it is not uncommon for players to purchase rulebooks for different games, not so much with the objective of playing them, but rather as a mode of gathering ideas - be it rules, setting or storylines - for campaigns already running in another game system. In this respect, it is important to distinguish rulebooks from proto-diegetic phenomena such as the draft of a

novel. In this last case there will regularly be a single text (i.e. one story) as an outcome, whereas a TRPG sourcebook may inform an indefinite number of narrations. Thus, one could argue that it is to be understood as an incomplete 'act of fictionalizing' (Iser).⁸⁴ Here, indeed, the imaginary has been fixed by giving it form as setting information. In fact, it has been given an additional aspect of "reality" by the introduction of rules for its transformation into statistically determined elements. However, the rulebook in itself is still not a single complete story and is, as yet, not completely "realized" (*realisiert*). Indeed, "the creation of world, character, and story become "real" when experienced during the course of a game session, rather than on the reading of the game rulebook itself" (Nephew 39). Thus, the role-playing game rulebook is a text still imbued by the possibilities of the imaginary. It is only during game play that this fictionalizing act is completed. As Borgstrom has observed, "[b]efore the game begins there is a large space of possible stories defined by the initial premise. During the process of gaming the players progressively reduce the space of possible stories down to a single story - one set of things "happened," while all other sets did not" (58). Making a similar observation in their analysis of digital games, Bode, Dietrich, and Kranhold speak of 'future narratives' to describe texts that "preserve and contain what can be regarded as defining features of future time, namely that it is yet undecided, open,

⁸⁴ In *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*, Wolfgang Iser establishes the necessity of reformulating the traditional notion of reality and fiction as a binary system of opposed elements by adding the concept of the imaginary. Thus, he proposes a ternary system, arguing that all fictional texts are based on the triadic relationship between the spheres of the real, the fictive and the imaginary. Because of the fact that signs, which are used to refer to real elements or concepts - understood as those of the empiric, extra-textual world -, lose their original pragmatic determination in the fictional text, while the imaginary - understood by Iser as an experience which is "diffus, formlos, unfixiert und ohne Objektreferenz" (20) - is given substance and form by the text, the relationship between these spheres is one of 'boundary crossing.' This crossing of boundaries occurs, according to Iser, by a conscious and intentional 'fictionalizing act' (*Akt des Fingierens*).

and multiple, and that it has not yet crystallized into actuality" (1). From this point of view, while TRPGs' reliance on a fixed text make them in many aspects analogous to drama, the relationship between the text of the rulebook - the game's 'drama' - and the actual performance during gameplay is much more one of interpretation than that of traditional theater. Furthermore, because of the fact that the information contained in the rulebook itself may be modified according to in-game events, one can speak of a dynamic relationship between the TRPG's 'drama' and its 'performance.' Most importantly, however, is the fact that the spectators of a role-playing game are at the same time its 'actors' and 'directors.' For this reason, the expectations triggered by rulebook's framing devices directly influence the formation of the story. Thus, when playing a game of 'gothic horror,' it is the players themselves that are responsible for making such elements actually appear in the game. In a sense then, framings in role-playing games are analogous to self-fulfilling prophecies. Indeed, there is no actual 'horror' *within* the rulebook of the *World of Darkness* but, because its framings trigger this specific genre frame, the players, as well as the GM, will be inclined to produce such a text. In this respect, Wallis has pointed out that "all stories must follow the rules of their genre and of storytelling in general if they are to satisfy an audience" (78). Consequently, a "game's mechanics must take into consideration the rules of the genre that it is trying to create: not just the relevant icons and tropes, but the nature of a story from that genre" (ibid. 73). The system of framings constituted by the rulebook is therefore crucial in order to establish the specific 'interaction codes' and 'improvisation patterns' (as by Fatland) relevant to a given game. Equally important, however, is the fact that by doing so TRPG texts also reveal to their readers, both implicitly and explicitly, how this is achieved, inciting players to further modify or even replace them with other

(framing) texts. This **specific mode of self-disclosure, as well as the use of framings in TRPGs to incite the production (and not only the reception) of text is what I have proposed calling *genesic framing*** (Jara, "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books"). Moreover, it is this feature that is likely to account for much of the complexity of the TRPG medium as well as for its persistence in time. Indeed, despite the appearance of alternatives in more technologically advanced media, TRPGs are still unique in that participants are not only playing a (storytelling) game but, by doing so, they are also learning the mechanisms that will allow them to (re-)construct and manipulate it along the way. Considering the aforementioned, the stories created during role-playing games may be seen as resulting from a process of negotiating and actualizing player expectations. In other words, because of TRPGs' multi-authorial nature, expectation fulfillment is part of an ongoing transaction among participants during play. While this may be done explicitly, as in meta-game dialog in general, the use of framing devices in rulebooks allow us to infer that much of this negotiation is in fact the result of the manipulation of expectations and diegesis interpretation by means of framing. In this respect, it becomes evident that framing activity in role-playing games is not to be reduced exclusively to the published texts. As a matter of fact, we have to assume that players as co-authors of the game, are as likely - if not even more inclined - to make use of framing strategies during game play.⁸⁵ In order to elucidate this

⁸⁵ Paradoxically, Will Hindmarch has stated that "[t]he key to maintaining player freedom in a storytelling game is the abandonment of [GM] expectations" (54). Hindmarch is correct insofar as he points to the fact that game masters should refrain from dictatorially imposing pre-determined narratives on the participants of a TRPG session - a practice referred to in the gaming community as *railroading*. Nevertheless, more than an abandonment of expectations, TRPGs require a GM to be able to adequately shape the latter, so as to guide players into producing a text more akin to his own plans. Indeed, by effectively employing framings, the storyteller should be able to let "the players loose within the game world, trusting that genre and subject matter will instinctively show [them] the boundaries of the game space [my emphasis]" (Hindmarch 54). Conversely, and in particular in the case of conventional GM-based TRPGs, framings are also essential in allowing the

more clearly, we will dedicate the following chapter to observe and analyze some of the most easily recognizable forms of player-based framings in conventional TRPGs.

distribution of narrative power and agency beyond the limitations of a game's rules and mechanics. We will discuss this in detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 6: Framing Storyplay: Negotiating Emergent Narratives



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Charles Schulz, *Peanuts*

In the previous chapter, I have described the particular way in which TRPG sourcebooks use framings and paratexts to enable, inform and mediate gameplay as well as the production and interpretation of a game's emergent narrative. Moreover, I have argued for an understanding of these texts as paradigmatic examples for the use of framing in the role-playing activity in general. Indeed, players (and especially GMs) have in principle access to the same framing possibilities than those found in the printed texts; that is, they can establish or modify setting & rule elements (creating in the latter case "house" rules)⁸⁶ as well as the "social agreements" that constitute the game

⁸⁶ According to a survey done in 2000 by Ryan Dancy for the publishing company Wizards of the Coast, over 80% of TRPG groups make regular use of "house rules."

system's 'architecture' (Domsch) or 'drama' (Mackay). More importantly, during gameplay participants may use framings to directly affect the game's emergent diegesis; for example, by spontaneously generating plot outlines and background information (Mackay's 'script') or by creating descriptions of specific locations and characters *in situ*. Even after the game session, players may extend the story paratextually by illustrating, narrating or analyzing past episodes of their specific campaign and diegesis. This allows them to continue shaping their "narrative playground" beyond the temporal limitations of gameplay. In this regard, the stories that develop during a game-session or campaign effectively emerge from the particular interplay between the pre-existing framing structures, the player-generated diegetic interface and the framings that develop from and "around" the latter. As stated by Nephew, "the plot in a roleplaying game is [...] a dynamic function of the players' own choices," meaning that "[t]he storyline that the game moderator devises for a roleplaying session is only a rudimentary plot skeleton" (8, 11). This notion can be closely related to the idea of 'game dynamics', a concept that describes the relationship between the system of rules that pre-exist gameplay and players' often unpredictable performance during the game. Clara Fernández-Vara explains it as follows:

The rules of the game establish the possible behaviors in the game, but then they have to be set in motion. The instruction manual of Monopoly (1935), for instance, sets up the rules, but it is just a box with boards, dice, and cards until the players start playing-then it becomes a game. The dynamics of the game consist of how the game plays out, the type of strategies that the game invites, and even the kind of exploits that can derive from

the rules; these are all the result of the rules in action. (136)

In view of the aforementioned, it is evident that there are still a number of possibilities for fictional negotiation and framing which are specific to the particular form of simultaneous, "face to face" interaction that defines tabletop gameplay in contrast to other forms of role-playing. Indeed, strategies such as the generation of **backstories, serialization, fictional poaching, mock role-play and pervasive border crossing**, which we will discuss below, are only truly available within the unique context that surrounds and constitutes the TRPG game-session. In the following chapter we will therefore aim at describing how players transform their expectations and desires into text while also negotiating and generating new framings as they go. Before we do so, however, we will have a brief discussion on some of the major theoretical issues related to gameplay analysis.

Participant Observation and Gameplay Analysis

My idea was to buy a fat note-book and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication - without editing. That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera. The writing would be selective and necessarily interpretive - but once the image was written, the words would be final. [...] Because the writer *must* be a participant in the scene, while he's writing it - or at least taping it, or even sketching it. Or all three. Probably the closest analogy to the ideal would be a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does

his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least as a main character.- Hunter S. Thompson, "Strange Tales From a Strange Time"

There are several prevailing assumptions within game studies concerning the requirements for "adequate" game analysis. Chief among them is the notion of "participant gameplay" (akin to participant observation) as the *sine qua non* for any game discussion. A "no playin' no gain" clause, so to speak. The latter is sustained by the idea that games in general "can only be experienced as ... *game[s]* [...] through an active participation" (Domsch 14). Domsch gives the example of a soccer game, explaining that viewers of the latter can experience the *performance* of the game but never the game *itself* as they are not engaged directly in play (ibid.). This position implies that, due to them being removed from play, observers are unable to fully understand exactly what or why something is happening in the game. In the case of TRPGs, furthermore, it has often been pointed out that external observation is by default unable to properly account for the particularities of the medium. Such assumptions are generally based on the idea that games - and TRPGs in particular - are defined by the unique situation of the 'first-person audience' (Sandberg),⁸⁷ where players are the intended and therefore only "valid" spectators of the text. As explained by Montola and Holopainen,

[m]uch of what happens in a role-playing situation happens only in the mind of each player. Characters' intentions, plans, regrets and such are not necessarily ever communicated to other players. This

⁸⁷ Adopting a similar perspective, Skolnik proposes the term 'spect-actorship' (7).

makes role-playing, daydreaming and make-believe unique forms of expression: as the creator is the only audience of this part of play, inner play actually skips the whole semiotic process of coding and representation. (20)

In this regard, the thorough description and interpretation of the particular events that take place during a single TRPG session or campaign have often been considered to be of little interest to all but the participants involved in the game (see among others Padol; Hindmarch). Thus, as Hindmarch has observed,

[g]ames are good in the moment. Games are anecdotal. Stories that develop over the course of gameplay are personally exciting and meaningful in a way that movies and novels aren't, but they achieve this level of personal meaning at the expense of secondhand meaning. No one but the players are included in the excitement. (52)

Positions such as the above have led to a rather widespread exclusion of external, "objective" observation and analysis of TRPG gameplay; an attitude that can be tied in closely with game-studies' general skepticism towards "traditional" forms of textual analysis. As Stenros observes, "[s]essions are rarely analyzed outside the peer review of the participants of the game" ("Notes on Role-Playing Texts," 78). Yet, even with Domsch's own example we can also see this stance critically. Indeed, when viewing or analyzing a game of soccer, we generally rely on the "outside" perspectives of commentators and sport reporters to make sense of the developments taking place on the field. Such positions are generally considered to have the

advantage of being (more or less) objective while also giving a privileged (over)view of the different aspects simultaneously involved in a game. Not being directly involved, in this case, allows for a wider perspective; a "bird's-eye" view so to speak. In contrast, a particular player's impressions of the game - while possibly relevant to understanding specific aspects of the event and perhaps even the outcome of the match - is also understood as being a partial and "emotionally compromised" view. In addition, players' active engagement in play is often tied to a restricted perspective of the game; a fact that may result in them being unaware of other of its relevant aspects (Fernández-Vara). In this regard, Miller has observed that players involvement in the activity of play often limits their capacity to engage in "deep," self-reflexive interpretation (par. 33). This opinion is shared by Ryan who points out that a player is "usually too deeply absorbed in the pursuit of a goal to reflect on the plot that he writes through his actions" (Avatars "Internal-Ontological Interactivity"). Skolnik, for his part, argues that immersive aesthetics are fundamentally at odds with cognitive reflection and critical thinking (9). In this context, there are two factors that generally qualify an external observer or commentator to give an assessment of a game: first of all, his or her knowledge of the latter's rules and mechanics and, second, (the extent of) their actual experience of gameplay. Where the former is the basic requirement that enables us to speak of a game objectively, the latter may enhance our understanding of gameplay by allowing us to grasp the activity in a more nuanced fashion; for example, by knowing the ease or difficulty involved in accomplishing a specific goal or feat. In the case of televised, professional soccer, this is reflected by the fact professional players (both active and retired ones) are often taken on board as commentators due to their specialized, "first-hand" experience of the game. From this point of view, it seems evident that we must be able

to distinguish between someone's immediate participation in a game and their capacity of externally assessing, understanding and judging the activity of gameplay.⁸⁸ Following this idea, I wish to argue that, while beneficial, participant observation is only one part of the equation; one possible way of approaching TRPG gameplay. Being able to look at players' interactions "from without" is an equally important complement to such an approach; one that may allow us to see past our own idiosyncrasies in order to recognize general trends, similarities and differences.

Bodies of Play: Gameplay Corpus

Up until now, I have dealt with the inherent difficulty of TRPGs' lack of materiality by focusing on published sourcebook texts. Extrapolating from our understanding of the latter, we have been able to make a series of assumptions as to how the activity of gameplay itself works. While the recording of game-sessions might seem to offer a viable alternative to the above, allowing us to combine both active participation and retrospective observation, it is one that has its own drawbacks and difficulties that are important to keep in mind. First of all, because it requires 'face-to-face' interaction of a group of players, gameplay is subject to personal, temporal and spatial constraints. Not only must players convene at a specific place and time but, due to the great amount of agency each individual has in the game, play might even become impossible without full attendance. Secondly, games with an anointed game master often require a significant amount of preparation by the latter, a fact which may further reduce the number of games that can be

⁸⁸ This, in fact, would seem to be particularly relevant if we consider the roles of referee's or coaches in professional soccer, neither of which requires "active participation" in the sense of kicking the ball across the field. Both of them, however, are essential parts of the practices and experiences revolving around professionalized sports.

played in a certain period of time.⁸⁹ In addition, the recording and analysis of game sessions is not only extremely time-consuming - a session lasting 3 to 4 hours in average -, but it also requires having adequate equipment in terms of hardware and software as well as the knowledge to use such tools properly. From this point of view, the recent boom and now flourishing scene of web-based TRPG broadcasting platforms can be seen as a tremendous boon to TRPG research and one that is, as of yet, vastly underexplored (if explored at all). Not only have these platforms challenged - or, rather, openly debunked - the notion of the medium as being objectively unappealing to external spectators, but they are generating a rich and unprecedented resource of material for analysis; one that is both easily observable, openly accessible and has a - more or less - permanent material form that we can continuously return to. With this in mind, the following discussion will be based on a combination of my personal experience as a player over the past 20 years together with the "close reading" - and, in one case the "close playing" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum) - of four distinct textual sources: "Call me a Dog," a *World of Darkness* based campaign I ran as a game master during 2012-2013 and three web-based TRPG broadcasts; namely, *The Dice Stormers*, *Titansgrave*, and *Critical Role*. In order to contextualize these references, I will offer a brief description to each of them below. Before we do so, however, it is important to note that despite the evident differences between these gaming groups in terms of their specific personal constellations, gameplay contexts and, more importantly, the particular games they choose to play, our analysis is validated by the fact that all of them rely on "conventional" GM-based game systems of "quantified interactive

⁸⁹ Avoiding this type of obstacles is one of the main objectives of GM-less games. However, even then, it is generally necessary for at least one participant to be well acquainted with the game rules and mechanics beforehand.

storytelling" (Schick). In this regard, the examples we will discuss are relevant not because of their singularity but because they exemplify some of the most well-recognizable framing features implemented by TRPG players in general; that is, they are representative of more or less typical framing situations that arise during a conventional TRPG session.⁹⁰ This is important to keep in mind as we will be using our observations in the final chapter in order to explain the more recent developments in game design and the rise of the "storytelling" TRPG as a category of its own.

Call Me A Dog

"Call me a Dog" was a *World of Darkness* - based campaign I began running in September 2012 and which kept on going at intervals during the second year of my dissertation project. The group consisted of three players and myself as game-master.⁹¹ The main plot involved three main characters; a social worker, a journalist and a food inspector, all drawn together to investigate the mysterious events revolving around - and tying together - the disappearance of a friend; illegal animal fights; and a restaurant for people with eccentric "tastes." During the campaign I did extensive audio recordings of game sessions and recollected player-generated ephemera⁹² and content for later analysis.

⁹⁰ On the other hand, both because of the particular game-systems and settings as well as the format of data recollection, these different games reveal to a certain extent the degree of variation and difference in focus that are possible in an RPG.

⁹¹ While all three players had extensive previous experience both as players and as GMs, it was my first time as a GM and was in this respect also a personal challenge.

⁹² The term 'ephemera' describes material items (mostly print) which are designed for single use and are therefore considered to be generally discardable. As such, they are often assumed to have only transient value (see. Makepeace; Rickards). In the context of TRPGs, however - and in opposition to the effectively ephemeral nature of gameplay itself - 'ephemera' actually constitute part of the more or less lasting material

The Dice Stormers

The *Dice Stormers* is a gaming group from Melbourne (Australia) that has been broadcasting TRPG sessions on a regular basis via *YouTube* since 2012. Originally conceived as a “just-for fun” broadcast, the following of the group’s channel has grown steadily in the past years and has, as of July 2018, over 10.000 subscribers. In contrast to the other two broadcasted sources I have used, *The Dice Stormers* play a variety of different games and genres ranging from *Call of Cthulhu* (horror) to *Star Wars* (science fiction) to *Paranoia* (parodic humor).

Figure 13 *The Dice Stormers*



While the main group of players is more or less stable, they often have additional guest players and even game-masters. Likewise, the position of GM also varies from session to session. In this regard the group is a good example of how play style is

representation of a game. As a result, they can often be a valuable source of information for game analysis. A particularly interesting source of such material is Timothy Hutchings’ “Play Generated Map & Document Archive.” The collection, currently held by the *Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong*, compiles “hand-drawn maps, sketches, notes, reference materials, and other documentation generated by numerous players of assorted role-playing games” (archives.museumofplay.org).

influential to role-play (more about this later). Indeed, while the spectrum of games the group plays is quite broad, their style of gaming can be said to be generally chatty, jovial and informal with the players often preferring humorous 'out of game' (OOG) commentary and parody to "serious", immersive gameplay.⁹³ Furthermore, an important aspect to note is that the sessions are edited before broadcasting, allowing the videos to use captions in order to convey relevant information - such as written communication between individual players and the GM - which might not be shared with the entire gaming group.

Titansgrave

Titansgrave is a TRPG show based on the game of the same name and featuring actor and popular "geek" personality Wil Wheaton as game master.⁹⁴ The series follows the success of Wheaton's ongoing *YouTube* broadcast *Tabletop*; a program that showcases Wheaton and a group of celebrity guests playing selected tabletop board games.⁹⁵ *Titansgrave* is produced in a similar format, albeit with a fixed group of players.⁹⁶ In contrast to the other shows I discuss, however, *Titansgrave* was made possible by an extensive and successful crowdfunding campaign,

⁹³ In this regard, the particular idiosyncrasies of the group are especially apparent during a "one-shot" session of the horror game *Wraith the Oblivion* from the White Wolf franchise. During the session, guest GM Stephen Mackie goes to great lengths in attempting to create an eerie atmosphere appropriate to the game's genre and theme. These efforts, however, are constantly undermined by the slapstick style of the group, resulting in a weird mix of gothic horror and teenage comedy ("Wraith the Great War").

⁹⁴ Wheaton is perhaps best known for playing *Wesley Crusher*, one of the main characters of the 1987 TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

⁹⁵ In general, rather than being mainstream celebrities, Wheaton's guests are mostly related to the gaming and fantasy fiction fan communities. Notable guests on the show include actor Richard Sommer from the TV series *Mad Men* and fantasy author Patrick Rothfuss.

⁹⁶ The group includes well-recognized voice actors Laura Bailey (who is also part of the *Critical Role* cast) and Yuri Lowenthal; popular *YouTuber* Hank Green and actress Alison Haislip.

leading to its high-end production quality and its clear focus towards an external viewership.

Figure 14 *Titansgrave*



In this regard, game episodes are heavily edited to produce chapters of roughly 45 minutes' duration; they include spectacular artwork and animations, flashbacks to previous episodes as well as occasional voice overs and special effects added in post-production. Correspondingly, the broadcast can be said to be aimed primarily at entertaining its external spectators, using the TRPG medium as a platform for serial storytelling. As described on the *Geek and Sundry* website,

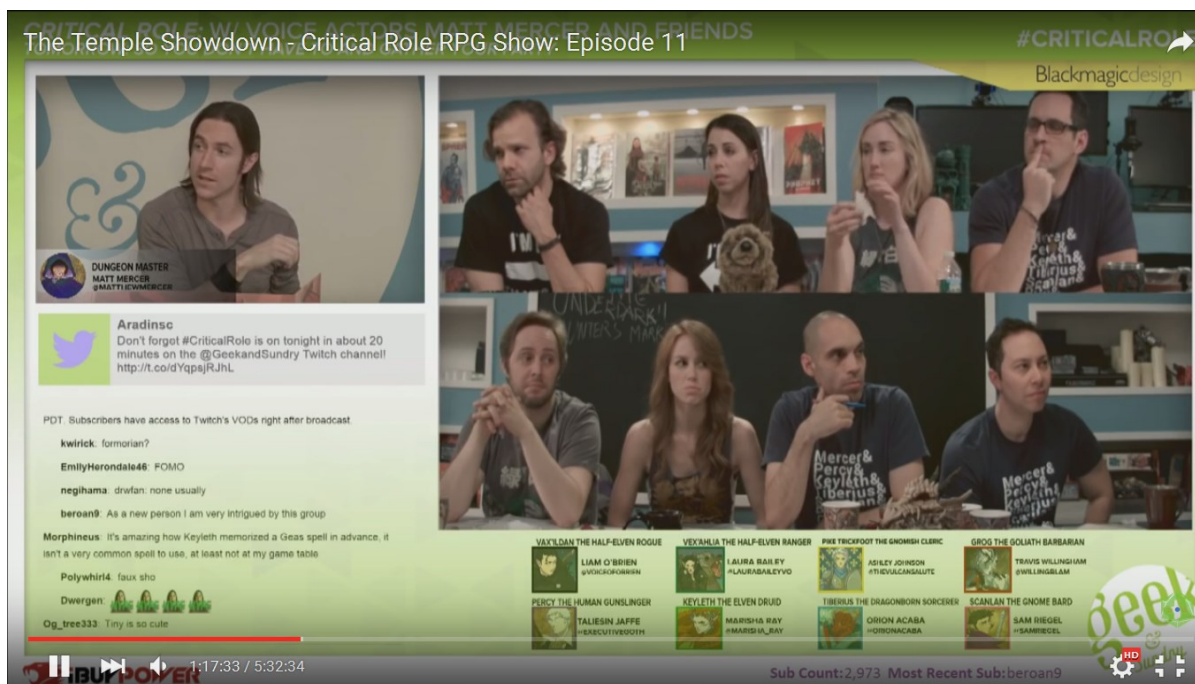
TITANSGRAVE: THE ASHES OF VALKANA is a gripping serialized story where Wil Wheaton takes a group of 4 celebrity role players and their characters through a life-threatening adventure in a world far from our own where goblins wield laser rifles, dragons destroy hovercrafts, and great war machines plunder the land. The world of Valkana has been at peace, but that is about to taken [sic] from the land from an ancient evil that has begun to stir. Will the

heroes be up for the challenge or will they be destroyed?
(Geek & Sundry, *Titansgrave*)

Critical Role

Critical Role is another TRPG web series produced and broadcasted weekly by *Geek and Sundry*. The program features a group of renown voice actors⁹⁷ who play an ongoing campaign of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*.

Figure 15 *Critical Role*



Much like the *Dice Stormers* - and in contrast to *Titansgrave* - the show was initiated rather unpretentiously in 2015.⁹⁸ Since then, the popularity of the gaming group has skyrocketed, earning it a great amount of notoriety throughout (and even

⁹⁷ The members of the *Critical Role* cast have been involved in a number of widely successful TV shows, movies and, above all, video games. This makes for an even more interesting relationship between different media and the communities surrounding them; in particular those of digital and analog gaming (see Kuchera).

⁹⁸ As explained by the *Critical Role* cast, the game originated as a "one-shot" event organized by Mercer for Liam O'Brien's birthday (Geek and Sundry Website).

beyond) the gaming community. Proof of this is not only the phenomenal (and steadily increasing) number of viewers the show has attracted both on *Twitch* as well as *YouTube*,⁹⁹ but also the attention the broadcast has received by media and game critics worldwide. Indeed, the show has been celebrated in numerous articles as having been instrumental for the recent re-popularization of tabletop role playing games (Ehrbar; Shea; Kenreck). As noted by Teitman, *Critical Role* has been key in making TRPGs and, more specifically, *Dungeons and Dragons* a "spectator sport" thereby "elevating this old-school game into something else entirely: compelling television, even for those who wouldn't know a vorpal sword from a Volkswagen" (par. 1). Ben Kuchera, for his part, calls the show "a thoroughly modern production" in the sense that it expands the reach of a typically "analog" medium by exploiting the affordances and possibilities offered by digital media, in particular in terms of its immediate accessibility:

The show streams live on Twitch every Thursday at 7 p.m. Pacific Time, and then subscribers can access the archived version instantly. The following Monday the episodes are placed on Geek and Sundry and then, ultimately, YouTube. (par. 25)

Indeed, the live quality of the show is one of its most distinctive features as there are no cuts or edits to the game, either during its live-transmission or in the ensuing upload to

⁹⁹ The group's own website credits the show with "attracting over half a million viewers every week" (critrole.com). As of July 2018, this might be, in fact, a slight understatement with the latest episode on *YouTube* alone already reaching over 390.000 views within seven days of its publication. This, however, does not consider either of the show's live-streaming platforms - *Twitch* and *Project Alpha* - which have strong followings of their own.

YouTube. This is important to keep in mind when considering the show's immense popularity despite the fact that the sessions have an average duration of three and a half hours. The above features make *Critical Role* one of the most "natural" renditions of TRPG gameplay currently available online. As stated by Mercer in a recent interview,

[w]e're still just fooling around on camera rolling dice and being huge nerds about it. Nothing has really changed except there's less downtime. [...] The little bit of pressure knowing there's an audience means there's less talking about our day or telling a funny story. Now when we play we sit and play, there's less out of character banter. Everyone really stays invested in the moment. (qtd. in Kuchera)

Now that we have a general idea of the corpus, we will have a brief discussion on some of the major theoretical issues related to gameplay analysis.

Framing Desire: A Hedonistic Approach to Role-Playing

As we concluded in the previous chapter, sourcebooks can be conceived as framing structures that generate a space of narrative potential by affecting or 'coding' player expectations. This reflects the fact that framings - especially those appearing in initial positions - not only mediate but invite us "into" fictions because they are a promise of pleasurable experiences (McCracken; Birke and Christ).¹⁰⁰ Thus,

¹⁰⁰ Describing the 'postmodern' approach to literature, Anz makes a similar observation stating that:

by anticipating - or, as Iser puts it, "revealing by hiding" (*Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*) - a non-existent text, TRPG sourcebooks allow the configuration of player desires. As such, they encourage the pursuit of specific forms of gratification within the game. This reveals the tension between desire (expectation) and pleasure (fulfillment), to lie at the center of the activity of role-play. The game's emergent narrative is thus to be understood as being hedonistically constituted. From this point of view, we can see TRPG framings as the first outposts of desire; those that outline the landmarks of pleasure to be enacted in the game. In this light, our inquiries concerning framings in TRPGs are ultimately related to questions about the sources and forms of enjoyment that these texts offer and how they do so. As Gray points out, it is this kind of question that has often been ignored in literary and media studies in general as they tend to see "media audiences [...] as unthinking, purely reactive monads" (27). This occurs, he argues, "in large part because the analysis of media has consistently underplayed the importance of worries, hopes and expectations concerning them" (ibid.).

Die einleitende Thematisierung des Lesens hat in den Texten Michael Endes oder Ernst Agustins mehrere Funktionen. Sie dient dem literarischen Spiel mit verschiedenen Fiktions- und Relitätsebenen, sie dient jedoch vor allem der Eigenwerbung. Denn sie gibt den Leser ein Versprechen, und das lautet etwa so: <Die Lektüre dieses Buches, das du zu lesen begonnen hast vermag bei dir die gleiche Leselust zu entfachen, wie sie hier beschrieben wird.> In solchen Versprechungen artikuliert sich seit mehr als zwei Jahrzehnten in Ansätzen ein literarisches Programm. Man kann es mit einigem Recht als "postmodern" bezeichnen, insofern im Umkreis der literarischen Moderne des 20. Jahrhunderts Begriffe wie "Lust" oder "Vergnügen" keinen sonderlich hohen Stellenwert hatten. (17)

The fact that Anz has chosen these examples of initial framing ("Die Einleitende Thematisierung des Lesens") as representative of the postmodern fascination with the motive of the literary text as a pleasurable game-space should not escape our attention. In particular, due to the proliferation of framing strategies that can be found in texts of that period.

Sources of Pleasure in Role-play

In his book *Literatur und Lust: Glück und Unglück beim Lesen* Thomas Anz discusses and exposes the possibilities of what he calls a "hedonistic approach" to literature. Not surprisingly, one of the main points of reference and support of his argument is the notion of the literary text as a form of play. As Anz puts it, "[w]er Literatur als eine Art Spiel begreift, kann die Zusammenhänge von Literatur und Lust kaum übersehen" (33). Literature therefore, as a playful activity, is practiced first and foremost for pleasurable purposes and, as such, is related to desire ('Lust'). As to the sources of the latter, however, Anz recognizes several different theories. Understanding them will enable us to establish a connection between the poetic or fictional aspect of TRPGs and their performative and interactive features. According to Karl Gross, for example, play fulfills an **evolutionary purpose**, whereupon it can be seen as a form of practice. From this point of view, he proposes, pleasure is derived instinctively from the "biological utility" of play as it prepares us for real-world situations that often involve a certain amount of risk. This is what Bühler calls 'Funktionslust', a concept that can be closely related to the notion of art as a form of teaching (*docere*). While this idea may seem evident in the case of physical play activities or performances - playing "tag" might help me develop important skills for pursuit and evasion; "hide and seek" can train my skills of observation and concealment - it is not so easily applicable to literary fiction or role-play. Indeed, in the latter case a "preparatory" function is more difficult to recognize because it occurs on a cognitive-affective level that is not easily observable. Nevertheless, as Anz has pointed out, fictional play can help participants understand, structure and control their emotional experiences:

In einem geregelten Schonraum künstlich herabgesetzten Risikos verhilft beispielsweise das wiederhol- und korrigierbare Durchspielen gefährlicher Situationen dazu, den Schrecken vor analogen Situationen in der Wirklichkeit zu überwinden, und vermittelt die für die praktische Tätigkeit notwendige Struktur der Emotionen. (58)

Furthermore, if we follow Harari's assertion that the ability to create and share fictions is the one essential feature that has enabled the development of humankind's vast and highly complex societies (24), we could postulate that role-play is an essential way of "preparing" ourselves for the constantly changing world of human reality. Not surprisingly, it is also one of the earliest forms of pretend play in children; one that has been proven to have a high impact in the developing of an individual's social skills (Bergen). Beyond such immediate, practical applications, Poppenberg proposes the idea that the pleasure we obtain from fiction is related to the way in which it allows for the metaphoric (con)figuration of emotion and affect, leading to a form of what he calls **poetic or 'figurative' knowledge** (*figurativer Erkenntnis*) (173). The latter can be conceived as a manifestation of what are otherwise non-verbalizable yet essential aspects of human experience. As such, they can only be revealed through the articulation of desire and poetic figure in the form of text (*ibid.*). In fact, in the case of TRPGs, we could also argue that their performative nature makes poetic knowledge a type of embodied cognition, perhaps best reflected in the experience of dramatic catharsis.

Enjoyment in literary and fictional play can also be related to the **desire for freedom** from imposed forms of discourse and meaning. Not only is play done voluntarily (i.e. out of free

will) but the activity itself is enacted within a space that explicitly or implicitly "brackets out" existing social norms, conventions and structures of hierarchic power. As noted by Anz, "'Spiel' steht für die lustvolle Befreiung von unlustvollen Zwängen" (37). From this point of view, interpretation can be conceived as an activity of subversion and textual re-appropriation by the reader. In addition, play activities can be seen as a way of **compensating** for the aspects lacking from everyday life (Spencer qtd. in Anz). This idea lies at the basis of the notion of play as a form of escapism which, in turn, can be related to psychological theories that conceive fiction in terms of an act of **wish fulfillment**.¹⁰¹ This is particularly true for the TRPG medium which offers a space or "magic circle" that gives players an '**alibi**' for engaging - not only imaginarily but often effectively - in non-normative forms of interaction and behavior.¹⁰² As such, TRPGs can be seen as "empowering mechanisms [...] that allow people to engage with strange or taboo activities" (Montola and Holopainen 21). On the other hand, TRPGs enable players to appropriate and modify existing texts, making **creative agency** an important source of gratification. This becomes especially evident in cases where games are based upon existing literary texts. As Nephew states, "using literature as a creative base fulfills that wish on the part of the readers of a book, or the audiences of a movie, to take the story beyond the ending the original writer provided" (67). In similar fashion, Punday considers TRPGs to be "a way for players to engage in favorite books and popular subgenres [and] to make

¹⁰¹ An extreme example of this idea is given by Edward Castronova in his book *Synthetic Worlds: The business and culture of online games*. Castronova argues that the extent to which online gaming has created spaces for the development of real social communities together with the advantages virtual worlds often have over the limitations of people's real-world context, will inevitably lead to a general "migration" towards these virtual spaces in the near future.

¹⁰² For a general outline on the topic of the use of fiction as an *alibi* for transgressive gameplay, see Stenros and Bowman.

beloved texts into a place where one can play" (121). In this sense he relates role-playing games to the concept of fan culture arguing that it is possible for players to "claim for themselves a certain agency in fandom" (128). Even in the case of games that present a fictional world "of their own", agency in developing and interacting with it is a fundamental source of player enjoyment in the sense of what Karl Gross calls "Freude an der Macht" (qtd. in Anz). In this respect, one can speak of role-playing games as allowing for the combination of an interpretive approach to textuality with one of creative re-appropriation (Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*).

Pleasure in games can also be seen to result from dealing successfully with situations of self-imposed challenge or difficulty. This point of view is reflected in Bernard Suits' definition of games as the "voluntary attempt to **overcome unnecessary obstacles** [my emphasis]" (55). In the case of literary play, this occurs mostly in terms of an activity of interpretation, understood as the overcoming of semantic obstacles posed by a text. As such, it involves what Ensslin has described as 'cognitive ludicity' (*Literary Gaming*). On the other hand, in forms of play such as TRPGs, challenges might also be related to a process of decision-making and puzzle solving that may be best described in terms of 'ergodic ludicity' (ibid.). As such they may also be closely related to the notion of **competition** (agonality) where the opponent can be either another participant or the game system itself. In this context, winning becomes a form of reward, the obtaining of which generates a further source of pleasure.

Finally, play is also taken to fulfill **social necessities**, indicating a relationship between enjoyment and the way in which such activities configure human interaction. As Anz observes, even the solitary activity of reading can be understood as serving a social function:

Leser können sich in fiktive Personen verlieben, sich imaginativ in eine dargestellte soziale Gemeinschaft integriert fühlen oder auch, womöglich im Wissen um eine ganze Gemeinde von Verehrern, eine enge emotionale Beziehung zur Person des Autors eingehen. Soziale Bedürfnisse sind also auch im scheinbar asozialen Akt des einsamen Lesens nicht völlig stillgelegt. (72)

In the case of role-playing games, the social function is even more evident as the activity itself is based on the face-to-face interactions of multiple individuals. From this point of view, the fantastic and virtual worlds they present can be seen as providing "new social networks" (Salen 18) which are often one of the most important motivations to participate in the game (see among other Fine; Gray; Salen and Zimmerman; Castronova, etc.). This, in addition, reveals another important source of pleasure in the TRPG medium, namely that of **uncertainty**. Indeed, as an emergent and collaborative activity, TRPGs develop from the constant tension between player desires and expectations and the unexpected ways in which these transform into actual text. This tension makes for an essential component in the enjoyment of gameplay where, as Mandryka puts it, "fun" can be considered "the desired exploration of uncertainty" (qtd. in Torner, "Uncertainty"). This has led researchers such as Greg Costikyan to understand games in terms of the way in which they structure the unknown (*Uncertainty in Games*). From this point of view, it seems evident that framings are essential in making this possible as they act by "coding" a game in terms of its narrative and semantic potential. Ultimately, however, and rather than being mutually exclusive, the different forms of expectation and pleasure involved in a game should be conceived as occurring in

a dynamic relationship to each other. Analyzing gameplay, therefore, is more a question of understanding which forms of enjoyment are foregrounded; by whom, in which manner and under what circumstances. In this regard, the so-called GNS theory provides a somewhat broader approach that offers three general categories or mindsets with which TRPG designers and players approach the game.

GNS Theory

Despite the unifying force of sourcebook framings, the TRPG diegesis is a space of heterogeneous desires where the needs and expectations of different players interact; sometimes overlapping and sometimes appearing in direct opposition with each other. As Punday notes, “[a]lthough many players enjoy the game for the challenge of ‘winning’ and developing powerful characters, others see in [it] an extended form of acting performance, in which they develop characters whose actions are psychologically realistic” (114). Recognizing the above, early TRPG theories attempted to classify players according to their general mindset of motivations, expectations and interests. A particularly influential one, known as *Forge Theory*,¹⁰³ developed around the idea that gaming groups - and individuals within these - tend to enact different “creative agendas” during play. The so called GNS - or “threefold” - model divided players thus into three different groups, namely gamist, narrativist and simulationist, where each of these agendas corresponds to a specific understanding of the game’s sources of pleasure.

¹⁰³ Edited and moderated by Ron Edwards and Vincent Baker, *The Forge*, was one of the earliest and most influential internet platforms in the U.S. “dedicated to the promotion, creation, and review of independent role-playing games” (www.indie-rpgs.com/about/). As a result, many of the discussions developed around the website’s community have become identified with a particular “school” of TRPG theory and design known as “Forge Theory.”

Gamists, for example, are considered to view competition (agonality) and the overcoming of obstacles (winning condition) as the main objectives and sources of gratification during gameplay. From this point of view, characters are mainly seen as a collection of abilities and traits that allow players to face specific challenges during gameplay and where the narrative ensuing from that interaction is secondary. Thus, in a horror game about supernatural monsters, gamists would be primarily concerned with the survival of their characters and the development of the latter in terms of the abilities that make them more likely to defeat further, more powerful, enemies in the future.

Narrativist, on the other hand, describes players whose main interest is the creation of emotionally engaging, aesthetically pleasing and "meaningful" stories. In this regard, their focus rests primarily on the characters' affective dimension and the motivations that lead them to action. Because of this, narrativists are considered to be more prone to manipulate the diegesis "externally", using their 'out of game' knowledge as players to exploit situations within the game in order to make them more dramatic. It is this breaching of 'awareness contexts' (Fine) that enables them to increase the emotional impact of the game's story. In the example of the horror game, narrativists would be more prone to play out the character's affective reaction in a situation of fear. Thus, a player may choose to describe how looking into the monster's eyes reminds them (i.e. their character) of his/her own mother; an image that adds complexity and texture to the situation. Narrativism is therefore more closely related to the notion of emotional and poetic knowledge (we will return to this issue in the following chapter).

Finally, **simulationists** are conceived of as mainly deriving pleasure from interacting with a fictional world which

"satisfyingly reconstruct[s] or model[s] the dynamics of a particular historical, literary or genre setting" in a fully "realistic" or internally consistent manner (White et al. 67). In other words, it is the proposed coherence and "logic" of the fictional world and the characters within it that takes precedence over other elements. From this point of view, and in stark contrast to narrativists, simulationists prefer a strict separation of awareness contexts during role-play. In our horror game example, simulationists would put emphasis on the coherent representation of the threat and the characters' reaction to it. Not only would this mean providing a "logical" explanation for the existence of ghosts, but also of a consistent strategy to defeat them.

With the above in mind, it is important to point out that current understandings of games and player motivations no longer assume that participants' attitudes and expectations are completely static but, rather, that they merely exhibit certain tendencies and preferences. In this regard, it is now generally accepted that creative agendas can change from game to game and even shift during game sessions. In fact, as we will argue in the following chapter, players' use of framings is especially important in setting these shifts in motion. Now that we have a general idea of some of the configurations of player expectations and desires, we will briefly propose a general typology of framings based on a new definition of gameplay before we go on to our analysis.

Gameplay Definition and Framing Typologies

Previously, we established the game session's diegetic interface as a TRPG's core text. We further defined source-books as systems of 'genetic' framings or 'scripts' (Mackay) that create a potential "ludo-diegetic" space or 'future narrative' for the game. As such, they determine and enable TRPGs' particular form

of textual generation. If we understand sourcebooks as framing systems that create a space of fictional potential, we may, in turn, define gameplay as **an ongoing fictionalizing act by means of which players collectively transform a potential fictional space into an emergent and ultimately a finalized or "past" narrative.**¹⁰⁴ As such, it is determined by the simultaneous or 'real-time' interaction between players and the game system via a diegetic interface. This interaction is paradigmatically represented by - but not exclusive to - role-play in the sense of players' embodiment and narrative performance of a character. The above acknowledges TRPGs as a temporal medium where gameplay and, therefore, the game's diegesis is to be seen as a temporal event.

Temporality and Discourse Level

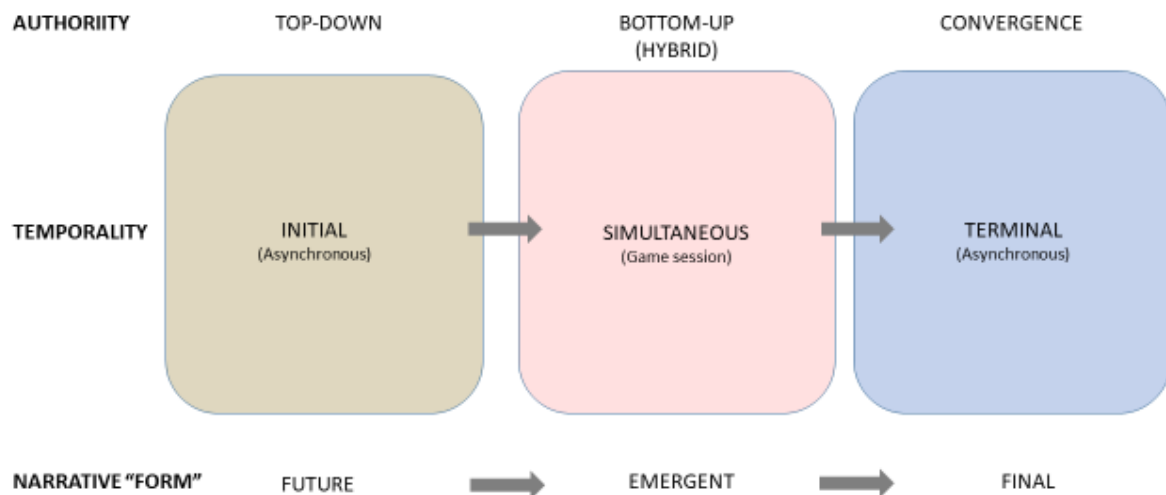
Not only does the above notion of gameplay allow us to distinguish between three instances or 'avatars' of narrative (Ryan) - future, emergent and final -, it also makes a first general distinction between TRPG framings possible; namely those that precede, accompany and follow the performance of a particular game session or campaign. Adapting from Werner Wolf I will call these initial, simultaneous¹⁰⁵ and terminal framings (Figure 16). Additionally, we may further classify gameplay framings based on the discourse level where the (de)coding takes place. From this perspective, we may speak of **contextual**

¹⁰⁴ Although we have already discussed the notions of 'future' and 'emergent' narratives, the concept of 'final' narrative' is important to note here, as it implies that TRPGs cannot be merely reduced to gameplay; In this regard, recollection and not only emergence is constitutive of the playing experience. Players do not merely play and forget; they create memories; stories they share and recall after the session or the campaign has ended. As Morningstar and Segedy put it, "when [the game is] over, nothing matters except the story you get to tell to your unfortunate friends who didn't get to play" (31).

¹⁰⁵ Werner Wolf uses the term 'internal' which I consider less adequate when considering the TRPG's lack of fixed materiality (*Framing Borders*).

framings when referring to those elements that code gameplay on the exogenous or 'real-world' level. Typically, these framings are used to establish the immediate conditions that pre-determine, enable and maintain the 'magic circle' of play (as opposed to the printed rules); in particular, in terms of the 'social agreement' a gaming group adheres to.

Figure 16 Framing Typologies: Temporality & Authority

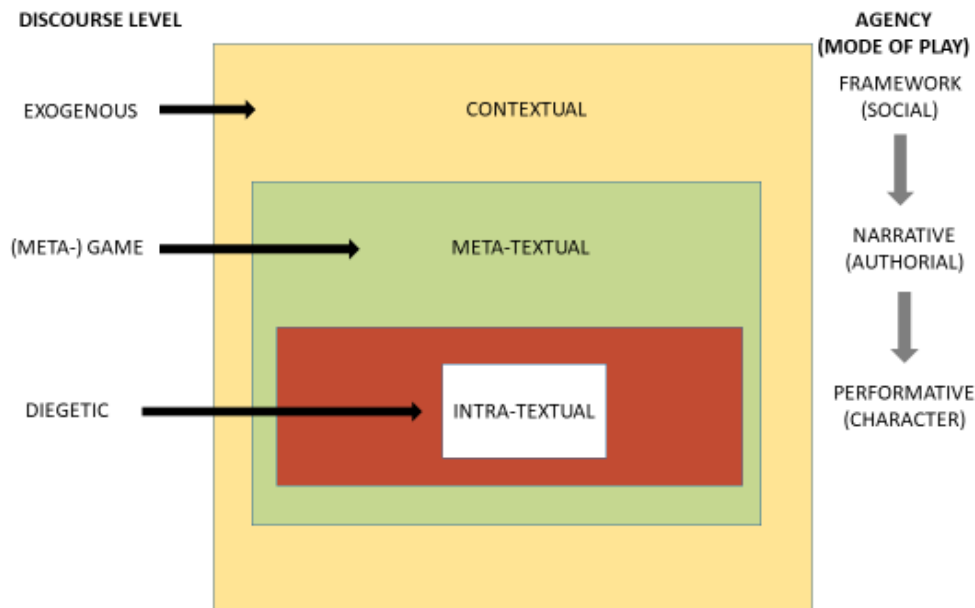


Meta-textual framings, on the other hand, are coded at the level of game frame discourse and allow players to negotiate the production and interpretation of the diegesis, both implicitly and explicitly.¹⁰⁶ This is what Domsch calls the game's 'textual commentary.' Of particular interest here are those elements that address the "additional agreements" related to the representational or poetic aspects of the game; that is, with issues such as aesthetics, hermeneutics and fictionality. Finally, (intra-) **textual framings** are part of the game's

¹⁰⁶ It is important to note, however, that not all meta-textual discourse is a framing *per se*. In fact, most meta-textual discourse is part of the game mechanics themselves. In other words, the implementation of a rule may directly determine the outcome of a diegetic situation without being a semantic 'coding' of the situation itself.

narrative proper but are easily identifiable as functionally, narratologically, spatio-temporally or ontologically different from the main world of the game or diegesis (Figure 17).

Figure 17 Framing Typologies: Discourse Level and Agency



Modes of Play

In his analysis of digital games, Domsch makes a fundamental distinction between what he calls “passive” and “active” narrative phases (31-35). Where the former refers to episodes that minimize or prevent player interaction, the latter describes those that depend upon player decision-making and input to develop. In computer role-playing games (CRPGs), for example, passive narrativity often appears in the form of cinematic introductions, outros or “cut scenes”, all of which Domsch sees as disrupting player interactivity.

A large part of the presence of narrative in video games - and that part that is most visible to an outside perspective, one that is looking at games

instead of through them - is constituted by forms that cannot be interacted with by the player. These are mainly textual narratives (written and spoken, such as logbooks, letters or audiotapes) and cinematic narratives (called 'cut scenes'). While these are very effective in creating narrative, they often rather heighten the divide between narrative and gameplay. (31)

Domsch's observations correspond with Thon's distinction between what he calls 'ludic' and 'narrative' events:

Während narrative Ereignisse bereits vor Spielbeginn im Programmcode festgelegt sind und durch verschiedene, insbesondere an filmischem Erzählen orientierte Erzähltechniken dargestellt werden, ergeben sich ludische Ereignisse erst während des Spielens aus der Interaktion der Spieler mit dem Spiel. Um letztere auch terminologisch klar von ersteren abzugrenzen, lässt sich der Modus, in dem ludische Ereignisse dargestellt werden, in Übereinstimmung sowohl mit dem ‚Ludologen‘ Gonzalo Frasca auch mit der ‚Narratologin‘ Marie-Laure Ryan als Simulation bezeichnen. (J. Thon, "Simulation vs. Narration.," 71)

While these distinctions are generally useful, their application is only limited in the case of TRPGs due to important medial differences between analog and digital gaming platforms. Being verbally based, the artifact of the tabletop game is not only immediately accessible to its players for modification and development, it is itself player generated. This means that, unlike CRPGs, where the game's diegesis is autonomously rendered

by the program, the diegetic interface of the TRPG is always the result of at least one participant engaging actively in pretense-play. From this point of view, activity and passivity are not absolute but subjective forms of ludic engagement with the text. In addition, and due to their co-presence, player interaction with the latter may extend beyond the actions of their characters. They may, for example, request for information or even dispute the "active narrator" authority at any moment; they may also ad-lib or add "colorful" details to a certain scene, etc.¹⁰⁷ In view of the aforementioned, rather than indicating two distinct forms of storytelling, Domsch and Thon's observations allow us to recognize two different modes of play in TRPGs;¹⁰⁸ one, namely, that is based on the overall control of the diegesis - we will call this 'narrative play' - and another one that is based on the control of a particular character within it - we will call this appropriately 'role-play.' Each of these modes is, for its part, directly related to a specific form of textual authority and diegetic agency.

Narrative Play vs. Role-play: Frames of Authority and Agency

As discussed previously, framing in traditional, non-interactive media, is generally used by a single, unified or otherwise privileged textual authority to exert control over the text's reception. In TRPGs, on the other hand, framings have the additional function of allowing divergent authorial sources to influence textual production itself. What makes framing analysis particularly difficult in this case, however, is not merely the fact that authority is shared among different sources but that

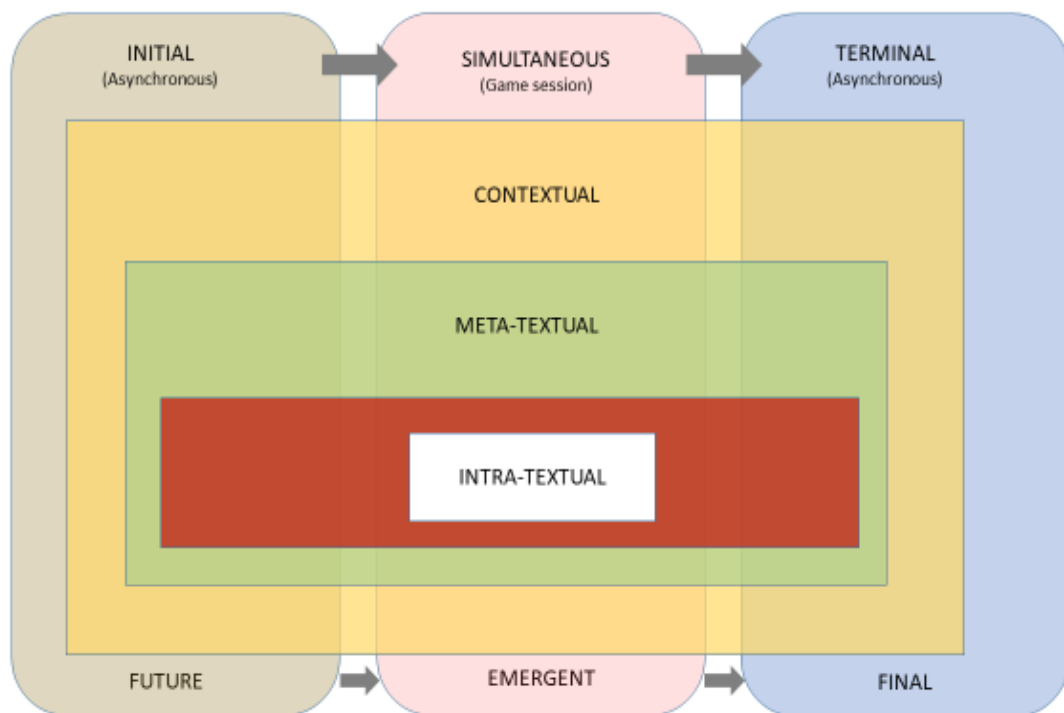
¹⁰⁷ One common such practice involves players spontaneously acting out the random voices in a crowd at a party or a canteen, thereby making the latter appear more lively and thus more "realistic." Alternatively, players will often enhance a GM's description of a situation by simultaneously describing their character's feelings or reactions to it.

¹⁰⁸ In addition to the social one established at the exogenous level (see Figure 17).

it is often also contested and that, as such, it is constantly shifting. From this point of view, framing is to be conceived as a crucial form of negotiation between authorial agencies (see Figure 17). In the case of conventional TRPGs, we can generally recognize three of these clearly: game designers, game masters and (role-)players. In this regard, game designers can be described in terms of a **"top-down"** authority because they establish a game's "architecture" (Neitzel; Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon; Domsch). The latter includes the game's setting, rules and mechanics of interaction and textual generation. In this context, their aim is to establish a coherent and unified notion of an "ideal game" for the players to strive for. This position can be seen as being diametrically opposed to that of the players, whose modes of interacting with, appropriating and subverting the game space may be described in terms of a **"bottom-up"** form of authority (ibid.). This notion, as we will see below, is all the more relevant in TRPGs, where players can directly access the "code" of the game's artifact. As Grouling Cover puts it, "[f]ace-to-face gaming allows for players' imaginations to dictate the situation rather than the code of a computer environment" (125). In this context, however, game masters can be described in terms of a **hybrid authority** in the sense that they generally mediate between the interests or "agendas" of designers and players (see Figure 16). At the same time, however, they are invested with a high degree of control over the storyworld, allowing them to pursue - and, in some cases even enforce - creative agendas of their own. This creates an asymmetrical power relationship between TRPG participants in terms of their direct influence upon the game's narrative and their agency within its diegesis. This can be seen reflected in the two distinct forms of engagement with the text available to TRPG players; namely 'role-play', which is character-based or performative and 'narrative-play' which is text-based or discursive. In the first case, players are typically granted

exclusive authority over a single 'player-character' (or PC) and an agency which is limited (Hammer) in accordance with that character's 'alethic endowment', understood as "[t]he sum of [its] physical, instrumental, and mental capacities" (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 118). Narrative play, on the other hand, allows a participant (typically the GM) to exert character-based, world-building and narrative agency simultaneously over the diegesis, putting them not only in control of the game's plot, but also of its discourse. From this point of view, participants' occasional shifting between these modes of engagement is often "marked" as a strategy of diegetic negotiation; one that empowers non-GM players, in particular, by allowing them to extend their agency and authority beyond the limitations of their character.

Figure 18 Gameplay Framings in TRPGs



While the categories we have discussed above will help us better understand the process of narrative generation during gameplay (see Figure 18), it is important to note that it is nearly impossible to cover all aspects of framing available in a TRPG.

In the following pages I will therefore focus exemplarily on some of the most notorious framing features rather than attempting a thorough classification of gameplay framing strategies.

Contextual Framings: Marking the Space of Play

Contextual framings refer to codings on the level of real-world discourse that activate specific cognitive meta-concepts affecting the perception of a game's diegesis: What game will be played? By whom? Using which (house) rules? In whose bedroom, attic or cellar? These decisions are not only important for their immediate practical applications, they also trigger expectations concerning a game's narrative. Additionally, these framings may have a paratextual function - in the sense of being an introductory threshold - when used by players to symbolically delimit the game's virtual ludic space, thereby activating the 'transformation rules' that enable the production of the fictional diegesis (Fine; Montola, "On the Edge of the Magic Circle"). In other words, they constitute the basis upon which actual gameplay is made possible by defining the 'magic circle' of play and the 'social agreements' that keep it in place. Finally, contextual framings may be used during gameplay to "mark" the physical play-space itself, allowing players to influence each other's cognitive and affective perception of the game-world. When preceding gameplay, contextual framing typically occurs in the form of:

- (Choice of) Game System: Whether it is a "hack and slash" adventure platform, a GM-less, generic game system or one that is focused on interpersonal drama, the collective and explicit decision to play a specific game is one of the most important markers of a group's points of interest, expectations and intended sources of pleasure. It is this decision that effectively activates the sourcebook's

framings as part of the gaming group's social agreement. As noted by Hammer: "the starting point for negotiation is usually based in the expectations for the game genre being played" (86).

- Player constellation: not only the number of players, but the reciprocal knowledge participants may or may not have of each other - their personalities, backgrounds, interests and playing styles - may strongly affect narrative expectations. This is somewhat similar to one's knowledge of a film's or play's cast before the show, where certain actors are prone to play certain roles rather than others. In this regard, GM's may prepare differently when looking forward to a session with their own troupe or with a group of strangers at a convention.¹⁰⁹ Conversely, players may rely on their knowledge about a GM's preferred style of play when preparing for a game. In an interview given by Yuri Lowenthal at the beginning of the *Titansgrave* campaign, for example, he admitted to putting more effort than usual on the creation of his character's backstory in view of Wheaton's focus on "deep" role play. As he explained,

[F]or this game, I knew it was going to be, because Wil was directing it, I knew story and character was going to be huge, and so I thought this time, rather than trying to make the perfect, you know, most flawless character, I was going to try to make a character with a lot of conflict, and a lot of problems and a lot of back-story and a lot of issues. (Geek & Sundry, *Titansgrave* BTS: Inventing Characters 5:00)

¹⁰⁹ In the latter case, for example, pre-generated player characters are often used, both for reasons of expediency and also in order to compensate for the GM's lack of knowledge about the individual participant players.

- Location (and time) of game: whether playing in a living room, park or local game store, the place chosen for a game can be an important factor in determining player attitudes and engagement with the game's diegesis. Playing in closed spaces not only grants players more privacy, it also allows for more control of the game's immediate physical surroundings. On the other hand, playing in open spaces, either public or private may be used to create or highlight specific aesthetic effects and emotional responses. We will address both these issues latter on.
- Duration of play: gaming groups often agree beforehand as to the temporal extension of a particular session. This decision may affect the group's initial game choice - a 'one shot' vs. a game focused on developing long chronicles -, as well as the expectations concerning the type of narrative that will be generated during play. So, for example, longer sessions generally activate frames such as 'exploration' 'sandbox' and 'strategic gameplay.' Shorter sessions, on the other hand tend to activate notions such as 'action-packed' storytelling and 'goal-oriented' gameplay.

Contextual framings may also have a transitional function when occurring in initial position, at the beginning of gameplay. Contrary to activities such as sports or board games - or even to related activities such as LARP - TRPGs do not occur within a space that is formally or physically delimited *a priori*. Because of this, it is particularly important for players to demarcate the "boundary" between the real world and the game at the outset of play. Dimming the lights, playing background music or turning off cell phones are typical examples of contextual

'markers' that indicate the initiation of play.¹¹⁰ Domsch describes this as "a process of both de-semanticization and re-semanticization" (18) which is key in marking the boundaries of the participants' different 'awareness contexts.' As he explains,

[s]tarting a game, players choose to ignore all of the world knowledge about themselves, other players, or the game system that they encounter, insofar as it is not part of playing the game. This is what it means to step into the magic circle.' [...] Within the game, everything that is not part of the game has no meaning, but the things that are in the game can have a meaning that is nowhere but in the game. Thus, players understand and accept game rules in a way that is analogous to the way that readers of fiction understand and accept fictional propositions. (ibid.)

Contemporary games and game designers have recognized the impact of this form of "border marking" on the experience of play, often addressing the issue explicitly. In the core-rulebook to *Houses of the Blooded*, for example, John Wick describes the use of music and the lighting of a candle as a form of "ritual passage" from the real world into the game and its corresponding fictional world:

¹¹⁰ These forms of contextual framing are functionally equivalent to the curtain roll and the dimming of lights in cinema or theater. The main difference, however, is that the physical surroundings themselves have an added mutability that is unavailable in other media. All of these are markers that serve to establish the magic circle of the game's fictional play-space.

As soon as the song is over, I give a brief reminder of what's happened so far. Then, the game starts. As long as the candle remains lit, the game is on. Monty Python quotes, questions about this week's episode of *Heroes*, Star Trek invokes are all Bad Form [sic]. (374)

As reflected by the above quote, contextual framings are especially important in allowing players to establish the so-called 'magic circle' of play by invoking the group's social agreement; the special rules they ascribe to during play. These rules not only "activate" a game's diegesis, they may also mark the different areas of authority and agency within the game - distinguishing, for example, between GMs and other players - or set limitations to exogenous activities during the session.¹¹¹ By indicating the beginning of gameplay, contextual framings establish these rules to be operative. In addition, they may also be used to influence players' cognitive and emotional responses to the game's fiction. This is particularly notorious in the common practice of coding the physical space by using sensory stimuli.¹¹² As Lopenen and Montola have observed:

Probably the most often used allegoric symbols in tabletop games are the background music and the non-diegetic lighting. [...] [T]hough the extradiegetic

¹¹¹ Gaming groups commonly choose to sanction behavior that is perceived to be disruptive of the magic circle. A GM might, for example, establish penalties on players' rolls if they attend to external phone calls during the game or engage in extensive out of game conversations. While eating chips or - hopefully - going to the bathroom may be accepted, non-game activities such as going outside for a smoking break or turning on the TV to see the result of a football match might not be tolerated.

¹¹² Due to their physical co-presence, TRPG players not only can use music and lighting - that is auditory and visual *stimuli* - but also smell, taste and touch to affect the perception of the game's fictional world.

background music is not indexically present in diegetic framework, its allegorised interpretations affect the feelings of the characters and the mood of the diegetic world. (48-49)

In fact, reflecting the importance given to such framing elements, Benjamin Loomes, one of the leading members of the *Dice Stormers* TRPG group, has developed *Syrinscape*, a software application that allows players to dynamically adapt a game's soundscape according to the current diegetic situation. Again, this is something that is often encouraged in contemporary TRPGs. For example, although the sourcebook to Meguey Baker's *A Thousand and One Nights* is only a few pages long, the author goes into great depth in describing the 'ideal conditions' for the playing of the game:

Consider the space in which you play: Can you burn incense or candles? Can you have tart grapes and dates and honeyed drink and sharp peppery crackers? Can you have music softly in the background? [...] Food and drink you might consider evocative of the setting and appropriate to eat while you play: coffee, raisin wine, shaved ice with fruit syrups anise seed drink, mint tea, fruit juices dates, figs, cashews, walnuts olive oil with crushed garlic and sea-salt, with vegetables to dip saffron rice with cashews and raisins almond coil cake hummus and pita tabouleh - bulgur wheat salad with onions, parsley, lemon, cucumber, mint grape leaves stuffed with lamb and rice baklava - pistachios and honey pastry roast goat or lamb with coriander, cumin and pepper babaganoush - roast eggplant purée with

spices zalata - yogurt, cucumbers, herbs lentil and vegetable stew fried pudding with syrup rabbit or fowl, marinated and roasted, with herbs and couscous or rice. oranges, pomegranates, peaches, grapes, apricots sugared cubes of jellied fruit tagine - meat or vegetable stew on couscous grape leaves stuffed with raisins, rice and almonds honey candy rich with sesame seeds, almonds, cashews or pistachios. (M. Baker 6-7)

Contextual framings may thus also foster a sense of immersion in the game world by means of using sensory stimuli that are evocative of the setting or genre of game being played. Not only has this been discussed by contemporary game designers, it has also been successfully exploited in a number of recent games which have made contextual framings an integral part of their mechanics. Such is the case of the game *Ten Candles* by Stephen Dewey. During each phase of game preparation, players are required to light up a candle. As each of these successively burns out or is extinguished during gameplay, the current scene ends. When the last candle goes out, the game reaches its end with all remaining characters finally succumbing to the darkness. Not only does this make the candles the game's main pacing mechanic but, by requiring players to use them as the sole source of lighting during play, it connects the fictional and the real world, creating a powerful effect of helplessness, claustrophobia and despair. This is because, as the game progresses, the actual surroundings of the player group become darker and darker, reflecting both the darkening of the fictional world together with the imminent demise of the fiction's characters. The effect becomes most notorious with the last candle as it embodies the characters' final moments, after

which there is only death and darkness.¹¹³ In this regard, the framing helps create a heightened sense of engrossment in the diegesis, reinforcing the group's social agreement by marking a strong boundary between the game and the outside world.

Figure 19 *Ten Candles* (Game Session)



Furthermore, the time constraint introduced by the burning candles means that any interruptions will tend to be either completely avoided or kept as short as possible. This encourages a playing style that will strive to maintain the immediacy of

¹¹³ Indeed, the suspense of seeing the flame weakly flickering and the feeling of emptiness left after it finally goes dark constitutes one of the strongest emotional experiences in the game.

the "pretense awareness context" (Fine) while avoiding external distractions. Such features, again, add to the overall suspense and intensity of the game. From this point of view, the use of contextual framing to encourage immersive gameplay can be seen as a natural counterpart to what we will describe further on as 'pervasive framing.' Where the latter works by seemingly merging together the diegetic and the non-representational world so that both may appear together simultaneously, immersive framing strategies generally work by inducing the player to "forget" the real-world context altogether¹¹⁴ (see Karhulahti; Mäyrä; Torner and White).

In view of the aforementioned, we can say that contextual framings are essential in order to establish, activate and maintain the 'magic circle' of play by means of a gaming group's social agreement. The latter will define the group's idiosyncratic playing style while meaningfully shaping the emergent diegesis and narrative discourse of the game. Additionally, the codings of the physical space of reception of a TRPG can have a great impact on players' emotional response and sense of engagement in the narrative, in particular when used to cross the boundaries between the real and the fictional world.

Meta-textual Framings: Playing with Fiction

Meta-textual framings are markers on the level of game frame discourse that code players' interpretation and production of diegetic text during gameplay. As mentioned earlier, TRPGs are particular for the way in which they allow players to

¹¹⁴ This, however, is not to say that these are completely mutually exclusive framing strategies. Indeed, examples such as that of *Ten Candles* discussed above can be both immersive - in the sense of generating in the players deep emotional and cognitive engagement with the diegesis - while also being pervasive by having the physical context of the game - in this case the progressive darkening of the players' surroundings - correspond with that of the game's characters - whose world is also becoming darker and darker.

simultaneously integrate diegetic narration and meta-game discourse or "textual commentary." The latter is defined by Domsch as:

...all textual elements that reflect on the way that a game is being played and that directly provide information about the game's rules. These are often commands directed at the player instead of the player character and refer to the game as game, for example to the real-life interface the player is using ('Press x rapidly'). But it can also be information about the game's state (again: as game), for example the (numerical) value indicating the amount of damage that an attack has just caused. Such a number is not part of the storyworld (though its relative value might be). (25)

Although Domsch is explicitly addressing videogames, his observation applies equally well to analog games. Developing this idea a bit further, I propose a general classification of meta-textual discourse in TRPGs based on its specific function:¹¹⁵

- **Procedural:** Related to the direct implementation of the game's rules and mechanics. This includes dice rolls, but also statements regarding the operation of a game's mechanics such as "Give me a perception roll", "I'll establish the scene" or "It's your turn."

¹¹⁵ Grouling-Cover recognizes two types of "discourse" within the game frame: "*narrative suggestions* and *dice rolls*" (99). I believe it is necessary to expand this further in order to appreciate the complexities involved in participants' meta-textual exchanges.

- **Corroborative/Simulative:** Explicit negotiation as to the current state of the fictional world and the alethic conditions of such state. In the first case, players seek to foster 'equifinality' in the sense of ensuring that their interpretations concerning the diegesis "are similar enough to cause indistinguishable consequences" (Loponen and Montola 40). This is done by answering the question "what is happening/happened in the storyworld?"; the second is related to determining what is *possible* by answering the question "what can *I* (as a character) do?" Examples of the former are phrases such as "So, the room is *completely* dark?" or "You dropped the gun *before* jumping across the ledge." On the other hand, statements such as "Could I take a shot at her from behind the bushes?" Or "Is there any chance they might hear us if we slip in through the back door?" are related to the simulated properties of the fictional world and its inhabitants.
- **Arbitrational:** Related to the *negotiation* of game rules and the discussion of *strategies* derived from them. It involves statements aimed at determining *when* and *how* specific rules apply as well the assessment of an action's potential consequences (i.e. advantages or disadvantages) in terms of the game's mechanics. Examples of the first are phrases such as "Shouldn't there be a saving throw for that kind of spell?" or "Your mental control only works on humans." An example of the second case would be a phrase such as "If I drink the potion first, I will have enough stamina to jump out of the window and get to the spaceship on time, but I'll probably miss the chance of giving the monster a final blow."
- **Poetic:** Related to the representational and semantic nature of the TRPG diegesis. It involves discussions regarding the narrative discourse itself (*how* the story is conveyed), players' interpretation of in-game events (*why* something

happened) and their thoughts and feelings concerning such events (*affective*). Examples include statements concerning the aesthetic evaluation of the story - "The leader's death seemed more like a *deus ex machina* to me" - explicit intertextual references - "Right now I feel like Sancho Panza" - and narrative suggestions - "It would be amazing if there were flames spinning around in mid-air" that can or cannot be introduced into the actual narrative.

Although all forms of meta-textual discourse may, at least in theory, be used as diegetic framings in the sense of activating specific cognitive frames,¹¹⁶ it is the poetic one that is of most interest to us here. This is because it concerns the "additional agreements" (Wolf) that define the diegesis as a space of semantic potential rather than a "mere" world simulation. In this regard, by commenting on the representational aspects of the game, players may explicitly trigger relevant frames; indicate sources of narrative interest and pleasure or relativize and therefore "re-frame" diegetic events. In order to demonstrate this, I will explain and discuss one of the most representative forms of meta-textual framing in the following pages. More specifically, we will look at how participants create secondary play-spaces via "mock role-play", a strategy that allows them to enact fantasies and desires which are restricted within the "canonical" diegetic framework.

¹¹⁶ For example, the meta-concept 'tension' or 'danger' may be triggered by requesting players for a specific dice roll (typically called a 'perception' role). Corroborative speech is also a way of shaping the diegesis by implying or directly proposing (i.e. "lobbying" for) a "canon" or conventional reading of a scene. This can allow players to advance their own interests. The same goes for arbitrational and ludic meta-discourses. Additionally, the tendency to focus on certain types of meta-discourse rather than others may reveal the creative agendas of players in a group. Thus, gamist players will tend to focus on arbitrational and ludic discussion while simulationists might be more prone to focus on corroboration and storyworld coherence. Narrativists, for their part will spend more time discussing the poetic aspects of the game aiming at creating an engaging, "well-told" story.

"Mock Role-play"

Perhaps one of the most characteristic forms of meta-textual framing in TRPGs is what I would like to call "mock role-play" (MRP). By this I refer to a form of discourse that emulates diegetic play but is marked as different from it by explicitly bypassing one or more of the game's constitutive rules. This can be in terms of players' allocated domains of authority and agency or the ontological status, modal structure or narrative coherence of the fictional world. In the first case, players may appear to take control of characters or diegetic elements which are outside their given "jurisdiction." Speaking or acting for another player character or NPC is a typical example.¹¹⁷ Additionally, they may introduce elements which are at direct odds with the storyworld's modal laws or with its coherence in terms of genre or narrative development. To illustrate this, let us have a look at an example from *the Dice Stormers' Pathfinder* campaign "Becoming Mythic." The following interaction is between Jon and Ben, who is acting as the session's GM. During the preceding exchange, Jon's character failed his attempt at crossing a small river to reach a battlefield on the other side. After slipping and being dragged downstream by the water (at the high cost of two full rounds of battle) he finally manages to succeed, only to find the fight moving back again towards the opposite shore:

1. Jon: "Oh, how do I get across this 5-foot river?"
2. (general laughter)

¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, as we have explained above, a certain amount of player freedom such as the spontaneous "ad-libbing" of gameworld elements or NPCs is often accepted as part of a group's idiosyncratic playing style.

3. Ben (GM): I think you can get across this turn. Come on, give us a roll.
4. (Jon rolls successfully)
5. Ok you make it across the river
6. (General laughter)
7. Jon: The river actually drops down just at that moment.
8. Ben: ha ha! the river parts!
9. Jon: Or like a turtle, a turtle appears, and I step on the turtle and I get across.
10. Ben. (sings theatrically and mimics a person walking gallantly) ("Pathfinder RPG: Becoming Mythic," 17:10 - 17:40)

Although Jon's initial statement sets the general tone of the scene ('comedy'), most of the exchange until [6] is related to the simulative aspect of the game (procedural discourse). With his description of the river level sinking [7], however, Jon begins "mock roleplaying" by trespassing the game's rules in two distinctive ways: First of all, because the description of the fictional world's state in a "traditional" TRPG such as *Pathfinder* generally falls under the exclusive authority of the GM, in this case Ben. Secondly, because the river's sudden change in volume - while theoretically (com)possible in a fantasy setting that allows for magic - has no explanation from a diegetic perspective and is therefore incoherent with the game's current situation. As a result of the above, Jon's statement establishes a mock role-play frame that codes the players' further interaction as 'non-actualized' or 'non-serious.' Acting

within this new framework, Ben adds his own, further exaggerated, "mock version" of the crossing by describing the parting of the waters [8]; a version that is, for its part, immediately trumped by Jon who adds in the sudden and even more unlikely appearance of a turtle [9].

Figure 20 *The Dice Stormers "Becoming Mythic": The players negotiate the miraculous crossing of the river by Jon's character.*



Staging the successful crossing as a nearly miraculous event, the players put the previous situation into perspective; the irony of a heroic character finding great difficulty in overcoming what should be an otherwise easy challenge. More importantly, as made evident by the ongoing laughter, and the players' way of continuously outdoing each other in their descriptions, mock-role-playing allows them to draw pleasure from what could otherwise be seen as a disruption to the game's narrative flow and coherence. This implies therefore a process of re-signification where the character's failure - which in TRPGs generally entails a certain amount of player frustration

- is re-assigned a form of positive value. In this regard, rather than fostering agreement as to what "actually" happened on a diegetic level ('equifinality'), the different river crossing versions allow the game's participants to *play with the fiction itself*, effectively creating a game within the game (or, perhaps more precisely, at its borders). **Mock role-play may therefore be described in terms of a secondary magic circle; one that creates a temporary space of transaction and pleasure realization that accompanies the main text or diegesis.** This allows participants to integrate disparate elements into the game without directly conflicting with the actual diegesis. Players can therefore momentarily play out fantasies and fulfill desires that are otherwise seemingly incompatible with the game. In order to illustrate this more clearly, let us have a look at the following example from Episode 7 of *Critical Role* where Taliesin Jaffe's character *Percy* has just attacked a *Dueregar* (Black Dwarf) and left him unconscious on the ground:

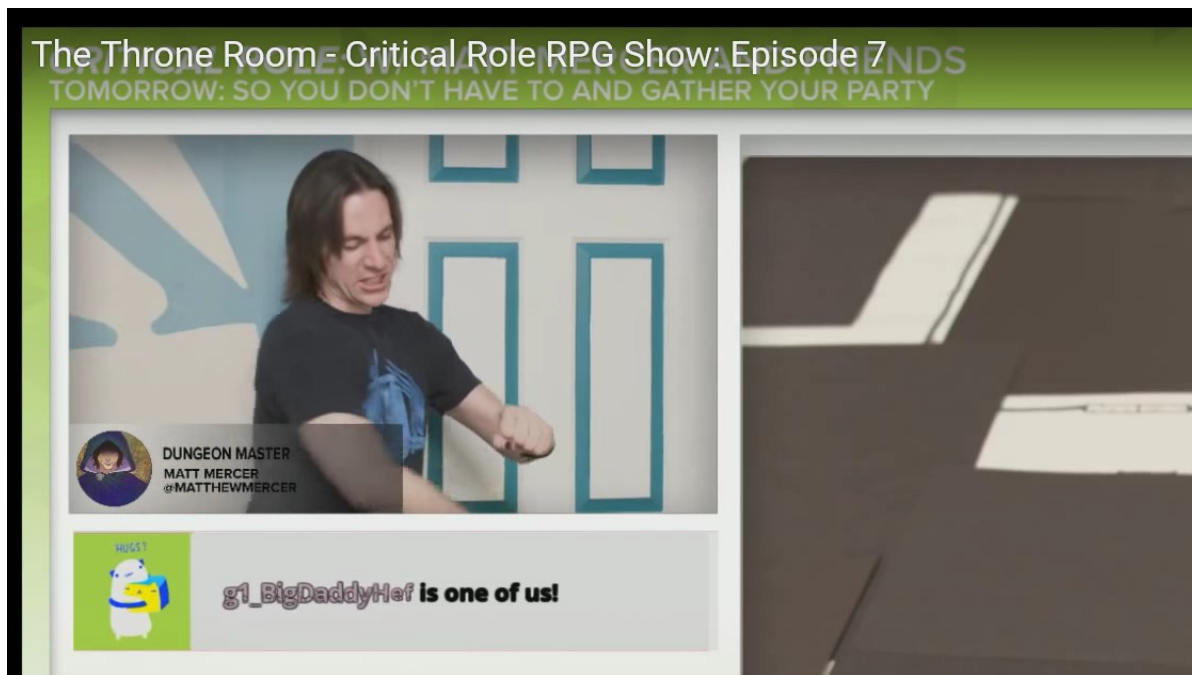
1. Johnson (*Pyke*): He's not dead? So, he's at a disadvantage basically?
2. Mercer (*GM*): He's incapacitated.
3. Johnson: So, can I go up to him and slit his throat with my mace of disruption?
4. [Gasps from fellow players]
5. Riegel: (")Whoah Pyke! (")
6. Mercer: [smirking] you... you...
7. Johnson: [interrupting] to make sure he's dead?
8. Mercer: [grinning skeptically] if you would like to...

9. Johnson: Yes, I want to.
10. Mercer: ok.
11. [gasps, laughter and astonished looks from the group]
12. Bailey: That's really bad.
13. Johnson: Is that really bad though?
14. Mercer: Pyke walks up and grasps the back of the Dueregar's hair, pulls it back and using the jagged edge of her mace of disruption [makes tearing noise] tears open the throat of the Dueregar which then spills all of this blackish ichor across the ground.
15. O'Brian: [to the camera] She's going renegade folks, she's going renegade...
16. Johnson: I just wanted to make sure he didn't come after us again!
17. Bailey: Pyke! [astonished laughs from the group]
18. Mercer: Grog looks impressed and but [sic.] also slightly worried as the man who grew up alongside you.
19. Mercer: ... alright, so that happened...
20. [group laughter]
21. O'Brian: And then she says: "ok I'm gonna' dismember the body, hold on" tsch tsch [Makes "cutting" sounds while physically mimicking cutting with a saw]. [group laughter]

("The Throne Room," 39:00-40:20)

In the example, Ashley Johnson's character *Pyke* takes an action that is at stark odds with her background and her moral "alignment" (a priest of healing who is "good" by nature) [3].¹¹⁸ Not only does she kill an opponent who is already out of combat and thus completely defenseless, but she does so in an unnervingly brutal manner. While this might be something that another PC such as Travis Willingham's barbarian character *Grog* might do without a second thought, Johnson's fellow players are quick in taking note of the character's unexpected cruelty [4-8].¹¹⁹

Figure 21 Critical Role "The Throne Room": Mercer describes *Pyke*'s killing of the Dwarf.



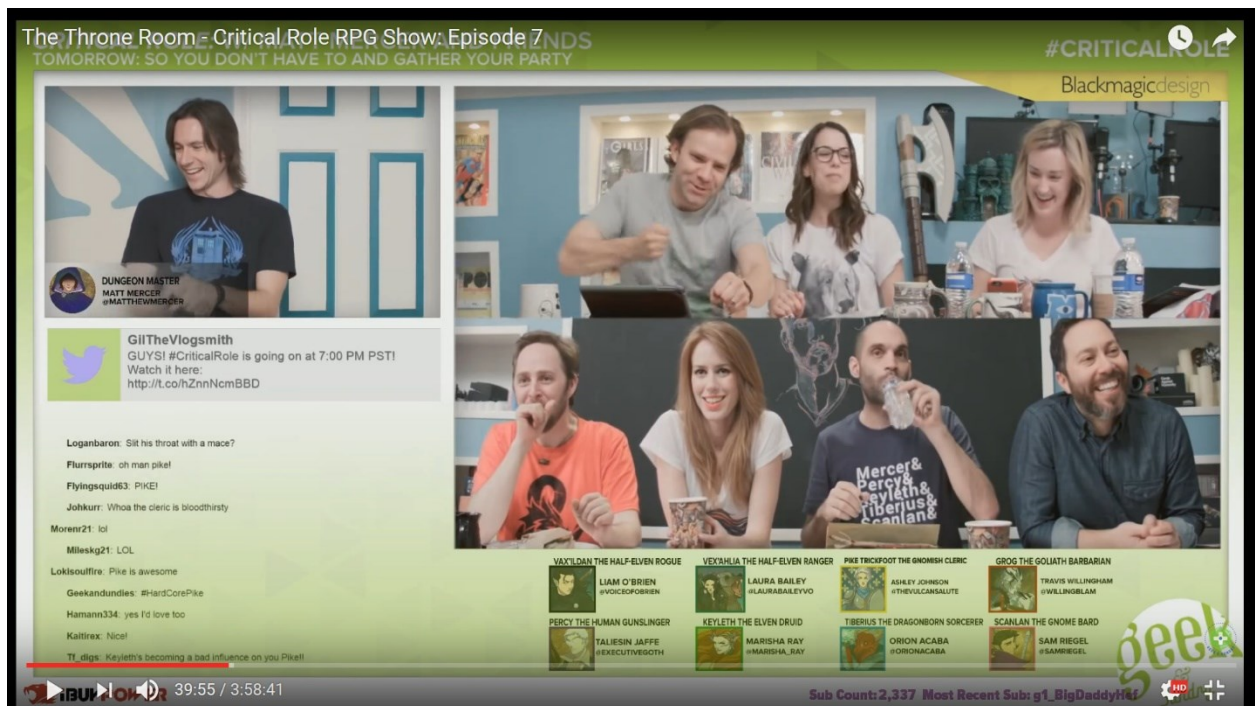
Following Johnson's confirmation of intention [9], Bailey explicitly describes the action as being 'bad', thus introducing the frame 'morality' to the exchange [12]. Reacting to this,

¹¹⁸ Characters in *D&D* are categorized according to their "alignment." This establishes specific guiding principles for the players regarding their characters' moral and ethical values. See chapter five ("Rules") for a discussion on the function of such categorizations.

¹¹⁹ In fact, Mercer's undecided reaction in [6] can be seen as an example of 'corroborative' meta-game speech; a request for clarification in order to establish whether Johnson's statement is "actual" or "mock" role-play.

Johnson hesitates for a moment [13] just as Mercer describes and thus 'actualizes' the gruesome execution [14] (see Figure 21).¹²⁰ Responding to this, Johnson attempts to negotiate the scene's interpretation by validating (or relativizing) her action as a strategic necessity [16]. Mercer, however counters this by describing the perplexed reaction of the barbarian character *Grog*, one of the closest friends to *Pyke* [18]. His portrayal is an effective way of intra-textually (re-)framing the scene's impact: If *Grog* is made uneasy by this, then it must be a big deal.

Figure 22 Critical Role "The Throne Room": O'Brien 'mock role-plays' the dismembering of the Dwarf by Johnson's character Pyke.



At this point, O'Brien begins "mock role-playing" Johnson's character [21]. By pretending to play *Pyke* - which under normal circumstances is "out of bounds" for him as part of the contract of authority concerning PCs in *D&D* - O'Brien stresses the shock

¹²⁰ The detail of Mercer's description here is relevant in view of the fact that the executed NPC in question is of no major importance for the development of the narrative. By spotlighting the event, Mercer's intervention functions as a textual framing that comments on *Pyke's* behavior.

of the situation, taking it to a make-believe superlative. Not only does the brief interjection further highlight the unexpectedness of the situation, but there is evidently a sense of enjoyment in O'Brien's pretended exaggeration; a feeling that is shared by the group as reflected by the general laughter (Figure 22). Within this context, the intervention is particularly revealing because it entails a "deeper" interpretation of the scene. From this perspective, Johnson's action can be perceived as an expression of her (unfulfilled) desire to escape the prescribed conceptual rules associated to her character. Or, diegetically, of her character's need to challenge the social expectations surrounding her role as a priest. The scene, therefore, reflects the conflict between the player's desires and the restrictions that exclude both her and her character from participating in the exercise of gratuitous violence; an activity often favored and celebrated by the group. In this context, O'Brien's portrayal of *Pyke* in an act of extreme brutality can be "read" as a form of both individual and collective wish fulfillment.¹²¹ But whereas Johnson's action entails actual 'in-game' consequences,¹²² O'Brien's contribution is marked as occurring outside of the diegesis proper and is therefore "free" of a diegetic "follow up."

As we have seen, mock role-play is a form of game commentary that emulates diegetic play, but which is marked as different from it by overstepping one or more of the game's constitutive rules. This occurs mostly, but not exclusively, in terms of the narrative and/or stylistic coherence of the diegesis. Unlike

¹²¹ In fact, this interpretation now seems to have been corroborated by Johnson's decision to play a barbarian warrior in the new season of the show.

¹²² Indeed, as a direct result of the killing, *Pyke's* amulet - a token of her connection with her deity - became cracked, resulting in her having to make amends at a temple encountered by the group later on in the game.

cheating, however, where "[t]he advantage falls to the cheater because the cheated person misperceives what is assumed to be the real world" (Bell and Whaley 47), mock role-play is a form of rule-bending that is self-disclosing. As such, it does not disrupt but rather invokes the game's diegetic border or magic circle. This allows us to relate mock role-play to Birke and Christ's notion of "dissonant paratexts" which typically present the audience with information that is at odds (i.e. is "dissonant") with the main text. In the case of a film, for example, this occurs "when a deleted scene shows an alternative ending" (73). In such situations, as they explain,

the audience is not invited to see the paratextual elements as simply adding to the fictional universe; instead, **such elements indicate that the fictional universe could have been constructed differently and thus draw attention to the making of the film and stress its status as an artifact.** More explicitly than the consonant diegetic paratextual elements, **the dissonant diegetic elements thus foreground the issue of authorization: they prompt the viewer to think about the choices that have shaped the text of the film and about the interpretive implications of these choices** [my emphasis]. (73)

As with the above, meta-game framings such as mock role-play code player expectations by making them aware of the creative and semantic process they are involved in. By doing so, they encourage TRPG participants to engage in activities of complex hermeneutic interpretation, thereby requiring them to enter states of "deep" rather than "hyper" attention during gameplay (Hayles). This aspect is of particular importance if we consider that 'deep attention' has been taken to be a defining feature

of "non-playable" media (ibid.). The latter, as Hayles argues, involves a subject's heightened focus on a single source of information (such as a print text) without completely losing awareness of the real-world surroundings. 'Hyper attention', in contrast, describes the simultaneous spreading of attention among various tasks and informational sources (such as those available in a multimedial, interactive diegesis) that leads to a "prioritization" of the fictional over the actual world. As such, it has been related almost exclusively to gaming activities (Hayles; Ensslin, "'Womping' the Metazone"). Mock role-play, however, demonstrates how TRPGs make it possible for both of these modes of attention to "coexist" during gameplay, thereby expanding players' possibilities of engagement with the text beyond the limitations of digital media.

Textual Framings: Playing with Narrative

In TRPGs, the term 'textual framing' describes meta-cognitive coding structures that appear at the immediate borders of, or within the game's diegetic interface. As such, they are part of what Domsch calls the "narrative text proper" and are therefore characterized by "only refer[ring] to properties of the storyworld, and [...] not acknowledge[ing] that this storyworld is part of a game" (25-26). As framings, however, they are distinct from the diegesis, conceived as the main spatio-temporal level of the game. Although textual framings in TRPGs show many similarities to - and even borrow directly from - those used in traditional, non-interactive media such as print and film, they also feature major differences (see, for example, J. Thon, "Zur Struktur des Ego-Shooters,"; Parker). For one, the superimposition of the player identities with the narrative voices that generate and mediate the text make the ludo-diegetic border particularly susceptible to crossing. Additionally, because it is a collective and collaborative enterprise, TRPG framings do not code an individual intention, but are themselves

part of the ongoing negotiation between different players and their corresponding expectations, points of interest and narrative pleasure as the game develops. Because of this, we will have a closer look at textual framings as exemplified by four of its more representative forms: backstories; serialization markers, fiction poaching and pervasive border-crossing.

Backstories as Initial Framings

Backstories are one of the most well-recognizable, ubiquitous and influential forms of framing in TRPGs. They can be described as information - often in the form of short narratives - related to the events preceding the diegetic "present" of the game and that constitute the "background" of a specific TRPG character. In general, PC backstories are authored by a single player and are rendered in the form of a written or spoken narrative. This makes them particularly interesting examples of character role-players (rather than GMs) engaging in 'authorial play.' Because they tend to be generated before gameplay proper and shared with other players - in particular the GM - at the outset of the game, backstories function as important initial or entryway framings to the diegetic interface. In this regard they have two major functions: First, they constitute a basis upon which players can portray a character's personality in a convincing and consistent manner throughout the game. Second, they serve to establish and communicate to other participants the 'semantic coordinates' that will determine a player's preferred modes of interaction and sources of pleasure in the game. In conventional TRPGs, backstories constitute therefore a crucial moment of transaction between the GM (a game session's principal authority) and the players (the narrative's main protagonists). In this respect, Machell has stated that for the player "[t]he most important element of any character background ... is telling

the GM either explicitly or implicitly, where [s/he] want[s] to take the character" ("The Problem with Character Backgrounds" par. 13); that is, what kind of stories s/he wants his character to be involved in. Indeed, both the type of character created, as well the background given to them, are instances from which players may affect expectations and interpretations of the game. In the *Vampire Players' Guide*, Myanda Sarro gives a similar relevance to the elaboration of the "prelude" for Vampire characters:

[T]he Prelude is extremely important in the construction of a monstrous character, since it defines who you were before the change and what parts of yourself have become twisted since. I cannot recommend enough playing (or writing) an extended Prelude with your storyteller. Not only can this really enhance your ability to crawl around in your character's head, it also gives the storyteller invaluable clues on how to tailor individual plots and stories for your character [...]. (195)

From the perspective of narrative semantics, character backgrounds generally establish possible sources of conflict for the game's 'future narrative.' As such, they may have a tremendous impact on the development of the game, a fact that is supported by Doležel's statement that it is characters rather than worlds that generate and define fictional narratives (*Heterocosmica* 33-55). In order to observe this more directly, let us have a look at an example from my group's campaign. The following text was submitted as the backstory to one of the game's PCs; the restaurant inspector Mr. Leo Navratil:

"Navratil. With a V. But that should be in your little file there, anyway. Not that there is much more in there."

"Of course I know. In 21 years, there have been three citations, two in '93, one in '97, nothing since. That can't be the reason why I'm suddenly talking to a shrink. I know, I know. All part of the new policy. Veteran city employees in challenging lines of duty yadda yadda psychological evaluation. I get it. Still, I'm not a cop, am I? This is hardly a 'challenging line of duty.'"

"Yeah, but he really didn't mean it. I've known Frank Navarro for a long time, and he's not a bad guy, he just likes to drink a lot. I should've known better than to come on a Saturday, but you know, regulations. He didn't even graze me, not even touch me. Couldn't aim with half a bottle of Captain Morgan in his veins."

"No, I've never been one to drink. I like some beers now and then, but for the job I need my eyes clear and my nose free. Plus, I've seen what alcohol can do to people. Restaurants aren't exactly the most stress-free environment. The more stars, the more stress, the more booze. Or, often, the other way around: the more grime, the more despair, the more booze."

"Hell, I've seen it all. Korean places selling live octopi. No, they're eaten alive. Of course that's illegal. So is putting cocaine in your ketchup packs. Yes, they did that - place in Queens, long closed. There was also this Ukrainian guy in the Village, putting his own blood in his borsht. Said

it would give it some kind of magic. Pity - that was a really good place."

"Pfff. As if that would fuck me up. It takes a lot more. I still like to eat. That's one of the few perks. There's so much amazing stuff out there. It's just better not to know what's in it. What's happening behind the kitchen doors. People are pigs, that's for sure. Actually, pigs are better - at least they do not lie to each other."

"Here we go. Of course you have to ask. No, I haven't spoken to Marlene in a long time. But that doesn't mean we hate each other or anything. Still send her Christmas cards every year. I met her a few months back, taking her youngest shopping for First Communion dress. Still looking fine, though a bit too fat for my taste."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've been seeing other women now and then. I just realised that I'm not made for marriage or family life or any of that. My job takes a lot of time and devotion, and I'm one of the few willing to give it that. The rookies don't get that, but I do. And I intend to give it that time and devotion for a few more years. After that, who knows? I've got a cabin in the Catskills, near where I grew up. Maybe then I'll stick to ham and cranberries, but until then ..."

"You can think what you like, doctor, but I'm not unhappy or sad or lonely. This is the greatest city in the world, and I'm having a backstage pass, seeing all of it, every dirty, nasty, wonderful facet. Hell, I've seen more fucked-up shit than you have, and I wouldn't want to change with you."

The first thing of note here is the style of writing: Presented as an interview transcript, the passage is fragmentary and open ended, leaving several "loose ends" or semantic blanks for the "reader" to fill in. As such, it is in line with the game's intended genre and its literary model of the gothic-horror narrative. The player thus recognizes and further reinforces the game's main guiding frames. On the other hand, the text establishes a number of additional meta-concepts that define the character both affectively and socially, anchoring him within the narrative world. If we were to boil them down, we could list some of the following: 'lonely'; 'emotionally detached'; 'workaholic'; 'hardened'; 'immutable.' Taken together, these elements place Navratil semantically well within the profile of the "noir" detective figure; the lonesome, duty-driven and reckless investigator. In addition, it is important to recognize the text's world-building function. Indeed, not only does it trigger meta-conceptual expectations, it also actualizes the diegesis by introducing characters, locations and events. These elements create a specific potential for dramatic interaction and conflict during gameplay, thereby expanding the game's narrative 'scope.' This is particularly prominent in the reference to Navratil's failed marriage and his dangerous encounters with past enemies. Furthermore, the fact that he is talking to a psychologist makes us suspicious of him, both in terms of his psychological condition as well as his moral integrity. The backstory can be therefore seen as also establishing basic motifs and 'story seeds' that will represent an important asset to the GM in order to fuel and guide character interactions throughout the game. For example, the remote "cabin in the Catskills" mentioned by Navratil immediately sticks out as an inviting *locus* for a horror narrative and one that is featured recurrently in texts of the genre. More importantly, because it was established by the player himself, it could be

easily included in our campaign, a situation I eagerly took advantage of. Thus, when Navratil became infected with a strange form of parasite, it required very little intervention on my part to "lead" the player-characters in their decision to use the cabin as a retreat. Not only was this a plausible "move" from a diegetic perspective - the place offering the isolation necessary for them to attempt curing (or exorcising) Navratil - it also offered (and delivered!) exciting narrative possibilities for the group, a fact that was doubtlessly also recognized by the players. The character of Navratil's ex-wife Marlene, on the other hand, proved to be a useful catalyzer for the development of the story, allowing me as a GM to heighten the stakes of the plot at an important stage of the game. By creating a situation that put her in immediate danger, I was able to exploit the affective relationship hinted at in the backstory to increase the players' feeling of urgency to solve the case.

The above reflects the importance of backstories in expanding the TRPG narrative's 'agential constellation' in a way that is meaningful to the players.¹²³ More importantly, in traditional, GM-based games, it is through these elements that players both express and recognize the divergent expectations and interests present in the gaming group and it is by exploiting the latter that they are able to make each other more invested in the narrative. This also makes the question as to the extent to which backstories are shared with other players (besides the GM) highly significant.¹²⁴ While keeping such information "hidden"

¹²³ As described by Doležel, an 'agential constellation' refers to the characters who "establish interactional contact" in a multi-person world (*Heterocosmica* 97).

¹²⁴ As a general rule in conventional TRPGs, GMs are aware of the full backstory details of each PC before initiating the game. Likewise, any modifications made to a characters' backstory during the game is typically done in consultation with the game master.

in order to reveal it (eventually) via character interaction - for example as an embedded narrative - may add an element of surprise to the game, openly available backstories are an important way of empowering players to influence the overall narrative. In this regard, Torner has described the "specific plot and game elements [that] are revealed to the players over time" in terms of a game's "transparency of information." As he observes, "increasing [...] transparencies confers increased agency on the player, but also increased responsibility over a game's final outcome" (Torner, "Uncertainty").¹²⁵ This is because background knowledge can be used effectively by players to influence character interactions. In one of the campaigns I participated in, for example, my character - a *Samurai* assassin - was secretly in love with one of the palace *geishas*. Having shared this piece of information with my fellow players at the beginning of the game, another participant established that the clan's *Daimyo* or feudal lord was interested in the same woman. This created an ongoing tension for my character throughout the campaign; a situation that was consistently exploited by our group to drive the game's narrative. Other PCs, for example, would often confront my character with the court's gossip involving the *geisha*, the *Daimyo* or, even worse, both of them. As a result, my character became increasingly unstable; torn emotionally between his feelings of abnegation and jealousy towards the *geisha*; those of obligation and anger towards his lord and those of trust and suspicion towards the other members of the clan. In view of the aforementioned, we can assert that backstories not only enable the generation of more coherent narratives but, because they are based on the players' own creative agency and sources of interest, they also work by

¹²⁵ As we will see in chapter seven, many recent games have implemented high information transparency in their design, allowing them to distribute narrative power more equally among players.

enhancing the emotional engagement of the game's participants with the characters and events of the diegesis.

Framing Vast Narratives: Serialization in TRPG Gameplay

Long-term, serialized, TRPG campaigns are often constructed as "vast" or "encyclopedic" narratives, meaning that they are "open ended" texts that may develop - often uninterruptedly and over extended periods of time - independently of the actions of individual players (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person*). As a result, gameplay extends beyond what any single participant may experience and includes a potentially endless amount of characters and events (Grouling Cover). In this regard, framings have the important function of ensuring smooth narrative continuity between episodes while allowing for the entrance and exit of different players and their corresponding characters to the game. In addition, they may be used to signal out moments of internal closure, for example when an objective has been accomplished, an enemy defeated, etc. In fact, both of these functions may occur in tandem with each other as the entrance and exit of characters to the game is often used to mark the "beginnings or endings to narratives within the overarching narrative of [a] campaign" (Grouling Cover 15). This can be observed clearly in the *Critical Role* series as additional protagonist characters - played either as NPCs by Mercer or, more often, as PCs by guest players - generally accompany the party through specific narrative storylines that form part of the overall campaign. A good example of this is actor Khary Payton's¹²⁶ appearance in the role of the mysterious cleric *Shakäste* on one of the first shows of the second season. Payton's character joins the newly formed adventure party at the

¹²⁶ Payton is best known for his acting roles in the popular TV series *General Hospital* and *The Walking Dead*. He also has an extensive background in voice acting, both for film, animation and computer games.

beginning of the session as they begin exploring the mines inhabited by a dangerous group of *gnolls* (a race of humanoid hyenas). After defeating the creatures and liberating the people that were being held prisoners, *Shakäste's* farewell scene serves as a clear episodic "wrap-up" to the session:¹²⁷

1. Payton: *Shakäste* is standing at a distance. Everyone else is walking towards the village. The Duchess [his pet bird] is perched on his shoulder and he's scrawling something in the dirt with that long reed... it's kind of an H... and he fades into the forest.
2. [admiring gasps from the fellow players]
3. Bailey: ahh he's the coolest...
4. Ray: he's so cool...
5. Mercer: [chuckling] And on that note we're gonna [sic.] end tonight's session.
6. [the players cheer]

("Hush," 4:11:00-4:13:00)

Other framing strategies, such as the use of cliffhangers not only create narrative tension and thus interest in the further progression of the story, they ensure the game's continuity by engaging the players in the text beyond the ending of a particular episode.¹²⁸ In this regard, and unlike TV audiences,

¹²⁷ This is also an exemplary case of a character role-player engaging in authorial play. Indeed, Payton's intervention allows him to exert an agency over the game world beyond the limitations of his character, obtaining thereby more influence over the game's narrative discourse.

¹²⁸ A good example of the explicit implementation of cliffhangers as part of a game's mechanics is Robin Laws' game *Hillfolk*.

TRPG players not only spend the time between episodes wondering what will *happen*, but rather what they, as characters, think, feel or want, cognitively preparing for what they will *do* during the following session. A clear example of this form of narrative anticipation was given by my own gaming group when one of the players spontaneously proposed ending a session with a "next time on..." segment. Agreeing to the idea, we decided that each player would describe a short "future scene" involving their character. Not only did the players' ease in coming up with appropriate scenes for their characters reflect their ability to borrow or "poach" framings from other media - in this case from TV series (see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*) -, it also demonstrated the extent to which they were already projecting their actions and expectations beyond the immediate ending of the game session. Here is what they came up with:

Next week on ...

- Officer Valle sits across from Leo and smiles at him: "Now, we can't just forget what you did, Mr Navratil, can we?"
- Theo Venkman, exterminator extraordinaire, opens up the giant fumigation tent around a building: "Okay, let's get this done"
- Rupert, Magnus and Leo, side by side, enter *El Perro Andaluz* - they mean business

While the above created a clear sense of excitement and expectation concerning the following session, it also presented us - and myself in particular, in my role as a GM - with a dilemma. Indeed, accepting these elements as previews of actual scenes to come created a fixed point in the future narrative that was difficult to ensure given the fundamentally emergent nature of the game. As a result, we opted to leave the

actualization of the scenes open to occur at different points during the following sessions rather than in the immediately following one. Nevertheless, the fact that we had agreed to them eventually happening helped maintain our interest during the next couple of meetings while also creating in the group a sense of focus by giving us specific narrative objectives to fulfill. In addition, it allowed us to share the enjoyment of recognizing the scenes as they showed up later on in the game. While this was indeed quite idiosyncratic to our group, it serves to reflect the importance of creative projection for players' engagement with TRPG narratives. Recapitulations or 'recaps', on the other hand, are one of the most easily observable forms of initial framing and serialization "markers" in TRPGs. They are essential in allowing players to keep track of the relevant information concerning the game's developing narrative, especially with regards to the interrelating 'storylines' of the text's multiple (main) characters. In addition, recaps have a major impact in creating the necessary mood for a session, in particular when beginning the latter at or after a moment of climax. This serves the important function of giving players emotional "access" to their characters, enabling them to immerse in performative role-play. A clear example of this occurs at the beginning of episode 13 of *Critical Role* - "*Escape from the Underdark*." The episode, which could be considered the culmination of the first adventure/storyline streamed by the *Vox-Machina* team,¹²⁹ begins immediately after the party has - in a very close call - managed to successfully confront and defeat the monster *K'Varn*. As usual, Mercer begins the session by giving a general overview of the campaign leading up to the current state of events.

¹²⁹ "Vox Machina" was the name adopted by the characters of the adventure group before the beginning of the stream. How the name came to be constitutes the story of the recently released comic book series *Vox Machina Origins*.

1. Mercer: [...] After completing their original mission of finding and rescuing Lady Cheema, the sorcerer from deep beneath the Mountains under the Dwarven City of *Kraghammer*, the party decided to help the latter in destroying the evil force of *K'Varn*. [...] Upon finding their way into the final cavern, [...] [the party] managed to break their way into the temple. [...] Using Tiberius' telekinesis, [they] tore the horn from [*K'Varn's*] forehead and the beholder fell to the ground unmoving and finally killed as opposed to its undead form.
2. Willingham: [under his breath] Son of a bitch...
3. Mercer: And that is where we begin.
4. Mercer: [Increasing his speaking pace; adding emphasis both with his voice as well as his gestures] As you guys all sit around there, looking around yourselves, adrenalin still pumping in your ears, the flow of blood "uuff, uuff, uuff" [makes "beating" sounds] ("Escape from the Underdark," 23:00 - 26:00)

While a good part of this summary, especially regarding general information, is aimed at the game's "outside" viewers - especially newcomers - Mercer's description becomes more and more detailed as he reaches the events of the preceding episode. This allows him to vividly contextualize the current situation and prepare the players to take up on the mood of the session. His statement in [3], furthermore, functions as a clear indication that marks the spatio-temporal border of the magic circle and the beginning of play (contextual framing). This is reinforced by his sudden increase in pace and his description of the heightened emotional content of the scene in [4]. The

group has succeeded in eliminating the greater danger, but they are still deep underneath the earth and in the center of a city full of evil creatures and enemies.

Figure 23 Critical Role "Escape from the Underdark": Mercer uses the recapitulation to frame the beginning of the game session.



Mercer's description not only recalls the immediacy of the situation but also foreshadows the fact that the danger has not been completely overcome. As such, it foregrounds the meta-concepts of 'immediacy', 'excitement' and 'danger.' This is an important effect since the players' performance depends so much on their emotional involvement and sense of immersion in the game (Fine; Mackay).

As we have seen, textual framings are essential in making episodic, serialized storytelling in TRPGs possible as they ensure players' access to and continued engagement with the game and its corresponding diegesis. Moreover, it is these factors that are decisive in contributing to the development of long-term TRPG campaigns into vast narratives, allowing multiple

players to participate (both collectively and individually) in the same fictional space over extended periods of time.

Intertextuality and Fictional Poaching

As mentioned previously, TRPG sourcebooks commonly include references to canonical texts and well-established genre conventions in order to “trigger” a game’s relevant frames or ‘guiding meta-concepts.’ Likewise, TRPG players constantly make use of other texts to construct their own narrative during gameplay.¹³⁰ As Montola notes, “[e]very player’s performance can be a conscious manipulation of tropes and conventions or an unconscious replay of ‘fictive blocks’ to which players have been exposed” (“The Invisible Rules,” 28). However, in contrast to sourcebook-based framing, where intertexts establish overarching frames to a wide spectrum of potential narratives, player generated intertextuality acts specifically upon the gaming group’s diegesis. In view of the aforementioned, we can say that intertextual framing or “poaching” during gameplay has important additional functions that are specific to the TRPG medium. First of all, it facilitates role-play by fostering first-degree interpretive agreement or *equifinality* among players (Loponen and Montola; Fatland). By using well recognizable textual elements, players can quickly breach gaps in their understanding or imagining of diegetic events or situations. Here is an example from a description given by the GM to one of my groups during a spontaneous, ‘one-shot’ game session:

¹³⁰ This is often encouraged by the sourcebooks themselves which generally include lists of reference texts to be used as an inspiration for a player group’s campaign.

He looks like an older version of *Blade* but with blue hair and only one eye. One half of his face is covered by a huge and ragged scar that goes from his scalp way down to his neck so that you can't really see where it ends. It might go down up to his toes for all you know.

The description, while brief, was effective in creating an immediate idea of the character's appearance and attitude. In this regard, the reference to the comic/movie figure *Blade* implicitly carries connotations as to the character's skin color, body build and, quite probably, also his "line of work." As a game master, I found myself frequently using such intertextual references as well, in particular when attempting to create a specific kind of feeling or emotional response in the players. For example, I consistently described the smile of an NPC in our campaign as being similar to that of the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*. This feature was immediately interpreted by the group as a sign of the character's untrustworthiness - quite rightfully so I must add -, giving him an edge of creepiness and mystery that affected the atmosphere surrounding his presence. In addition, intertextuality may be used in order to generate new semantic constellations and meanings. In this regard, Angelina Ilieva has demonstrated how game designers and game-masters in live-action role playing games use intertexts and other 'literary codes' as clues to help players in resolving complications or "riddles" within the game world. As Ilieva puts it, this form of intertextuality makes the game a "mosaic of literary works, amalgamated within the dynamics of discursive interaction and (re)written in a collaborative interpretative endeavor" (33). The above reveals intertextual framing to be a form of pleasurable engagement with the game by means of which players incorporate and reconfigure

other favorite texts or passages of them into their own narrative. This form of appropriation is what Jenkins calls "textual poaching" (*Textual Poachers*). An interesting example of this occurs in Chapter 3 of *Titansgrave*:

1. Alison Haislip: I would also like to know if this lovely merchant would like to buy my old quiver from me.
2. Wheaton: Why don't you ah ... Make a bargaining role?
3. Hank Green: [doing a voice and pretending to be the merchant] "why does it smell like dead bird?" [general laughter]
4. [...] [Haislip makes a successful role]
5. Haislip: Oh, I know what I want to do, hold on! I'm gonna flirt with this gentleman as well.
6. Wheaton: All right, he sort of blushes and like actually kind of giggles a little bit and says "look, I'm going to be honest with you..."
7. Haislip: [tilting her head while grinning flirtatiously] "yeah?"
8. Wheaton: "this is not a very impressive bow..."
9. Wheaton: [now in a slightly aroused voice] "but it ssssmells so strongly of dead bird!"
10. [general laughter]
11. Wheaton: and he kind of like rubs it on himself. [laughter]
12. Bailey: ewww..!
13. Wheaton: and he goes, and he goes... "this is all for me, all for me!" and he gives you another ten gold for it.
14. Group: wooow! [impressed looks on their faces]
15. Wheaton: and he takes it, and he takes it away and he goes "uhh I need... I need my lunch break."

16. All: eww!
17. Haislip: "One more thing, throw in one more arrow."
18. Wheaton: [shaking his head] "I couldn't... possibly... throw in another arrow... [puts his hands up to his nose pretending to hold something between them and breathes in hard] no I'm really, I... [repeats heavy breathing with increasing intensity.] ahhh [breathing heavily] ahhh!"
19. Haislip: "It's not full if I don't have one more arrow."
20. Lowenthal: [laughing] He's Dennis Hopper all of a sudden!
21. Wheaton: [now cupping his hand in front of his nose and mouth as if it were a breathing mask; inhales heavily] eeaaaah! [in a high-pitched voice]
22. Lowenthal: jesus! Hahaha
23. [increasing laughter from the group]
24. Wheaton: "aaaah!!!" He sort of wobbly walks [sic.] from there and goes "It's daddy shithead!" ("Danger at the Market!," 23:30 - 25:10)

In the example, Alison Haislip's character *Killiel* has just acquired a quiver at an armory shop. Immediately after the purchase, she attempts to sell her current quiver back to the merchant [1]. "Mock role-playing" the shop owner, Hank Green makes an intra-textual reference to a prior situation in the game concerning a practical joke which involved the use of a dead bird [3]. It is this humorous reference that triggers the meta-concept 'comedy' as the ensuing frame of the scene; a prompt that is quickly picked up by Wheaton who uses his authority as a GM to actualize the "dead bird smell" within the diegesis [9]. Furthermore, Haislip's declaration of intending to flirt with the shopkeeper after an already successful bargaining role [5] adds - perhaps somewhat awkwardly - the dimensions of 'eroticism' and even 'sexuality' to the situation. As the scene

progresses, both of these framings (Green's and Haislip's) are adopted and combined by Wheaton who continues to build up the description of the shopkeeper's reaction in a comical yet grotesquely weird fashion [9-18]. This is further encouraged by Haislip who, despite her success in obtaining the desired item, still requests to be given yet another arrow [19].

Figure 24 *Titansgrave* "Danger at the Market": Wheaton "poaching" from David Lynch's Film *Blue Velvet*.



At this point it is again the extradiegetic prompting of a player (in this case Yuri Lowenthal) that is adopted by Wheaton to take an already hilarious scene to its excessive climax. Lowenthal's mentioning the actor David Hopper intertextually connects the shopkeeper's bizarre reaction to the "mommy loves you" scene of David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* [20]. Acknowledging the reference and further playing on it, Wheaton immediately reacts by mimicking - and thus "poaching" - Hopper's gas mask with his

hand (compare figures Figure 24 and Figure 25), ending the scene with a direct textual quote from the movie ("Its daddy you shithead!") [20-24].

Figure 25 "Mommy loves you" scene from *Blue Velvet*



The passage is interesting because it illustrates how the group's interaction works in order to create a scene that combines trivial comedy and naïve eroticism with the bizarre, disturbing and explicitly sexual content of the film. It is also important to note the importance of the players' meta-narrative commentary, in particular the impact of those players whose characters were not directly involved in the diegetic action. Rather than following the GM's prompts, it is the players' interventions that guide the development of the scene by means of framing. In this regard, Wheaton succeeds in using the players' prompts and references as a creative asset, including them into the scene and thus adding to the enjoyment and amusement of the group. As Ensslin explains, such practices create "anagnoretic effects" in the players and, as such, are related to the pleasure of recognizing familiar texts within the game space. This, as she notes, "makes players feel on quasi-

familiar territory and can be exploited to evoke tragic, horror, nostalgic, comic and satirical effects" (Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming* 53). The generation of narrative during gameplay thus involves not only the complex relationship of various forms of discourse but also of different (inter)texts. As such, the common knowledge of other fictional texts and media reveals itself to be an important asset for players when involved in such a shared imaginative enterprise. From this point of view, we could say that the fictional code itself becomes a mode of communication in TRPGs, ultimately making fictional "literacy" a form of "gaming capital" as per Mia Consalvo (4).

Pervasiveness in TRPGs: Framing Across Borders

In this final section, we will discuss one of the most unique framing features of TRPGs, namely that of pervasiveness. As described by Montola, Stenros and Waern, pervasive games are characterized by "ha[ving] one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play spatially, temporally or socially" (12). Although most TRPGs take place within the specified social and spatiotemporal context of the game session - and would thereby seem to be excluded from the definition given above - the medium itself inherently affords pervasive play. This is due to the superimposition of discourse levels during gameplay and the fluent boundaries that exist between them. As noted by Henry, in TRPGs "text and story bleed into real life in varying degrees [...]. If we accept this, then it also follows that the world of fiction and fantasy has a fuzzy boundary with the "real world" we live in" (12). Indeed, despite their use of 'keying' to semantically "allocate" speech acts within a particular frame of meaning (Fine), players are constantly crossing the borders between the fictional and the non-representational or 'real' world. Not only do these transitions occur seamlessly during gameplay, they often happen

without players consciously taking notice of them (ibid.).¹³¹ By contrast, pervasive framings can be described as **coding structures that overtly trespass a TRPG's ludo-diegetic border or 'magic circle' in order to extend and/or redefine it.** As such, they involve an explicit, intentional act of transgression on the part of the players. Depending on whether they are established during or beyond the spatiotemporal borders of the game session, pervasive framings may have different effects. In the first case, they may generate direct "cross-talk" between the emergent diegesis and its surrounding discourse levels. This is what I propose calling *pervasive metalepsis*. In the second case, they may enable role-play to transgress the spatiotemporal boundaries of the session, thereby extending the "reach" of the game towards the activities of everyday life. This can be described in terms of *pervasive gameplay* (as by Montola, Stenros, and Wrn). In the following pages we will have a brief look at some of the forms and functions of these two major framing strategies.

Pervasive Metalepsis

Metalepsis is commonly defined in narratology as the crossing of boundaries between narrative levels (Genette, *Narrative Discourse*).¹³² In TRPGs, however, metaleptic transgressions between the diegetic and extradiegetic level(s) have the additional feature of challenging the division between the fictional and the real world. Indeed, despite their semantically constituted function as performers and narrators of the generated text, players always exist non-representationally

¹³¹ For a clear example of this, see the transcription from the *Dice Stormer's Call of Cthulhu* game session in the following section.

¹³² For an in-depth discussion on the notion of metalepsis and related phenomena, see John Pier's contribution to the *Living Handbook of Narratology*.

"outside" of the narrative. Because of this, the extradiegetic level of the TRPG narrative is *simultaneously* the extra-textual level of real-world activity and communication. This superimposition of diegetic and non-diegetic realities means that, rather than being discrete, easily identifiable and exchangeable (as stated by Fine), player identities often become amalgamated during gameplay. For Waskul, TRPG participants are therefore to be seen as being "uniquely situated in the loose boundaries of a person-player-persona trinity [where][t]he distinctions and permeable boundaries between [them] roughly adhere and are related to the more general trinity of reality, imagination, and fantasy" (31-33). This form of "palimpsestic" identity can be best exemplified by the use of the deictic first and second person pronouns to refer alternately and often simultaneously to the player and character. Here is a good example from a session by *The Dice Stormers*:

1. Johnny: can I fire my elephant gun at him?
2. Jon: Sure [...] your elephant gun [...] blows a hole in him and he drops to the ground, giving you a moment to breathe.
3. Jon: Nathan, as you're uncoupling [the train wagons] make a spotting check. ("Call of Cthulhu RPG," 27:00-28:00)

As we see in the example, Johnny's initial statement [1] is a form of corroborative meta-game discourse.¹³³ Nevertheless, both the personal and the possessive pronouns used ('I' and 'my') refer to the character's rather than the player's point of view, as opposed to the question: "can my character shoot his gun?"

¹³³ See previous section ("Meta-textual Framings").

Jon's answer, in contrast, is unequivocally diegetic, with the second person 'you' addressing the character's identity and context exclusively [2]. His following statement, however mixes again both player identities and, therefore, also the game's discourse levels [3]. Indeed, Jon begins by addressing the player's identity (Nathan) as opposed to the character's one (*Tommy the Tongue*). In the same sentence, however, Jon's deictic use of the second person pronoun ('you') refers to the action being carried out by the character in the game world. Thus, where metalepsis in other media may give the *illusion* of overflowing into the real world, TRPGs effectively *allow* the border between real and fictional worlds to be trespassed. This can be most clearly observed when direct cross-communication occurs between character and player identities. Here is an example from an exchange between Laura Bailey and Mathew Mercer from the *Critical Role* campaign:

1. Bailey: (") can I ask a question? (")
2. Mercer [in a deep "Dwarf" voice] "ah yes"
3. Bailey: "not to you, to the other guy, Matt"
4. [General laughter]
5. Mercer: "yes" [changes back to normal voice] yes,
Laura
6. [effusive group laughter]

("Into the Greyspine Mines," 33:45 - 34:00)

In the example, we can observe how the initial misunderstanding between Mercer and Bailey (which is due to an unmarked crossing of the ludo-diegetic border) [1-2] is resolved by the latter's

explicit metaleptic transgression [3]. By speaking 'in character' to the NPC while simultaneously referring to Mercer's non-diegetic identity, Bailey manages to briefly merge the diegetic and the extra-diegetic or 'real-world' discourse levels. While this has the immediate function of retroactively 'keying' her initial statement as being non-diegetic, it does so by challenging rather than reinforcing the ludo-diegetic border. In contrast, Mercer keys his response clearly in [5] by returning to his "normal" voice and explicitly addressing Bailey's real-world identity. As reflected by the group's reaction in [4], there is a definite sense of pleasure in the transgression. In this regard, rather than undermining the illusion of the diegesis, Bailey's act of border-crossing has the effect of making the character seem more realistic in the sense of existing as part of a 'persistent' fictional world (Bartle).¹³⁴ A perhaps more representative example of this form of framing occurs when players have characters react to, or comment on elements that are otherwise understood to exist solely on the exogenous level: the smell of food, the sirens of a passing ambulance, the lightning outside the window, etc. A memorable such episode happened during the funeral of an important NPC in a *D&D* game I participated in. The loud munching of one of the players during the scene eventually prompted another participant to formulate the following request:

1. Player 1: "could you just stop eating those for a second? We're in a church... and it's a funeral"
2. Player 2: "ermm... I... I'm sorry, I just can't stop eating when I'm nervous... or sad"

¹³⁴ We will discuss this idea in more detail further below.

3. Player 1: "Well, you will have to get a grip of yourself then, we're mourning the loss of our nation's mother after all..."

At first sight, both statements may seem ambiguous. The first one, for example, could be simultaneously interpreted as being related to the social contract - one player asking another to quit eating for the sake of appropriate role-play - or to the moral and axiological rules of the game world - a character calling attention to another character's lack of etiquette and manners. Likewise, the second player's response could refer both to his actual as well as his character's emotional state as an explanation for their behavior. However, by maintaining the voice inflection of their characters throughout the exchange, the players explicitly 'keyed' the exchange as being primarily diegetic. From this point of view, player 1's initial statement can be conceived as a form of pervasive framing that overtly trespasses the game's magic circle by introducing what would otherwise seem to be a clearly extra-textual activity into the diegesis. By merging both discourse levels, the players were able to negotiate the terms upon which the scene was to be played out - in this case by including meta-concepts such as 'solemnity', 'anxiety' and 'sadness.' More importantly, the framing also allowed the players to address the game's social agreement without having to "break" the diegetic frame, making the smooth continuation of the game possible. Pervasive metaleptic transgressions can be therefore seen as important framing activities that allow for participants' simultaneous transaction of narrative (diegetic) and social (extra-diegetic or contextual) expectations during gameplay. In this regard, rather than disrupting the latter, they continuously redefine its ludo-diegetic border as the game progresses. In other words, it is the crossing of the border that calls it into existence,

revealing the fundamentally “transceptional” nature of the TRPG medium (Bunia). More importantly, it is players’ awareness of such nature that allows them to fully exploit the TRPG’s affordances in order to collaboratively generate narratives during gameplay. In addition, while metaleptic transitions such as the above may often be used for ‘keying’ purposes or to initiate episodes of “mock” role-play, they may also be used to induce players towards “serious” or immersive play. A good example of this happened during a session I played with my group some years ago:¹³⁵ Our characters were on an investigation mission and had, after much effort, finally managed to track down a possible informant; a mean-looking biker called *Jabber*. Overhearing two of the players’ constant out-of-game (OOG) chatter during their initial and precarious encounter with the NPC, the GM suddenly snapped to them “in character” (IC):

1. GM “what was that you said again, you punk?”
2. P 1: “We were just...”
3. P 2: [interrupting] “...just wondering how fast you can go with such a beauty.” And I advance toward his motorcycle and look at it admiringly.
4. GM: Ok, give me a roll for charisma, both of you.

In the example above, the GM’s initial statement can be said to transgress the game’s ludo-diegetic borders on at least two levels. On the one hand, by implying that the character has overheard the players’ conversation, it actualizes the latter within the game’s diegesis. Of more impact, however, is the

¹³⁵ The game played, Mike Pondsmith’s *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0*. (1988), is a classic example of transmediality in TRPGs, having been based mainly on Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982) which, for its part, was adapted from Philipp K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

character's sudden outburst in response to the exchange, as it seemingly expands the diegesis towards the real world. In other words, while the pervasive transition was from the contextual to the diegetic level, the main effect was one of fictional "overflow" with the game-world "reaching out" towards the players and engulfing them in it. In terms of our affective response, the situation generated an 'uncanny' atmosphere around the character due to the seemingly abnormal nature of his (over)hearing. This emphasized the feeling of danger and aggressiveness already surrounding him while adding meta-conceptual frames such as 'choleric', 'irascible', 'aggressive' and 'suspicious.' More importantly, the transgression had the effect of attracting our attention back towards the diegesis. As such, it can be related to what McCracken has called 'centripetal paratexts', understood as "inward pathways of semiotic engagement" with the text (106). In contrast to 'centrifugal' paratexts, which "draw readers outside the text proper," these textual markers can be said to "modify readers' experience on inward vectors" (107). In this regard, the GM's framing in the example works by marking the exchange as 'serious play', thus encouraging the players' cognitive movement back towards the diegetic frame. Here, again, the framing served the double function of negotiating the group's social agreement while introducing additional meta-conceptual frames to the diegesis. More importantly, this was done from "within" the storyworld itself, thereby avoiding its temporary disruption.

Pervasive Gameplay

As stated above, pervasive games are characterized by blurring the boundaries of the magic circle - the social agreement or "contract" that players ascribe to - and thus by overstepping

borders between “everyday” and play activities.¹³⁶ Consequently, pervasive framings can be most easily recognized when spatiotemporally removed from the game session (asynchronous). One recurring form of this occurs in players’ use of real-world technologies and/or means of communication to continue or extend play beyond game sessions. In the case of my group’s campaign, for example, we would often exchange text messages “in character” (IC) or in reference to the latter as if they were real people. Here is an example of an exchange between myself and one of the players via cell-phone text messaging:

1. GM: magnus, hon, how did that meeting turn out?
been worried bout u...Kissss,Christina [sic.]
2. Player: Sorry, but do I know you? I know noone
[sic.] that goes by that name...
3. GM: Funny, last time we met you seemed to think
otherwise. But it’s ok, you get used to assholes
when you’re in my biz...Just hope I get my pistol
back!
4. Player: Vicky! Why are you sending me messages
under a different name? I am alright, baby. But
things are a bit complicated now. Might take some
time to sort things out...Kisses, baby.

¹³⁶ A recent and highly popular example of such a game is Niantic’s *Pokémon GO* which places virtual pocket monsters (or *Pokémon*) on real-world maps accessed by players’ on their mobile phones. By using the latter’s GPS functionality, players navigate their own physical surroundings as they hunt for more creatures. Nevertheless, the fundamentally pervasive nature of the game has also been a source of controversy with reports of players causing accidents or suffering from injuries as a result of them being inattentive to their surroundings while playing (Griffin; McCormick). An additional source of criticism has been due to security concerns related to government buildings being approached by civilians as well as the existence of other locations deemed to be inappropriate for play - such as cemeteries or former concentration camps (Zraick).

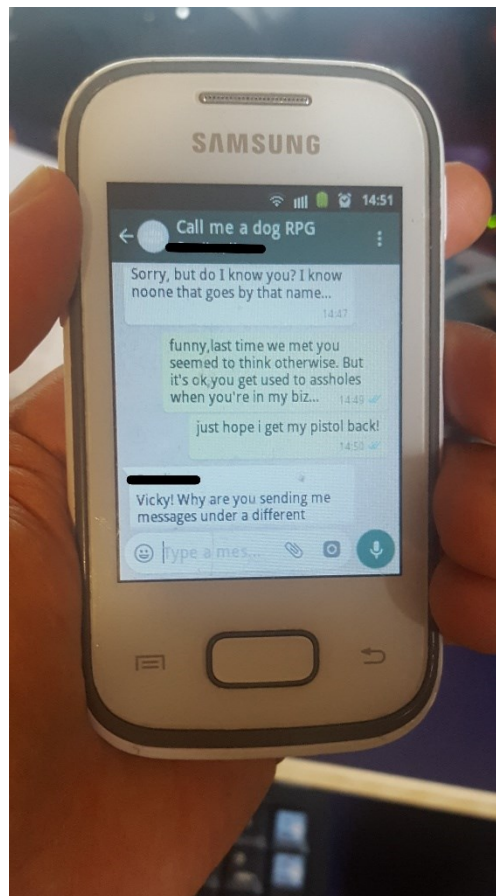
5. GM: You rat! You scared me for a sec. Thought you had my nr on your phone anyway. Christina is my, well, real name, I thought you knew! Anyway, I'm working outta town this week, but hope 2 c u when I get back ☺ [sic.]

6. Magnus: Take care Christina ☺

From a framing perspective, we can say that the use of fictional world referents - in this case, the names of the characters - in the context and via a medium of everyday communication activates the meta-concept '(role-)play', marking a temporary "magic circle" that is superimposed upon a non-playful activity; namely, real-world communication via text messaging. This "new" ludic space, on the other hand, is formally outside the boundaries of regular gameplay and yet - because it emerges from the interaction between the GM and a player - is validated within the diegesis of the game (as opposed to mock role-play). As a result, these episodes may introduce relevant information to the latter while generating additional framing structures to affect the game's narrative development. In the example above, for instance, one of my objectives was to establish the absence of the NPC *Vicky/Christina* for the upcoming game session, knowing that this information would influence the player's plans for our next meeting. In addition, the interaction allowed us to further explore the relationship between the two characters, adding to the latter important meta-concepts such as 'intimacy' and 'trust' which would then inform later encounters between the two. More importantly, the spatiotemporally "displaced" nature of the interaction enhanced the illusion of the diegesis as forming part of a "persistent virtual world" in the sense of Richard Bartle. According to the latter, a fictional or virtual world is persistent when its existence and development are continuous and not bound to player activity or interaction. This

notion of the diegesis as having an existence of its own introduces therefore important meta-concepts such as 'realistic' and 'immersive' role-play. These guiding frames are not only recognized by players but also reinforced by an implicit agreement to maintain the pretense of fictional "persistence" during the full extent of such exchanges.

Figure 26 Pervasive Gameplay: Communication technologies are often used to extend the "reach" of the game towards spaces of everyday activities.



This was particularly evident in the example above as I initially made a mistake concerning the NPC's name which was indeed *Vicky* and not *Christina*. However, rather than "exiting" the temporary play-space in order to clarify the situation, the player opted to role-play through it, allowing me to re-frame the confusion from a diegetic point of view. This negotiation proved to be crucial in order to make the exchange work as intended. Indeed, where 'out-of-game' interactions tend to be compatible with

regular, face-to-face tabletop roleplay, frame breaks may easily disrupt episodes of pervasive play. This is because pervasive framings not only code the game's fictional world, but also the real world of the players.¹³⁷ As such, they have the powerful effect of reconfiguring the relationship between reality and fiction. As Montola, Stenros and Waern have observed, "[s]urprising players by having the game pop up at unexpected times and in unexpected ways is a powerful tool in strengthening the life/game merger [by] giv[ing] players a feeling of freedom regarding their environment and of realness in relation to ludic activities" (102). A good example of this was presented in the form of an email I received from one of the players as part of his character's backstory:

Sehr geehrter Herr Jara,

wie mir Ihre Verlagshomepage verrät, untersteht es Ihrem Aufgabenbereich über neue Probemanuskripte von Schriftstellern zu entscheiden. Vor diesem Hintergrund wende ich mich an Sie. Sollten Sie doch nicht zuständig sein, möchte ich Sie herzlich bitten, mein Anliegen an den verantwortlichen Kollegen weiterzuleiten oder mir einen kurzen Hinweis zu geben, an wen ich mich wenden kann. Ich bedanke mich im Voraus.

Anbei finden Sie einige kurze Exzerpte aus dem Manuskript meiner Autobiografie. Sicherlich werden Sie sich nun fragen, was mein Lebenslauf so

¹³⁷ This is one of the main reasons why live-action RPGs (LARPs) - the most clearly pervasive form of role-play - generally require clearly structured mechanics for out-of-game interaction. In this regard, the spontaneous disruption of the diegetic level is something that is generally avoided, a fact that is reflected in players' use of what Harviainen calls "boundary control" strategies ("Systemic Perspectives" 4).

besonders macht, dass es wert wäre, ein Buch darüber zu schreiben. Hier sind einige kurze biografische Eckdaten.

Mein Name ist Theobald Walker Venkman, Sohn von V&V CEO Williman Venkman. Trotz eines abgeschlossenen Studiums in Stanford arbeite ich heute bewußt in der Schädlingsbekämpfung. Warum? Finden Sie es in den Auszügen meines Buches heraus, von dem 2/3 der ersten Fassung abgeschlossen sind. Ich denke, mein Familienhintergrund und meine Erfahrungen in meinem Beruf stellen einen reichen Fundus an Anekdoten und Einsichten dar. Gerne schicke ich Ihnen weitere Auszüge, sollten Sie sich ein genaueres Bild machen wollen.

Ich verbleibe hochachtungsvoll,

Ihr Theobald Walker Venkman

The message, written 'in character', was sent to my personal email address and - at least *prima facie* - directed to my "real-world" identity. Thus, it had the double effect of framing diegetic material to make it seem realistic while also introducing a "fictionalized" version of myself into the game world.¹³⁸ Not only was this a fun and original way to convey a character's background information, but it also meant that my private and working space was temporarily reconfigured to accommodate a ludic activity. More importantly, it allowed the

¹³⁸ Indeed, in real life I am neither the editor of, nor am I in any way associated to a publishing company.

player to gain authority and thus to exert an important amount of power over the game. This was done on two levels: first, by establishing a number of diegetic elements as part of the character's backstory and, second, by implicitly subverting the relationship between himself as a player and my role as game master. From this point of view, the framing could be seen as an invitation to role-play a fictionalized version of myself within a space that had been generated and defined by the player.

According to Werner Wolf, metaleptic frame-breaks can be described in terms of a "radical defamiliarization" that serves to "undermine aesthetic illusion", "by stretching the (fantasy) potential of imaginary worlds to an unrealistic, even 'impossible' extent" (*Framing Borders* 200-01). In view of the aforementioned, however, I would argue that pervasive framing in TRPGs involves players' conscious trespassing of the fictional-ludic border in order to *create* aesthetic illusion and therefore *enhance* the experience of fictional play. The latter relies on the "twofold dynamic between the playful and the ordinary" that allows participants to "take the pleasure of the game to ordinary life" while bringing "the thrill of immediacy and tangibility of ordinary life to the game" (Montola, Stenros, and Wrn 21).

Framing Horizons: From Player Framing to Game Design

In this chapter we have discussed some of the most particular and well recognizable framing strategies implemented by players in conventional TRPGs. After proposing a typology based on their spatio-temporal and discursive "location" relative to the game's diegesis, we were able to identify and describe gameplay framing in terms of the following major forms and functions:

First, we discussed players' use of **contextual framings** in initial and entryway positions to establish and maintain the

group's social agreement and corresponding "magic circle." As such, they are crucial in negotiating the dynamic borders between the real and the ludo-diegetic world. In addition, by coding the physical space of play, contextual framings have a high impact on players' cognitive and affective response to the game, in particular regarding their sense of immersion in it.

Meta-textual framings, for their part, were shown to enable the ongoing transaction, both implicit and explicit, of the diegesis in terms of individual players' wishes and desires; their 'creative agendas' and the corresponding sources of cognitive and ergodic pleasure entailed by these. By directly addressing the "additional agreements" governing the generation, interpretation and evaluation of the game (W. Wolf, "Framing Fiction"), these framings highlight the constructed nature of the text. This feature, in particular, enables players to establish secondary play-spaces where they may temporarily bypass the game's rules to enact unfulfilled desires and fantasies as exemplified by the activity we have called 'mock role-play.'

Finally, players' use of **textual framing** was revealed to be a unique form of negotiating agency during gameplay, allowing TRPG participants to obtain and exert authorial power over the diegetic world and the discourse rendering it. In addition, we discussed how entryway and closural framing structures are key in supporting players' transition between spectator- and actorship by "anchoring" their characters emotionally within the game world. This is particularly relevant for long-term campaigns as they tend to generate open-ended, 'vast narratives' where players must often negotiate multiple exit and (re-)entry points for their characters (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person; Bartle*). In this context, 'serial' framings were shown to be essential in maintaining player interest and engagement over extended periods of time, thereby ensuring the game's further

continuation. Another feature we discussed was players' use of intertextual references and fictional poaching both as a form of pleasurable engagement with the game's diegesis as well as a way of semantically reconfiguring existing texts within it. In the final section, we looked at pervasiveness as one of the TRPG's most singular framing features. As our analysis revealed, the superimposition of person, player and character identities allow for a constant overflow between real- and fictional worlds. While this often happens inadvertently during play, we demonstrated how participants not only recognize but also exploit this feature as a further possibility of transaction and a unique source of enjoyment. Where pervasive metalepsis allows participants to negotiate the diegesis and the discursive frames surrounding it without "exiting" the game, it is also used to re-direct their attention or 'awareness context' (Fine) "centripetally" back towards the game world (McCracken). More notoriously, when extending beyond the spatiotemporal boundaries of the game session, pervasive role-play may be used to create the illusion of "persistent" fictional worlds (Bartle), granting the diegesis a feeling of realism while "gamifying" everyday spaces of interaction. Most importantly, our observations have revealed the key importance of framing in allowing participants to overcome the inherent difference in authorial power that exists in traditional TRPGs, in particular concerning the player/game-master dynamic. From this point of view, framings can be seen to have emerged as a "democratizing" force that enables the successful collaboration and, ideally, the pleasurable engagement of multiple participants in gameplay. In evident recognition of this, as we will see in the following chapter, independent game designers have begun integrating many of these - initially rather intuitively adopted - framing functions and strategies into their game design.

Chapter 7: Welcome to the Reading Games: Framing Future Narratives

If Jazz is an expression of life, then perfection is certainly not the end goal - life is lived from too many viewpoints to be able to have a "perfection." If you win every time you play, doesn't it get boring? How much challenge and adventure should there be in a life's game - in a musical performance? What are the objectives of the musicians? What does the audience want? How is that determined? Who should determine that? What's the relationship between the performers and the audience? Does the giving and receiving of pleasure have anything to do with it? Do any of these questions really matter? And to whom? - Chick Corea, *Trilogy*

TRPG sourcebooks are, quite undoubtedly, unique textual artifacts that still have to be accounted for by contemporary cultural and literary research.¹³⁹ Within them, fictional information appears inextricably mixed with meta-game discussion and real-world references. Thus, as hybrids between functional and literary text, sourcebooks make any attempt at a holistic definition seem nearly impossible; they may be used both as manuals to create fiction - roughly equivalent to recipe books - and as entertainment texts, despite the fact that they generally do not contain "complete" narratives but rather

¹³⁹ Indeed, despite some notable exceptions, sourcebook analysis is still a rare enterprise among researchers. As we have discussed previously, this is mainly related to game studies' ongoing skepticism concerning the value of applying methods of textual analysis to games. For example, in what is otherwise an enlightening and exemplary demonstration of the possibilities and viability of such an approach, Stenros and Sihvonen seem almost apologetic in their use of sourcebooks to discuss representations of queer sexuality in TRPGs stating emphatically that these "only provide the starting point for role-playing games" (par. 11).

fictional worlds with narrative potential (Bode, Dietrich, and Kranhold; Grouling Cover). Both subservient to and determinant of the game's main diegetic text, sourcebooks can therefore give us invaluable information as to the structures that govern how we share fiction and activities of make-believe in general. In this regard, we have already described in chapter five the specific use and impact of fiction framings in these texts to shape players' expectations, understanding and, consequently, their generation of the diegetic text. In the case of the *World of Darkness* franchise, we saw how this was done mostly in terms of a profusion of 'double framings' and paratexts; elements that proved to be key in communicating the essential atmosphere and genre of the game's diegesis. The games published by White Wolf did not, however, drastically change (or challenge) the TRPG medium in terms of its "internal workings"; its governing rules and mechanics. As such they maintained the conventional separation between the functions of GMs and players while still relying on what was mostly a simulation-based rule system. From this point of view, the distinctive thing about their design was not that they allowed players to generate narratives - an affordance, as we have seen, ultimately inherent to the medium - but rather that they induced the creation of specific *types* of stories. The notion of a 'storytelling' TRPG should be therefore understood in terms of certain *qualities* that set it - and its corresponding narratives - apart from more traditional tabletop games. This difference (*Differenzqualität*), as I would like to argue, is less related to the formal features of narrative than to the concepts of 'literariness' and 'poeticity.' Indeed, current developments in game design have been notorious not only for expanding the scope and functionality of their paratextual framing structures but, more importantly, by challenging and re-conceptualizing conventional TRPG mechanics to make the 'fictionalizing act' itself the main focus of the game. Indeed, as we will discover in the following

pages, not only do these games showcase a number of “literary” features, they do so to enable and encourage the production of gameplay-texts with heightened aesthetic value and a variety of allegorical and metaphoric meanings. As such, they are worthy of appreciation as art forms in their own right. Paradoxically, however, for all that has been said about the narrative features of tabletop RPGs, and despite the ongoing discussions on the production and negotiation of meaning within them, there is still a general lack of analysis on their use of non-representational or “poetic” meanings. In view of the aforementioned, our focus in the following chapter will to analyze a selection of published core-rulebooks, putting emphasis on the impact framing structures have on their potential for generating deep emotional involvement and complex meanings. More specifically, we will discuss and illustrate the use of uncertainty, ambiguity and polysemy as essential framing strategies in TRPG design.¹⁴⁰

Creating Meaning in TRPGs: Ambiguity, Polysemy and Poetic Knowledge

The creation, interpretation and negotiation of meaning has been a central point of discussion in role-playing game studies since the very beginning. Nevertheless, in the study of “analog” forms of role-play – and despite some notable exceptions–,¹⁴¹ there has

¹⁴⁰ Both ambiguity and polysemy refer to a use of language that allows for multiple and, more often than not, divergent interpretations. More specifically, ambiguity refers to the general characteristic of an expression while polysemy indicates “a word’s capacity to carry two or more distinct meanings” (Baldick 264). These are considered to be central features of literary works and of art in general.

¹⁴¹ Ilieva, for example, describes the use of riddles and intertextual references in LARPs as a way of creating spaces of ambiguity and divergent interpretations among players. More recently, the *Analog Game Studies Journal* has been including a growing number of articles addressing the non-referential meaning structures present in games. Nevertheless, these studies are still relatively few and far in between.

been a notorious tendency to reduce the analysis of "meaning making" to describing the negotiation of the fictional world - and the emergent game diegesis therein - as a make-believe reality (i.e. as a simulation). This point of view can be generally related to the conventional understanding that "good" game design must strive to be clear-cut and illustrative in order to avoid "dysfunctional" gameplay (Fatland). On this level ambiguity and polysemy would appear to be undesirable features; quite on the contrary, the ideal is to produce interpretations that are *equifinal*. The latter notion is explained by Loponen and Montola as follows:

As we state that every player's diegesis is different by definition, we must explain how meaningful role-playing is possible. In the best possible situation the diegeses are equifinal. Two interpretations are equifinal when they are similar enough to cause indistinguishable consequences. Equifinality is easiest to achieve if all participants have a good understanding of the genre, style and the world of the game. (40-41)¹⁴²

While it seems indeed evident that a specific amount of mutual understanding and "coincident interpretation" is crucial to successful game interaction, it is striking that the hermeneutic process in this light becomes reduced to the production of "indistinguishable consequences" as a sort of higher goal for enabling "meaningful role-play" (Salen and Zimmerman). In contrast, the palette of possible uses for "allegoric" meaning

¹⁴² A similar argument has been made by Borgstrom, who states that "[w]hen there is sufficient structure for the players to answer a specific question regarding the imaginary world, that creates meaning" (59).

becomes bracketed out "by definition." In fact, according to Lopenen and Montola, allegory and metaphor are, at best, only marginal features of RPGs:¹⁴³

From the semiotic point of view, it is interesting to note that while allegorisation is heavily used in practically every other form of art - indeed, it is seen as one central ingredient in turning entertainment into art - role-playing games tend to use extremely limited allegorical communication. (50-51)

In the following chapter, I will attempt to counter this statement by discussing the use and importance of poetic structures in TRPG design. More importantly, I will argue that it is these elements rather than "narrativity" that actually define the category of "storytelling" TRPGs. In order to do so, I will be basing my analysis on a close reading of four TRPG sourcebooks: *Universalis* (2002) by Ralph Mazza and Mike Holms; Meguey Baker's *A Thousand and One Nights* (2006); *Houses of the Blooded* (2009) by John Wick and *Fiasco* by Jason Morningstar (2009).

Written Bodies: Textual Corpus

While there is as of yet no TRPG canon comparable to those used in literary studies, the corpus of works I have selected for analysis was based on their notoriety within the gaming community as well as them being explicitly conceived of, and marketed as, "storytelling" tabletop RPGs. At the same time,

¹⁴³ To be fair, Lopenen and Montola do note that there are several "exceptions to the rule" yet still see these as being very exceptional cases (50).

they cover a wide range of approaches to what can be seen as a particular TRPG "genre"; a fact which will become especially evident when having a closer look at the framing function of their rules and mechanics. In this regard, the chronological arrangement of the selection will also allow us to observe some of the developments and major innovations that have taken place in game design over the past decade and a half and understand how these continue to build upon each other with newer releases. Another aspect that is important to point out is the notoriously independent nature of these games, with none of them originating from a big company or franchise. This is a major difference with most of the texts discussed previously in chapter five which stem from White Wolf's *World of Darkness* franchise. Where the latter initiated a distinct trend towards story-oriented game design in the early 90s, it did so mostly on the basis of an extensive use of paratextual framing (cf. chapter five "(Meta)Framings and Paratexts"). However, the company's abundant implementation of sophisticated artwork and accompanying narratives; their consistent production of supplements and the altogether high-end quality of the books themselves also meant that the games were not only focused, but also greatly dependent on mainstream success. Indeed, because they required larger development teams - often involving multiple artists, authors and game designers - and therefore bigger production budgets, the *WoD* games were more closely tied to the needs and expectations of a wider market audience, leaving little room for further experimentation with the medium and the financial risks this could entail. As such, they left most of the conventional TRPG mechanics intact; in particular, in terms of the rules of authorial distribution and diegetic simulation in use since the 70s. Independent game designers, on the other hand, while lacking the material advantages offered by larger budgets, also had less of a financial burden to deal with when producing a game. This, together with the fact that they often worked alone

or in very reduced teams, allowed (and encouraged) them to innovate constantly over the years, taking more risks in the development of original ideas while adapting and modifying many of the elements long considered to be structurally inherent to the medium (see chapter two). Such willingness to experiment has been key in fueling the important changes that have been taking place in the TRPG medium in recent years. From an even broader perspective, as Trammell, Waldron, and Torner have pointed out, these analog, independent TRPGs have pioneered "some of the most innovative and progressive movements in gaming recently[,] ... greatly expand[ing] what narrative possibilities role-playing games have to offer" (par. 5). In the following section therefore, we will be analyzing some of the framing strategies implemented by this new generation of games in order to understand their impact on making TRPGs a medium that can effectively create aesthetically refined, highly significant and emotionally engaging narratives. In *Universalis* - a game without a pre-defined setting or game-master - we will discuss how the introduction of explicit rules for the negotiation of narrative authority and agency affect players' understanding of the role-playing activity. By 'coding' the diegesis as a space of competing interests and desires it marks uncertainty as a main source of enjoyment during the game. The above not only brings a new perspective to role-playing, but actually subverts traditional TRPG practices which were generally based on a distinct authorial hierarchy separating the GM from other players. In this regard, the game illustrates a marked trend that has been constantly developing during the last 15 years. In *A thousand and One Nights (1001 Nights)*, we will see how a framing system based on a simple game premise and a set of narrative and poetic rules can produce a semantic space that allows for several layers of interdependent meaning. This promotes the generation of stories with heightened metaphoric potential while also reflecting on the practice of role-playing

itself through the phenomena of *doubling* and *boundary crossing* (Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*). In *Houses of the Blooded* (*HotB*), we will have a look at a text constructed as a complex system of framings that uses polysemy and ambiguity in order to challenge long established TRPG conventions such as the requirement for internal coherence in the portrayal of fictional worlds and cultures. In doing so, the game becomes a reflection on our notions of art and culture in general. Finally, in *Fiasco*, we will see how TRPGs may adopt framing strategies from other media, allowing them to extend the narrative and aesthetic possibilities of the medium even further. More importantly, the game showcases the powerful influence of (intradiegetic) fiction framings as story generators by almost completely dispensing with setting information and simulation rules in favor of creating powerful character constellations at the outset of play.

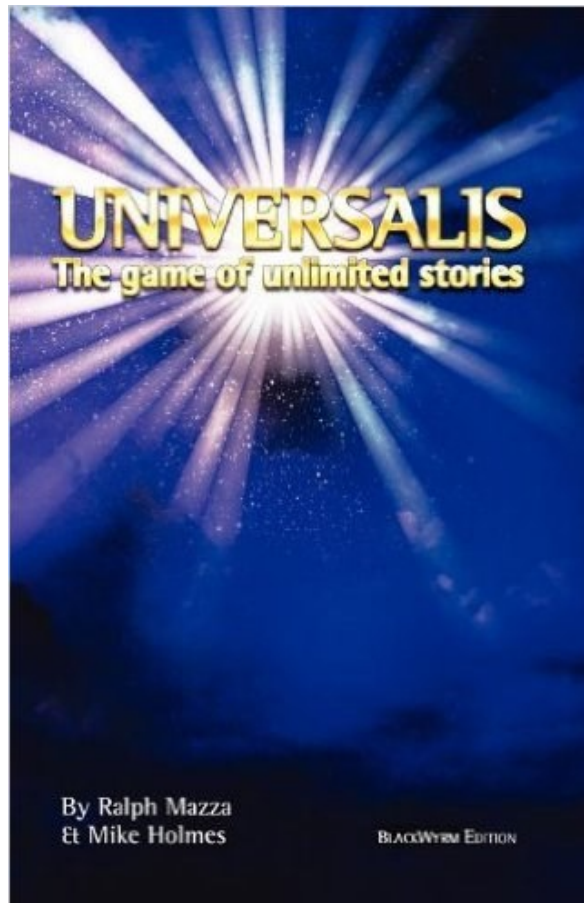
Authority, Agonality & Uncertainty in *Universalis* (2002)

"If you hated it, why'd you read it Jillsy?" John Wolf asked her. "Same reason I read anythin' for," Jillsy said. "To find out what *happens*." John Wolf stared at her. "Most books you *know* nothin's gonna happen," Jillsy said. "Lawd, you know that. Other books," she said, "you know just *what's* gonna happen, so you don't have to read them either. But *this* book," Jillsy said, "this book's so sick you *know* somethin's gonna happen, but you can't imagine *what*. You got to be sick yourself to imagine what happens in *this* book," Jillsy said. - John Irving, *The World According to Garp*

Distinguished as the "most innovative game of 2002" by the Indie RPG Awards, *Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories* by Ralph

Mazza and Mike Holmes broke with many of the long-established conventions of tabletop role-playing.¹⁴⁴ In its core, the game presents a system of rules and mechanics that allow for the creation of a fictional world and the narratives within it without previous preparation and completely from scratch.

Figure 27 *Universalis* (cover)



Dispensing altogether with the “role” of the game master, the game distributes authorial and narrative power evenly among participants, allowing each player a wide scope of influence over the story; an influence, however, that must be actively -

¹⁴⁴ While *Universalis* is neither the first explicitly “generic” TRPG - a title often given to Steve S. Jackson (*GURPS Fantasy*)’s *Generic Universal RolePlaying System* [sic.] or GURPS (1986) - nor the first game to include a GM-less system - a feature considered to have been popularized by Erick Wujcik’s 1991 game *Amber Diceless* - it is particular for the way in which it combines both of these features together in a single game system.

and quite literally - negotiated within the gaming group via a meta-narrative "economy." Furthermore, *Universalis* is also particular in how it showcases the importance of fiction framing elements as the driving principles behind the collaborative development of TRPG narratives. In this regard, the game's explicit focus on narration rather than simulation - a feature made explicit by the game's subtitle - makes it exemplary of a trend in independent game design that has continued to expand over the last decade(s). In the following pages we will have a closer look at some of the main mechanics and framing structures at work in the text in order to demonstrate how they "code" expectations related to the sources of pleasure afforded and encouraged by the game.

Rules and Game Mechanics

Before commencing our analysis, we can briefly summarize the main mechanics of the game as follows:

1. At the beginning of the game, each player receives an equal amount of tokens or "coins" that will enable him or her to define or control aspects of the game and its diegesis. All actions within the game have - or are assigned - a specific "cost" in coins. The default cost for any element or action is one coin.
2. Players initiate the game by negotiating (i.e. "paying for") the "parameters" of fictional play and social interaction. These are typically elements such as the genre, theme and mood of the proposed setting as well as important agreements concerning the group's social contract (for example, "no phone calls during play").
3. Once this is done, the game develops on a 'scene by scene' basis where players first make a secret bid for the 'privilege' of establishing the scene (a mechanic explicitly called 'scene framing'). The "winning" player

- (the one with the highest bid) determines the time, location and initial components of the scene by spending coins from the "pool" of his/her bid. During this phase, the "framing player" has a near absolute authority and is "immune" to the mechanics of interruption (explained below). The framing player also decides when to end a scene.
4. After a scene is established (i.e. once the first event of a scene has been narrated), any player can use coins from their "pool" to introduce further elements; take control of the characters involved in the scene¹⁴⁵ or take over narrative authority. Furthermore, they can also 'introduce complications', 'interrupt' and even 'challenge' the events being narrated. These actions are rewarded by the game mechanics by granting players with extra coins.
 5. When the framing player decides to end the scene, all players receive a "refreshment" of coins and may begin bidding for the next scene.

A Game of Collaborative Competition

As explained above, the core mechanic of *Universalis* is constituted by a meta-narrative "coin-currency" and the ensuing pseudo-economic system that regulates how players explicitly negotiate the game and its diegesis during play. Mazza and Holmes explain it as follows:

Coins are the resource that give you control over the story, and every player will have a supply of them called their Wealth. Every character you create

¹⁴⁵ Although players can role-play the characters involved in the narration, there are, by default, no fixed roles (i.e. no character "ownership") during the game. Players can use coins to "take over" the control of any character or element. We will discuss the consequences and implications of such distribution of storytelling power later on.

and everything you have those characters do will cost Coins. The Coins are a way of regulating how much of the story any one person can tell at a time. Basically, every statement you make about the story will cost 1 Coin. [capitalization in original] (7)

In this respect, an important part of the "gameness" of *Universalis* is focused on the administration of resources that become therefore a form of narrative power. As Mazza and Holmes put it "[a] player's Wealth [sic.] is a reserve of potential, but as yet unused, story power" (12). As a consequence of the above, the game creates the seemingly paradoxical situation of collaborative creation through the competitive negotiation of narrative authority; a feature leading to what Jonathan Walton describes as a state of "cooperative antagonism." In order to make this possible, *Universalis* resorts to two main framing paradigms; one, fostering agreement by establishing overarching meta-concepts; the other, encouraging antagonism via a formalized mechanic of narrative competition and disruption. We will have a look at these two paradigms below.

Agreement & Collaboration

As mentioned previously, *Universalis* does not contain any pre-established fiction framings such as game world, setting information, literary themes or genres.¹⁴⁶ These elements are,

¹⁴⁶ While the sourcebook lacks specific setting information, it does include a sample game throughout the text as a mode of illustrating how the rules and mechanics apply. Although we will discuss the widespread use of such examples further on, I wish only to point out here that in this specific case, rather than showcasing a type of genre or theme, the text foregrounds the "limitlessness" of the generated narratives by portraying an adventure that can be described as a motley "Gulliver's Travels meets sci-fi meets dinosaurs" story.

however, still recognized as the core "building blocks" required to begin the game as can be evidenced by the following quote:

When you first sit down to play, you and your fellow players will have to decide what kind of story you're going to be telling. Is it going to be an action adventure, a romance, a mystery, or a psychological thriller? Is the mood going to be dark and gritty, a light comedy, or a psychological thriller? [...] To answer these questions you'll take turns going around the table, with each player spending 1 Coin to add one element about the type of story you're going to tell. (Mazza, Ralph and Mike Holmes 7)

It is significant that the game establishes fiction framings in the form of narrative ("what kind of story?") rather than simulation rules ("how does the game-world work?") as the constitutive basis for initiating gameplay. In fact, in his review of the game, Jonathan Walton describes this initial phase as a "pre-game system" that represents "a pretty unique approach to a 'universal' game [by] getting all the players, right before they start playing, to collectively tailor the rules, story guidelines, and their own social contract" ("Universal Universalis?"). As a result, he concludes, "Universalis stops being universal before play ever starts" (ibid.). From this point of view, simulation rules in *Universalis* are at best secondary framing structures which will depend on the fiction and storytelling "parameters" that the group initially develops. This contrasts with other well known "open systems" such as

GURPS or *FUDGE*¹⁴⁷ which are a set of basic simulation rules to be used in any setting. While these systems can indeed be used to play a range of different games, they are not immediately adaptive to specific genres; a fact that can be seen critically as exemplified by the following player interview excerpt by Joris Dormans:

For some players the disposition of the rules is an important factor of their quality. "I want to have a clear idea of what would be feasible in a certain game," reports one player. He points to a four-storey building opposite the street and continues: "climbing that building is easy in *Dungeons & Dragons*, hard in *Shadowrun* and when playing *MERP*¹⁴⁸ I probably fall to my death. It does matter a lot which one it is, as long as it is clear to the player beforehand." **For the same reason he likes roleplaying games the rules of which tie into the background well, and dislikes generic roleplaying systems like GURPS that use the same rule set for many diverse settings,** ranging from games set in the American wild west, to games about deep space and mythical Greece [my emphasis]. ("Rules of Simulation and Interaction")

The criticism here is related to the fact that even simulation rules are forms of representation (see among others Dormans; Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon; Fernández-Vara). As such, it is necessary for them to be not only functional but also coherent

¹⁴⁷ These are the respective acronyms for Steve Jackson's *Generic Universal RolePlaying Game* (1986) and Steffan O'Sullivan's *Freeform Universal Do-it-yourself Game Engine* (1992).

¹⁴⁸ Abbreviation for S.C. Charlton's 1984 game *Middle-Earth Role Playing*.

with the stipulated fictional world and the meanings that are to be conveyed within it.¹⁴⁹ For this reason, the effectiveness of generic systems based on simulation rules is limited as they tend to neglect thematic and aesthetic considerations. In contrast, *Universalis* allows players to establish a set of initial framings and thereby to generate the necessary social and fictional "agreements" that will constitute the basis for collaborative creation and interaction during gameplay. As we will see, however, the rules and mechanics governing the further development of the game will also work in the opposite direction, encouraging player competition and (narrative) agonality. It is the tension created by these two frameworks that will propel the progression of the game's narrative during play.

Disagreement & Agonality

Due to the absence of a game master, one of the main features of *Universalis* is the introduction of rules that govern the distribution of narrative authority among players. In this context, the mechanic of "scene framing" is one of the most salient (core) features.¹⁵⁰ Mazza and Holmes describe the idea in the following terms:

All play occurs within scenes. One player will frame the scene which all players will have the

¹⁴⁹ While it is true that *Universalis* is not a perfectly "universal" system as noted by Holter, it has the additional flexibility of relying on narrative rather than simulation rules.

¹⁵⁰ Unlike many games from the previous generation which tended to develop as a more or less continuous narrative - the group of adventurers walks into a chamber, and from there move down a staircase, and from there into the dungeon, etc -, *Universalis* contemplates narrative development from a series of narrative/dramatic units or scenes. Furthermore, the scene mechanic itself can be said to be a framing strategy "poached" from other dramatic and audiovisual media. As such, it has been further developed in more recent games such as Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* which we will discuss later on.

opportunity to participate in. Players will narrate the Events and actions of the scene both during their own turns and by Interrupting the turns of other players. [capitalizations in original] (13)

Not only is the concept of 'framing' explicitly invoked here, but it is established as an element of central importance in developing the plot and story of the game and, thus, of exerting power over it. As Mazza and Holmes note, "[t]he player who frames a scene will have a great deal of influence over the direction the story takes" (8). In other words, by making it a formalized element of gameplay and therefore an explicit part of player strategy, the text highlights the impact of scene framing as an instance of authorial control. As such, it structures the potential space or 'future narrative' of the game (as by Bode, Dietrich, and Kranhold). This is also reflected by the important fact that, rather than sharing the default 1-coin cost of any element or 'tenet' in the game, the cost of framing a scene is directly proportional to a player's "investment" in the bid. Indeed, in order to determine who will have temporary authorial 'privilege', players secretly bid an amount of coins from their pool of 'wealth.' After simultaneously revealing bids, the winning - i.e. highest bidding - player uses the coins to "Establish the Location, Set the Time, and Introduce the Components [sic.]" of the scene (ibid. 22-24). The higher the bid, the higher the probability of gaining authorial privilege. Moreover, since the "pool" of coins of the winning bid will also have an effect on the amount of additional components that can be determined before the scene begins - each of them having a cost of one coin - it also quantitatively reflects the "material" at the disposition of the framing player. Conversely, high bids will generally also indicate the future depletion of a player's "resources," so that obtaining narrative privilege early on is

done at the cost of granting authority to fellow players at a later stage of the game. As a result, scene bidding becomes both an indicator of the influence that player will have upon the current scene, as well as of his/her eventual lack of narrative and /or authorial power in the scenes that will follow. More importantly, scene framing can be seen as a measure of players' immediate narrative interest in the diegesis; one that clearly reflects the importance of desires and expectations in driving the story forward. Because of this, the game encourages players to "bid a lot of Coins ... [i]f [they] have a really great idea for what to do with the next scene" (Mazza and Holmes 8). Another aspect to keep in mind is that the framing mechanic also allows the transfer in control over any and all diegetic elements from one player to another, thus defying the idea of players having exclusive authority over a single "player character."¹⁵¹ As stated in the rulebook,

[y]ou control any component that you introduce into a scene (either existing or newly created). This control does not last beyond the end of the scene. When a new scene is framed, the Framing Player [sic] gains control of whichever components they introduce. (Mazza, Ralph and Mike Holmes 48, 49)

As a result, *Universalis* also completely blurs the distinction between PCs and NPCs. This, together with the fact that the framing player is not pre-established but determined scene by scene, heightens the surprise (or uncertainty) factor of the story while further shifting the agonal relationships from the character level - where PCs would often confront NPCs or even

¹⁵¹ This also implies a shift of focus from a character-oriented game (where a player seeks to fulfill character goals) to a story-oriented one.

other player-characters - to the player level, where participants now explicitly compete with each other for narrative authority. This idea - the notion of competing authorities - is further reinforced by the rules that govern the scene's narrative development. Indeed, once the framing phase has concluded, players can take turns in narrating the scene. However, rather than occurring in a "linear" fashion in the typical "clockwise" dynamic of board games, turns occur as part of an ongoing negotiation where players can "pay" to 'interrupt' a turn (thus beginning a turn of their own), 'introduce a complication' to the scene or 'take over' the control of an element within it. As a consequence, a scene may itself involve an indefinite number of turns "as players take their actions and Interrupt [sic.] each other to narrate some element of the story" (Mazza and Holmes 15). In addition to this, the game includes specific rules for 'challenging' - and therefore re-negotiating - any aspect, event or development in the story as well as the group's social agreement (see Figure 28):

A Challenge is the way that players can police other players in the game. Challenges can occur for any reason. Anything a player says or does in the game can be Challenged. This can include player behaviors that are not directly game rule related but are deemed inappropriate. [capitalization in original] (ibid. 35)

In other words, although conflicts and spontaneous narrative negotiation do arise in regular games, the framings of *Universalis* actually incite the use of what might otherwise be seen as disruptive elements by turning them into a formal mechanic. This feature, as Jonathan Walton notes, is in fact

essential to the game, which “is driven by players not getting along” (“Cooperative Antagonism”). “[I]f they get along too well,” Walton continues, “the mechanics won't really do what they're supposed to do [which is to] balance narrative control” (ibid.).

Figure 28 *Universalis* – Rules and Mechanics Overview



<p style="text-align: center;">Actions you can do any time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupt and begin your own turn. 1 Coin. • Turn an Event into an Obstacle, starting a Complication. 1 Coin per die. • Take Over a Component (as long as it is not part of a Complication). You now Control it. 1 Coin. • Challenge. Bid Coins if necessary. • Call for a Fine. No cost. • Speak Dialog for a character you Control. No cost. 	<p>Control</p> <p>A player controls any Component he brings into a scene. During the scene, other players may Take Over control of any Component., as long as it isn't involved in a Complication. When the scene is over, all control is lost.</p> <p>COMPLICATIONS</p> <p>A Complication begins when the acting player wants to change Components he does not Control, OR when another player buys dice to create an Obstacle.</p> <p>1) Start Dice Pools for the Complication and each player who controls a Component involved.</p> <p>2) Regular play continues. However, narration should focus on the Complication. On their turn, a player may add dice to (or subtract dice from) the pool(s) of their choice by drawing on traits or buying dice. He may also Call for a Resolution. If all players agree, the dice pools are rolled.</p> <p><i>1 Trait or 1 Coin = 1d10.</i></p> <p>3) Roll the dice. A roll of 1-5 is a Success. Compare the total successes in the Complication Pool to the total of successes in <i>all</i> opposing pools. The side with the most successes wins.</p> <p><i>Ties: Sum of the numbers on each side's Success dice. The higher side gets an Edge die. (If more than one player is involved, then the Edge die goes to the highest single total or the player closest to the acting players left.) Reroll and repeat as necessary, adding more Edge dice.</i></p> <p>4) Get coins. Winner gets coins equal to the sum of the numbers on his Success dice. Losers gain 1 coin per die rolled.</p> <p>5) Winner uses Coins to narrate Events and add, remove, or restore Traits as desired. He may also buy down the coins other players got in the Complication.</p> <p>6) Losing players narrate, in order from most to least coins received, limited by what has already been narrated.</p> <p>Coins not spent may be kept.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Actions you can do ONLY on your turn</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Scene Framer Only (Chapter 5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish scene's location. 1 Coin • Place a scene in the present. No Cost. • Place a scene in the past. 1 Coin. • Place a scene in the future. Pay 1 Coin to each player. • End the scene. No cost. • Fade to Black. 1 Coin. 2) Narration Activity (Chapter 4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change scene to a new or existing location for 1 Coin • Introduce an existing Component into the scene for 1 Coin. • Exit a Component from a scene for 1 Coin. • Describe an Event for 1 Coin. • Start a Mini-Scene, which ends when your turn is over. No cost. 3) World Building Activity (Chapter 5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create new Component & Introduce it (or not). 1 Coin. • Add, Remove, or Restore a Trait for 1 Coin per Trait. • Reduce or Restore Importance for 1 Coin per Level. • Create a Master Component. 1 Coin. • Link a Component to a Master Component (creating a Sub Component). 1 Coin. 4) Game Tenet Activity (Chapter 2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propose or modify a Social Contract issue for 1 Coin • Propose or modify a Story Element for 1 Coin • Propose or modify Rules Gimmick for 1 Coin. 5) Complication Activity (Chapter 6) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originate a Complication with Components you do not Control • Draw on a Trait to add dice to a Complication Dice Pool • Buy Dice (and justify the purchase) for a Complication Dice Pool. 1 Coin per die. • Roll the dice, determine winner and spend or keep Bonus Coins 	

Uncertain Pleasures

In conclusion we can say that *Universalis* is particular for how it formalizes authorial negotiation by turning it into a system of "narrative economy." This can be seen as a quite literal illustration of Motte's understanding of literary texts as "language games" which are to be conceived in terms of "different ludic economy[ies] with [their] own rules and norms" (15). Moreover, the whole concept of narrative control in the game is focused on the idea of a framing-based system of authority. In this regard, *Universalis* is unique in that it introduces rules for actions that are not generally (or explicitly) included in conventional role-playing games. This can be observed most clearly in the mechanic of "scene framing" - a feature we will see (further) developed in games such as *Fiasco* and *1001 Nights* - as well as the explicit regulation of activities such as 'interrupting,' 'challenging,' 'introducing complications' and 'taking control' (Mazza and Holmes 1-29). Following Caillois we could say that the latter become *ludic* - that is, highly formalized and regulated - rather than *paideic* - or "freeform" - elements of the game.

If the overarching framings such as genre, theme and mood are what enable player collaboration, narrative coherence and thematic unity during gameplay, the mechanics of authorial negotiation established by the rule system 'code' the antagonistic and competitive nature of the game to create an ongoing tension between players' shared expectations and their divergent modes of enacting them. In this context, it is the competition for narrative control rather than the effort to overcome diegetic obstacles as characters that becomes one of the game's primary objectives. These 'procedural' framings can be therefore said to promote a game session where explicit authorial negotiation appears as its constant and defining feature. As a result, agonality and uncertainty are coded as the main sources of pleasure in the game. In this regard, *Universalis*

is exemplary for how enjoyment in a storytelling game emerges not only from having (or discovering) a "ready-plot" to follow, but from the dynamic between shared expectations and the unforeseeable or even aleatory input of each participant. As Mazza and Holmes put it, "[a]t the start of the game, you may well have only the vaguest idea of a plot. Most of your time will be spent enjoying the creativity of your fellow players (and they yours)" (43). Ultimately, the game can also be seen as a form of ideological criticism that reflects on the mechanisms that control fictional production and the interpretive communities that consume it. In the real-world, turn of the millennium context, where the creation of fictional content is both shared with audiences while being monopolized - and capitalized on - by big media franchises, the "game of unlimited stories" becomes ambivalent: Stories are "unlimited" because they allow for the "unlimited wants" of the players/audiences; fictional production itself, however, is still a "scarce" element that can be exploited as a source of social and economic power. Players become thus metaphorical "everymen" as they represent procedurally the structures of production and consumption of mass-media fiction.

Poeticity, Specularity and Doubling in Meguey Baker's *A Thousand and One Nights* (2006)

»Und wo ist dieses Buch?« »Im Buch«, war die Antwort, die er schrieb. »Dann ist es nur Schein und Widerschein?«, fragte sie. Und er schrieb und sie hörte ihn sagen: »Was zeigt ein Spiegel, der sich in einem Spiegel spiegelt? Weißt du das, Goldäugige Gebieterin der Wünsche?« - Michael Ende, *Die Unendliche Geschichte*

A Thousand and One Nights is a short (66 pages), rules light, TRPG source-book explicitly inspired in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the game has a particular focus on sensory framings and a game system that enables layer upon layer of storytelling that makes it semantically much more complex than immediately apparent. Such complexity relies on the heavy use of polysemy, doubling and poetic rules as framing strategies.

Setting Summary & Main Premise

In comparison to most other TRPGs, the setting of *1001 Nights* appears to be quite simple. So much so, that most of it fits into only one page of the book:

In the palace of the Sultan are many rooms. In these rooms are many people, and the people have many stories. Most intriguingly, many of these people cannot leave these many rooms. The ornate carved walls surrounding the fragrant pools and exotic gardens are high; the lace-like doors are webs of iron; the delicately cool tones and publicly refined manners raise the significance of an arched brow to

feverish degrees. This place apart holds the Sultan's peace; to disturb it would be foolish indeed. Yet, beneath the surface of any still pool are many currents, and this is no exception. Nights especially can be long in the desert. The sun sinks, and the relief of evening washes over the palace; the inhabitants stir themselves, bathe, dress, eat, and scheme. Music of cymbals, tambours, strings and drums fills the marble halls. Smoke, perfumed and otherwise, seeps into thick color-soaked carpets. Coriander, dates, wine, cardamom, black pepper, coconut, saffron and mint mingle on the tongue. Oiled skin glows beneath fine cotton and silk, set off by leather and gold. And always, the planets dance overhead, taunting in their freedom high in the cool air. Is it a wonder that those here turn to tales of mystery and magic, beauty and bold adventure, to fly away in thought, if only for a time? And, if one's tale is well told, and brings a favor of one kind or another, so much the better, is it not so? (M. Baker 6)

As would be expected, the setting borrows heavily from its famous literary precursor. On the one hand, we have the notion of the idealized, "exotic" middle-east, framed in the description of the Sultan's palace; opulently rich, full of extravagant objects and people. On the other, there is the *topos* of storytelling as a mode of escape - or of deferring death.

Poetic Rules and Narrative Closure: Framing Texture

Acknowledging its orientalist undertones, Baker is careful to establish *1001 Nights* as a game that seeks to explore - and thus allow players to participate in - the occidental fantasy of the

exotic Middle East.¹⁵² According to this approach, such exoticism is closely related to the notions of magic ('wonder'), beauty and art. Above all, however, it is connected to the idea of sensory perception and eroticism. In this regard, one of the most unique features of *1001* is the way in which it focuses on the sensory paradigm as a central framing aspect of the diegesis. Thus, rather than elaborating on the political, religious or moral details of palace life, the game includes lists of appropriate professions, names and clothing for palace members. These elements, far from making the game appear "realistic" - something that from the outset has been explicitly discarded - are meant to add to the exotic "feel" of game-play through the "sound", it would seem, of language itself. Players can therefore take on roles such as "the Chief Eunuch," "the Favored Dancer," or "the Astrologer"; have names such as "Baba Abdalla," "Hasad," or "Nourigan"; and dress in "Taksirahs," "Sirwals" or "Jillayhs" (M. Baker 7-15). More importantly, character attributes - typically elaborated in TRPGs as long lists with statistics and rules for game-play - are drastically reduced in Baker's game to five simple descriptions based on each of the senses. As explained in the sourcebook:

Now, to give your Courtier flesh. Consider the senses - Hearing, Sight, Smell, Taste, and Touch. List these on your paper, and describe each in a short sentence, so: I wear rows of tiny bells in my clothes to announce my presence, I am hard of hearing, I love music - My eyes are warm and smiling, I have a piercing gaze, I have seen death - Cinnamon and cloves scent my skin, I smell always of leather

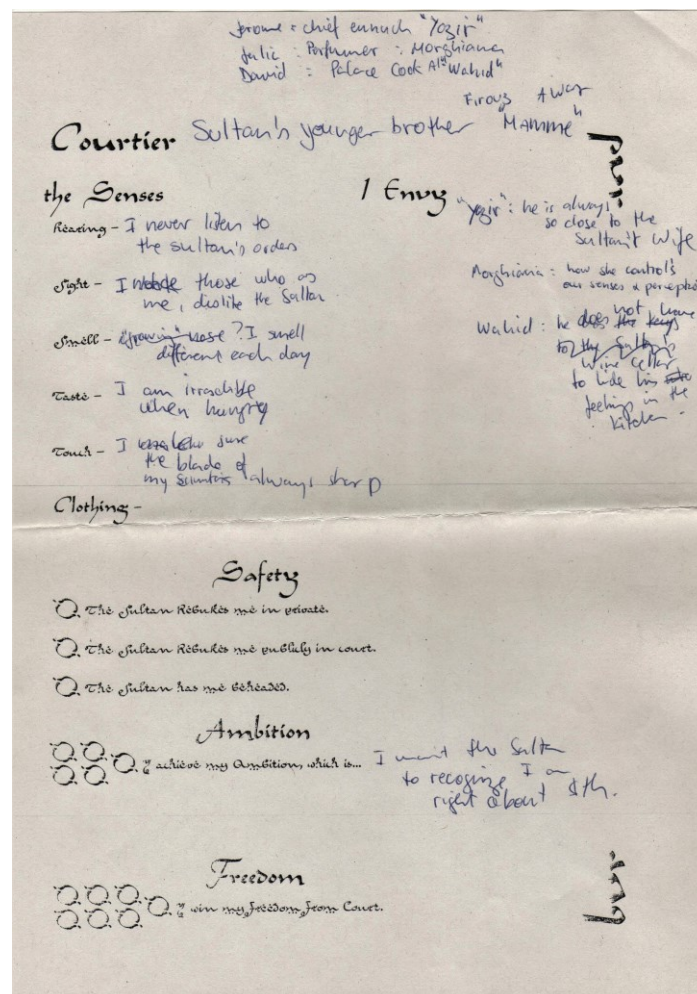
¹⁵² In fact, Baker includes a long disclaimer on this point in the book's introduction stating emphatically that it "is not a game about Arab culture" (4).

and animals, Strong smells upset me - I love almonds and honey, I can make a rich and savory meal, I smoke a pipe - My hands are delicate but stronger than they look, I can tell a good horse from a bad one by feeling it's coat, I have deep scars on my arms. Make sure to describe at least one sense as a physical attribute, but not all [capitalizations in original]. (M. Baker 13)

Interestingly, the sensory descriptions mentioned above are not meant only to pertain to what others perceive of a character on an "outward vector", but also to how the character perceives his or her surroundings on an "inward" one. For this reason, both "The chains on my feet are always rattling" and "I always listen when someone whispers" would be valid character descriptions based on the sense 'Hearing.' In this regard, the framing is intentionally open to interpretation, rather than having an unequivocal or quantifiable strategic function. More importantly, because these aspects are related to qualitative and not quantitative aspects of the diegesis, they can be expected to have an impact on the texture (i.e. *discourse*) rather than merely the plot of the generated stories. Following Jakobson's notion of the poetic function of language, we could say therefore that the recursive use of sensory framings implies the projection of a selective paradigm upon the level of linguistic combination. As a result, the emergent text of the game becomes not only more aesthetically intricate, but also increasingly overdetermined in terms of its semantic potential. The same occurs with the game's overarching themes of 'envy' and 'ambition.' Rather than being established as mere guiding meta-concepts, both of these notions are made into constitutive elements of all PCs by the character creation system. This is because the latter requires players to define their characters

on two further levels: socially, in terms of their feelings of envy toward each other and "internally" in terms of their personal 'ambition' or 'desire' (see Figure 29). By doing so, the poetic recurrence of these themes is ensured throughout the game as all characters' actions will move along the lines of these semantic paradigms (rhyme intended).

Figure 29 1001 Nights Character Sheet (Actual Gameplay Example)¹⁵³



¹⁵³ In the example above, the player has created the character of "Firouz 'Mamme' Awar," the "Sultan's younger brother." In the upper section of the page, the names and corresponding characters of the other players have been annotated for guidance. To the left, we can see the description of the character based on the five senses (e.g. "I am irascible when hungry" for the sense of 'taste'). To the right we find the terms of the character's envy towards the other PCs (e.g. he envies the chief eunuch Yazir for his closeness to the Sultan's wife). Further below, we can see the character's ambition for "the Sultan to recognize [that he is] right about something."

The above features clearly indicate the game's focus on storytelling rather than strategic game-play. Paradoxically, however, Baker's game does in fact have a "winning condition"; a feature that has been otherwise generally taken to be absent from traditional role-playing (see, for example Montola, "On the Edge of the Magic Circle,"; Salen and Zimmerman; Juul). Indeed, during the game, players (or rather their characters) are rewarded for their ability to use storytelling in order to develop their interests within the palace. By accumulating these rewards, players may advance towards their characters' goals¹⁵⁴ ('Freedom' or 'Ambition') and/or protect them from the danger of being beheaded ('Safety'). Should a character achieve one of these objectives or, on the contrary, succumb in attempting to do so, the game reaches its end. While this would seem to make the outcome of the session more typically "game-like" it does, in fact, add an important element to the narrative, namely that of closure. This is important since the latter constitutes an important structural moment of the original tales which, in turn, belong to the genre of the short story. As such it actually brings the game even more in line with the literary tradition.

Doubling and Specularity

As previously mentioned, *A Thousand and One Nights* puts players in the role of courtiers who - within the confinement of the palace - tell stories as a means of social positioning, achievement and, ultimately, survival. Because of this, the embedded structure of the story within the story, so characteristic of the original text is likewise reproduced as a constitutive part of the game setting.¹⁵⁵ As a consequence, the

¹⁵⁴ As established during character construction.

¹⁵⁵ This framing also adds the meta-concept 'agonality' to the act of intra-diegetic storytelling. In this, the premise also resembles the structure of pastoral literature in the form of the competing poets.

game world is divided into (at least) two narratological levels: the first - the diegetic or "hypothetical primary frame" (Fine) - being the palace court - a "natural" yet tightly confined fictional world where courtiers compete for social status and the general favor of the Sultan - and the second, the "supernatural", hypo-diegetic, fairy-tale worlds of the stories told in court - embedded fictional worlds that are used to advance the interests of the courtiers. Not only does the main premise trigger important interpretive frames such as 'confinement,' 'social conflict,' and 'agonality' as guiding meta-concepts but, by dispensing with most of the setting information typical to traditional TRPGs - there are no maps, no diagrams, no tables; there is nothing on fictional races or cultures; nothing on magical powers or properties - it focuses on the *play with meanings* rather than on an actual exploration of the fictional worlds. As a result, the latter become a form of *mise en cadre*¹⁵⁶ where the stories emerging on the hypodiegetic level are meant to illuminate aspects of the frame level (the palace) in order to exert power over it. As Baker explains,

[i]n Stories, you have the freedom to insult what you wish to insult, criticize where you wish to criticize, and make yourself look better than your rival. Here is where you may call a dangerous person foolish to their face. When it is your Courtier's turn to tell a Story, that is when you are the GM. [capitalization in original] (21)

¹⁵⁶ In literary studies, *mise en abyme* refers to a form of textual recursivity whereby certain elements of a text (narrative, structural, semantic, etc.) appear duplicated on another, subordinate and ontologically different, level. According to Wolf, *mise en cadre* can be considered to be the complementary form of the *mise en abyme*. Whereas in the latter case, it is the subordinate (i.e. hypodiegetic) level that serves to "comment" on the external one; it is the frame (i.e. 'cadre') that affects the meaning of the "inner level" of the *mise en cadre* (Wolf, *Framing Borders*).

More interestingly, since the palace members' storytelling mirrors that of the group of players ("When it is your Courtier's turn to tell a Story, that is when you are the GM."), the primary diegetic level of the game is put into a specular relationship with the level of reality itself. As a result, the premise of the game has direct semantic consequences for the relationship between the different levels of fiction and non-representational reality. This idea is further reinforced paratextually by the cover illustration which focuses on the image of a woman (Scheherazade?) and what appears to be the large jewel - a diamond or gem of some kind - she is holding above her head (Figure 30).

Figure 30 *A Thousand and One Nights* (2006): Rulebook Covers (Back & Front)



The polygonal shape of the jewel - as most tabletop players would recognize - is clearly meant to resemble one of the polyhedral dice traditionally used in TRPGs (Figure 31). As a matter of fact, this interpretation is also validated within the

text itself: "In the middle of the table, put a bowl, pleasing to look at, and fill it with dice of many colors, shapes and sizes. These are the gems of the Sultan" (9). This superimposition of the die and the jewel implies therefore a blurring or crossing of the boundaries between players and characters, triggering the notion of 'immersion', while pre-figuring the "mirror-like" or "doubling" relationship between reality and the different layers of story within the game. As a consequence, the illustration already establishes ambiguity and polysemy as central framing elements of the game which is thus revealed as a form of play with 'hidden meanings.'¹⁵⁷ Since these features are generally understood as being the defining characteristics of art in general and literature in particular, this framing also makes a strong implicit claim as to the aesthetic or 'literary' value of the game and, correspondingly, of the stories resulting from it (cf. Gray).

Figure 31 20-sided die as those used for tabletop role-playing.



In a related manner, the woman's hair is also an important framing feature of the cover illustration. Not only does it seem to expand uncontrollably towards the margins of the page, but it actually overflows into the back cover, effectively becoming the background of the illustration as a whole. This again

¹⁵⁷ This idea is further supported by the image of the serpent curling around the woman's arm. Indeed, not only can the reptile be seen as a phallic symbol related to desire and sexuality, but it also carries the strong connotations of 'myth' and (dangerous) 'knowledge' or 'wisdom.' Additionally, the dual aspect of the snake's skin - black with intricate white arabesques - triggers the notion of 'ambiguity.'

triggers the notion of "border crossing" while establishing important relationships between front and back cover by connecting them. In contrast with the front and its focus on a single, central figure, the back presents us with multiple characters which can be seen as composing three distinct - yet possibly connected - scenes. Under closer observation, however, it becomes apparent that the scenes are in fact layered on top of each other in three consecutive planes. Because this layering correlates simultaneously with the vertical construction of the illustration, the topmost scene becomes simultaneously the "innermost" plane while the two scenes below move gradually "outward" towards the viewer. This, of course, is reminiscent of the *mise en abyme* structure of the tales and implies causal, power as well as semantic relationships between the levels. Thus, if the superimposition of the gem and the die can be seen as indicating the crossing of boundaries between players and characters, the woman's overflowing hair mirrors this relationship by blurring in an analogous manner the boundaries between the characters of the illustration and their levels of existence. This interdependent correlation of the worlds can be described in terms of what Iser (*Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*) has deemed "doubling" and results in a growing ambiguation of the literary - or, in this case, ludic - signs. From this perspective, the relationship between the players and the characters of the game can be conceived as one of masking. As a result, the "reality" of the game is defined by the discrepancy between the person and the mask; a discrepancy where, as with pastoral literature, poetic truth is revealed through the act of concealment. As Iser explains:

[T]he relationship between the person and the mask is continually changing in accordance with a shift in demands. [...] The code of the disguise is formed

by the absent person who guides the operation of the mask and takes on presence through his guidance, his testing, and his choice as to whether he or his disguise is to predominate.

[...]

Simultaneously, the mask itself is permeated by difference, for it is at once concealment (hiding the person) and discovery (revealing the person as a multiplicity of his aspects). Because it facilitates an ecstatic condition of being himself and standing outside himself, the mask is a paradigm of fictionality which discloses itself as a deception in order to show that such deceptions are always modes of revelation. (Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* 75-76)

In its foregrounding of the relationship of doubling between the real and the diegetic worlds, Baker's game can be read (and played!) as a reflection on the practice of role-playing itself. Furthermore, if - as Iser states - masking is a paradigm of fictionality in general, this would imply that TRPGs can be understood as a practice where fiction is revealed as a mode of - and thus not in opposition to - real human interaction.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Although somewhat related, this claim differs starkly from Edward Castronova's observation that "massively multiplayer online role-playing games" (MMORPGs) are increasingly becoming a place that hosts "ordinary human affairs" rather than fictional ones (2). What Castronova describes is, quite effectively, the voiding of the fiction itself as the mask (in the form of the Avatar) is replaced by the disclosure of the real person behind it. Such a disclosure is not merely the recognition of the person but, actually, the clear distinction between her/himself and the mask. On the contrary, I believe that, rather than being merely an alibi for "ordinary" activities, TRPGs allow for a specific mode of human interaction based on the figurative power of fiction. This can only be achieved in the articulation of mask and person; an articulation where both aspects are recognizable yet indistinguishable at the same time.

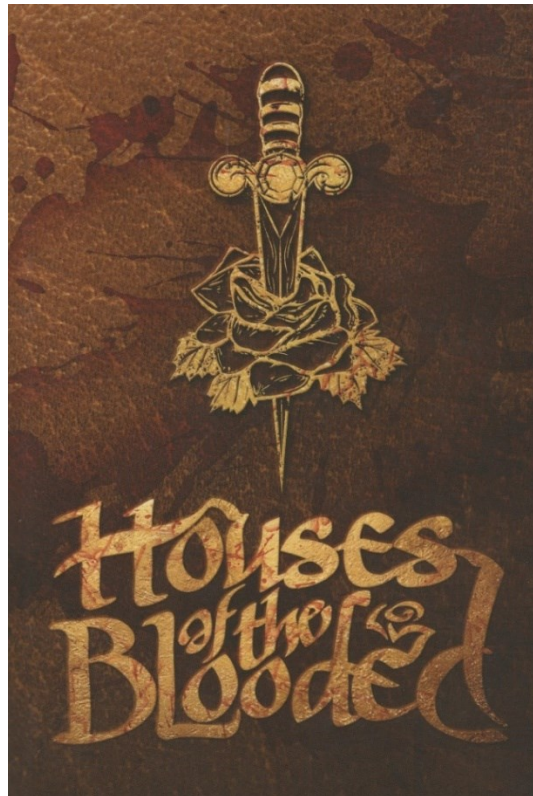
Metalepsis and Ambiguity in John Wick's *Houses of the Blooded* (2008)

Desde la sangre galopando en sus oídos le llegaban las palabras de la mujer: primero una sala azul, después una galería, una escalera alfombrada. En lo alto, dos puertas. Nadie en la primera habitación, nadie en la segunda. La puerta del salón, y entonces el puñal en la mano. la luz de los ventanales, el alto respaldo de un sillón de terciopelo verde, la cabeza del hombre en el sillón leyendo una novela.

- Julio Cortázar, *Continuidad de los Parques*

Released in 2008, *Houses of the Blooded* by John Wick is a game that was explicitly developed as an "anti-D&D RPG" (Wick 8). As such it is conceived in many ways as a direct response to the classic fantasy role-playing game.

Figure 32 *Houses of The Blooded* (Cover)



If we only consider the general setting of the game, however, this statement might seem at first glance to be paradoxical. Indeed, *HotB* includes many of the standard features of a fantasy - i.e. *D&D*-like - TRPG; the inclusion of sorcery, monsters (appropriately called 'ork') and dungeons (deemed 'puzzle houses') as well as the organization of the fictional society as a feudal system to name a few. Nevertheless, it is by means of the framings established by the sourcebook that the focus is significantly changed.

Metaleptic Transgressions and Narrative Authorization

Beginning with the initial crediting of John Wick for "research, writing and game design" (3) *HotB* is presented as being based on historical facts. Thus, in the preface ("How to use this Book") and under the explicit heading "This is not a work of fiction," we find the following passage:

I learned about the ven about a decade ago. A pre-Atlantean people mentioned in texts such as the Book of Dzyan and the Voynich Manuscript, the ven were a passionate people obsessed with etiquette, beauty and art. And revenge. Always revenge. When my own research began, we knew almost nothing about them. No primary sources. The secondary sources were suspect at best, written almost entirely in Greek. The translations from those documents dated back to the late 1800s. Needless to say, the "scholars" of that time took many liberties with the Greek translations, and the Greeks probably took many liberties with the primary sources. (Wick 10)

While we might have been put on guard by the mentioning of the adjective "pre-Atlantean" - which could arguably still just be a casual "slip of the tongue" or a metaphorical exaggeration on part of the author - the framing structure of the passage makes the argument/claim for a historical background seem quite convincing at first. In fact, as one reviewer of the game pointed out,

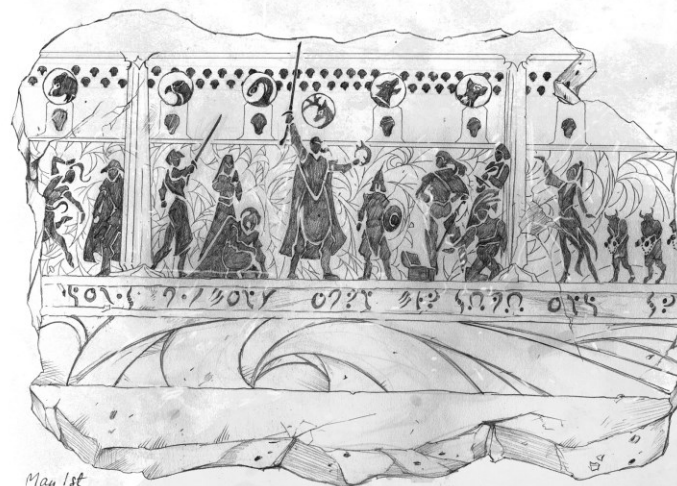
more than a few times while I was reading, I felt the strong desire to search online for additional information about the ven, as if they were a real, historical people. The book is written to give it that level of verisimilitude. As well, the atmosphere that is described is one that I definitely find lacking in many rpgs. As you read, the world the ven inhabit seems real and seems to really embody the romantically tragic feel that the author is striving for. (Barnett)

Indeed, both the paratextual convention of a (source-)book introduction as being a place of "serious" discourse as well as the use of bibliographical references as a feature typical of non-fiction, support the factual reading of the statement.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, the strong 'entryway paratext' (Gray) is further supported by other paratextual material such as an appended bibliography of "scientific references" as well as "investigation" notes and illustrations scattered throughout the text (see Figure 33). On the other hand, if we are curious (or naïve) enough to look up the texts referenced in the passage - or so cultivated as to actually know the *Book of Dzyan* and the

¹⁵⁹ Mommertz describes this strategy in terms of what he calls 'Herausgeberfiktion.'

Voynich Manuscripts - we will find out that - while they do in fact exist - their authenticity, as well as their content, is highly questionable. Likewise, a brief search either for the texts mentioned in the bibliography or for additional information resources concerning the Ven reveals them to be a product of invention.

Figure 33 Houses of the Blooded Illustration (84)



May 1st

This is an interesting find. It depicts a minor scene from a famous opera. The center figure is a supporting character, who's military victory is a backdrop catalyst for some of the major characters.

but what is more interesting is the visual depiction of ven opera's classic archetypes...

The second figure from the left is the "wise Man" archetype. obvious for his hunched form, and watching from behind the column, keeping tabs. The Eighth figure, going left to right, is "The Husband", often portrayed as neglectful, his back is turned to us, unaware of the proceedings.

From an art history point of view, this piece is very intriguing. On the surface, it appears similar to Egyptian, Sumerian art. which often use height hierarchy but if we look closer, there is a sophisticated use of perspective, despite a two dimensional silhouette. The silhouettes themselves owe more to Chinese or Japanese brush paintings. yet, height hierarchy is in play here as well. The bowed captives on the right side are not pushed back in space. They are cowed, fettered and insignificant. S.

Even without any "background checking," the text itself continues to actively disclose and thus to deconstruct its own

fictionality by progressively adding information which is at evident odds with our real-world knowledge; a feature that is made evident by the following passage:

Writing about a culture that lived and died in the Primeval Age—before Atlantis saw its great rise and Mu was still a distant dream—is no easy task. Theirs was a brief time, before the return of the sorcerer-kings and the Bloody centuries that followed. Still, for a moment, the world was theirs. Or so they thought. (19)

As the mentioning of *Atlantis*, *Mu* and sorcery make clear, the premise of a real historical background is not meant to be “seriously” (or continuously) maintained, making the passage similar to what Genette defines as a “fictive authorial preface” (see *Paratexts* 275–292). This form of paratext, as he explains, is “distinguished by [its] fictional or, if you prefer, playful regime [...] in the sense that the reader is not really, or at least not permanently, expected to take the alleged status of their sender seriously” (ibid. 278). However, where such a preface would normally add a frame narrative level to the diegesis, the relationship between levels here would appear at first to be paradoxical: If the game world is postulated as being analogous to the “real” or “natural” world – the inclusion of fantastic elements would have the adverse effect of invalidating the premise by being at odds with the modalities of possibility and constraint that govern reality (Doležel, “Narrative Modalities”). At the same time, the constant recurrence of the framing and what would seem to be the mechanisms of its self-disclosure and invalidation throughout the text – with the author repeatedly inciting the reader to

reference the "historical texts" for further information - mark its importance as being more than just a humorous "gimmick." This makes it necessary to question its function and effect: Why - if the setting is clearly a fantastic one - does the text explicitly frame it as being based on fact? Why, on the other hand, if the intention is to make the setting seem "realistic" - in the sense that it conforms to our real-world codes of knowledge - is the contrary so obviously signaled? In order to answer these questions, we must begin by reading the passage as a world-constructing rather than a paradoxical and self-voiding mechanism. In this respect, by treating the Ven "as if" they were a real ancient culture, the game implicitly establishes an "invisible" 'hypothetical primary framework' (Fine); a ("contemporary") possible world where the Ven, *Atlantis* and *Mu* in fact did exist, and where historical research on them is going on in the present. In this world there is - or was at least in the past - magic and sorcery (and, considering the author's introductory remarks on the matter, even role-playing games such as *D&D!*). As a result, there is in fact no modal dissonance between the present and past worlds of the text which would be within the same space-time continuum. The dissonance, it would seem, is only between the real world and the framed one. Moreover, the referential overlap of the modally distinct real-world and the fictional one can be seen as marking the latter as a form of "alternate reality" where the authorial figure turns out to be a construct of the fictional text itself.¹⁶⁰ This indication is relevant when we take into account the sourcebook's general lack of extensive world information such as geography, flora, fauna, etc. From this point of view, the framing has what could be described as a "(pseudo)metaleptic effect." In the context of a TRPG, where framings only "mark"

¹⁶⁰ For a detailed analysis of similar forms of paratextuality in literature, see Malcah Effron's article on artificial paratexts in detective literature.

the potential narrative space, such a framing becomes a mechanism of authorization that incites players to extend the fictional-world by using real world referents. Furthermore, because the relationship between the past and the present of the fictional world is never clearly disclosed throughout the text, the verisimilitude of the setting - what happened to the ven? How did the present world become what it is? - is left to the players to create; an "uncertain," vast 'semantic blank' waiting to be filled.

Fiction and "Cultural Authenticity"

Now that we have established the metaleptic character of the preface, we can move on to a further complication in the framing structure of the text, what Wick calls "The Eastwood Defense":

There are precious few ven scholars in the world, but I have a feeling most of them will find many problems with the liberties I've taken in this book. Just in case they are reading, I want to make it clear that I'm taking The Eastwood Defense. Clint Eastwood once said he wasn't interested in making a "historical" movie as he was in making a film feel "authentic."

[...]

This is a romanticized version of the ven. It should not be considered anything near a historical document. In fact, I've done my best to pretty up the ugliest elements of ven culture while maintaining a sense of authenticity.

[...]

Houses is not meant to be a "historical game," but rather, a game that authentically recreates the stories presented in ven literature. (13)

The quote above introduces an additional twist. After presenting us with a fictional culture framed in a "realistic" (i.e. internally consistent) manner, the text further embeds this pretense by arguing that the game is in fact based on the literature - that is, on the fictions - of the said culture. This conceit serves to further heighten the metaleptic effect of the initial framing as it effectively blurs the boundaries between the fictional levels of the text, making it nearly impossible to discern where one ends and the other begins. What features are from ven "fictions" which ones from ven "history"? How do the past and present of the fictional world relate to each other? How do both relate to non-representational reality? These relationships are never explicitly elucidated. While this feature makes the world of *HotB* especially precarious, it also allows the author to free himself from the constraints of coherence which are typical of TRPGs. Thus any and every diegetic "fact" - implausible as it may seem - can also be explained as a form of (non-attributable) "artistic license", disregarding conventionally expected issues of consistency and therefore leaving all possibilities open to expansion.¹⁶¹ The following passage is a good example:

Ven children grow quick enough, but in their literature, the ven take quite the liberty with a child's age. It seems just a few short years after they are born, children are running around on both

¹⁶¹ For an enlightening discussion on the issue of world consistency in games and other media, see Wesp.

feet. A few years after that, they're as old as teenagers, getting in trouble with their elders, joining the vast political games. This is a literary device, of course. A cheat. An excuse to get the kids involved as fast as possible. But it may have also been a function of the sorcerer-kings wanting their slave race to grow quickly so they could get to work right away. Whatever the case may be, this game is dedicated to presenting the ven as they appear in their literature, and not in the light of historical fact. And so, in accordance with keeping to that tradition, the rules for children growing up will do just that.

Assume children age at double the rate human children do. (Wick 273)

This feature, far from being a flaw in game design,¹⁶² is another way of yielding authority to the eventual players of the game. In this regard, Wick manages to reconfigure player expectations, leaving the "primary text" of the game especially open for modification. Moreover, the fact that the game world is not logically disclosed in all its details but rather - to use a Platonic expression - "further removed" in the "semblance" of ven literature, makes *HotB's* claim to "authenticity" a statement about the role of art as a source of non-representational (cultural) truth. Following Poppenberg, we can say that because

¹⁶² Some reviewers, such as Tracy Barnett, have openly criticized the style of Wick's writing, arguing, for example, that "the murky, unclear sentence structure is justified by the author stating that he wanted to write the book 'the way the ven wrote'" (par 10). Without wanting to fully dismiss what can be seen as justified objections, I believe that much of this kind of criticism stems from traditional expectations concerning TRPGs. In this regard, current developments in game-design seem to indicate that new forms of role-play also require a new kind of game 'literacy.' We will discuss this further in the concluding section of this chapter.

it is a form of "articulation with the unknown" (*Artikulation mit dem Unbekannten*), this truth is defined by a "logic of the metaphor" (*Metaphorologik*) and, as such, corresponds to the notion of "poetic knowledge" (167). The latter, as Poppenberg notes, "hat ... nicht den Charakter einer Aussage mit eindeutiger Information, sondern geschieht als Artikulation einer Figur oder eines Denkbilds" (*ibid.*).

Dramatic Structure, Character Conflict and The Pregnant Moment in *Fiasco* (2009)

The sight was one of many. One of a multitude of clearly-etched scenes lying tangent to his own. And to each was attached a further multitude of interlocking scenes, that finally grew hazier and dwindled away. A progressive vagueness, each syndrome less distinct.- Philip K. Dick, *The Golden Man*

In many ways, *Fiasco* can be seen as a landmark of storytelling TRPGs.¹⁶³ Published in 2009, the game and its various supplements have won and been nominated to several game design prizes including the 2011 *Diana Jones Award for Excellence in Gaming*, the *Indie RPG Awards 2009* and the *RPGGeek Golden Geek 2012* for 'Best Supplement.' A highly streamlined game, *Fiasco* features a GM-less system that allows players to collectively create and role-play through a full, self-contained story within a couple of hours. This is accomplished by a mechanic that uses a pre-

¹⁶³ In fact, as we will see, *Fiasco* is exemplary for how it effectively combines some of the most important design and framing features previously discussed. As with *Universalis*, it includes a highly formalized set of rules for authorial negotiation and distribution. Similar to *1001 Nights*, it makes extensive use of poetic paradigms for textual construction while also adding precise mechanics to generate narrative closure. Finally, it resembles *HotB* in the way it encourages players to strive for the demise rather than the success of their characters. Due to the aforementioned, our analysis of Morningstar's game will require a somewhat more extensive discussion and analysis.

established dramatic arc and a constrained number of 'scenes' and 'acts' in order to determine the game's extension and overall narrative progression. The narrative itself - its story and plot - is driven by the game's framing structure and a character creation system that is based on the generation of character relationships rather than attributes. By determining these elements at the outset of play, participants are able to create a so-called "pregnant moment" (Lessing) that will unfold dramatically during the game-session. In contrast to its fixed genre and dramatic structure, however, the actual setting of *Fiasco* is variable, appearing in the form of interchangeable modules or "Playsets."

Figure 34 *Fiasco* (Cover)



Conceptually, the game invites players to create and enact narratives revolving around morally questionable, often

criminal, yet disturbingly mundane characters with “powerful ambition and poor impulse control” (Morningstar 8). Moreover, since protagonist failure is an essential part of the genre of narrative it seeks to reproduce, Morningstar’s game requires participants to engage in a ‘play to lose’ attitude that is uncommon in conventional TRPGs. In addition, rather than relying on simulation rules and a fixed hierarchy of authorial control, *Fiasco* exploits players’ fictional, narrative and dramatic ‘literacy’ - their knowledge of the rules and pleasures of cinematic narration and genre fiction as well as their familiarity with preceding texts - in order to produce stories with heightened emotional and semantic content.

Transmediation and ‘Playing to Lose’

As stated in the introduction by the game’s designer, Jason Morningstar, *Fiasco* aims explicitly at adapting or, rather, emulating the genre of “caper gone wrong” films in the medium of tabletop role-playing games.¹⁶⁴ This establishes two principal guiding meta-concepts for the game: ‘cinema’ and ‘caper gone wrong narratives.’ The cinematic frame itself is paratextually reinforced throughout *Fiasco*’s published material by means of explicit film references and quotes. In addition, the sourcebook’s layout “borrows” visually from the aesthetic and design of relevant movie posters. More significantly, as we will see, *Fiasco* encodes some of cinema’s most recognizable framing elements procedurally into its mechanics.¹⁶⁵ This encourages

¹⁶⁴ A sub-genre of crime fiction, caper or “heist” films generally present narratives revolving around the planning and realization of a criminal act such as a robbery or a kidnapping. Quite predictably, the “caper gone wrong” variant involves the protagonists’ failure at accomplishing the task and the often darkly comedic events and consequences accompanying such failure.

¹⁶⁵ Although the scene framing mechanic was already introduced by games such as *Universalis*, *Fiasco* explicitly ties it to the medium of cinema. This is combined with another “transmediated” framing structure; namely, that of the dramatic “act.”

players to *narrate* and *visualize* the diegesis as if observed from the perspective of an imaginary camera rather than defaulting to the characteristic 'first' or 'third person' narration used in most TRPGs. As Felan Parker observes,

The central mechanics of *Fiasco*, the overall structure of gameplay, and the specific kinds of plot elements that the game deploys work in tandem with the Saul Bass-style presentation of the game and references to films that inspired it in order to help players produce a shared, imaginary caper-gone-wrong movie, scene by scene. (par. 12)

A good example of how these elements and features translate into gameplay can be taken from a crucial moment in one of the games we ran with my group. The scene was described by one of the players as follows:

Everything is silent. It is dark. We are looking at the scene from below, right outside the open door and can only see silhouettes in shades of blue and black. There is the sound of something dripping onto the floor. Now we see the outline of a puddle and a liquid that ripples with each drop. Everything else is silent. Suddenly the light goes on. Hans is getting to his feet from the sofa. The [conjoined] twins are standing there with the harpoon gun in their hand, looking shocked. [...] We turn to see Julia standing there, glassy eyed. She's pinned to the door by the harpoon that is now jutting out from her side. It was her blood we heard and saw dripping in the darkness.

Here we can clearly recognize how the player adopts the point of view of the movie camera as he describes the (non-human) *visual perspective* from which the scene is observed. In addition, because the sounds included in the description are not immediately related to the presented "images" (we see the silhouettes but *hear* the sound of a dripping liquid), the passage is immediately evocative of a cinematic audiovisual montage. Indeed, *Fiasco* is a role-playing game that is designed to feel (and play) like a movie. As a result of the above, Parker views it as "a sort of colloquial, playable form of film criticism" (par 2). Thus, instead of reproducing or simulating a specific *setting*, the game allows players to generate and - both practically and affectively - explore a particular type of *story[telling]*. In order to accomplish this, it relies on an intricate system of framings that "maps out" the space of play both formally and semantically. In this regard, the sourcebook's introductory passage is exemplary of the game's emphasis on thematic and conceptual framing:

Fiasco is inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong - particularly films like *Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, *The Way of the Gun*, *Burn After Reading*, and *A Simple Plan*. You'll play ordinary people with powerful ambition and poor impulse control. There will be big dreams and flawed execution. It won't go well for them, to put it mildly, and in the end it will probably collapse into a glorious heap of jealousy, murder, and recrimination. Lives and reputations will be lost, painful wisdom will be gained, and if you are really lucky, your guy just might end up back where he started. (Morningstar 8)

As we can see, the 'caper-gone-wrong' genre immediately calls forth a series of overarching meta-concepts such as 'crime fiction,' 'tragicomedy' and 'black humor.' Thematically, the game explicitly invokes the topic of "great ambitions and poor impulse control," while further triggering broader notions such as 'greed,' 'jealousy' 'violence,' and 'moral ambiguity'. The specific film references, on the other hand, introduce additional thematic sub-frames such as 'lack of judgement' and 'inferiority complex' (*Fargo; A Simple Plan*), together with commonplace genre motifs and tropes like '*incompetent villains,*' '*anti-heroes,*' and '*gratuitous violence*' (*Burn After Reading; The Way of the Gun*). In addition, the movie references exemplify the variety of plots, characters and narratives made possible by the genre's thematic and conceptual premises. This is important as it points implicitly towards the "re-playability" or "restaging" potential of the game - an issue which we will discuss in detail further on. More importantly, the introduction highlights the meta-concept of '*spectacular failure,*' emphasizing its relevance as one of the fundamental - and certainly most enjoyable - elements of the genre. Indeed, for the protagonists of "caper" films, failure, loss and despair constitute frequent if not invariable life-experiences. As viewers, we obtain gratification in observing their "glorious collapse" from a "safe" distance, making caper-narratives particularly focused on the audience's ambiguous emotional response. Indeed, we are often at the same time deeply sympathetic to the characters' suffering while being voyeuristically thrilled by the extent of their demise. In the medium of gaming, however, lead characters who suffer and end up worse off than they began would seem to make for an even more problematic situation. Indeed, due to the close relationship between players and the characters they embody, "success" in TRPGs has been traditionally related to character "self-

preservation" and progression (cf. chapter four). By requiring participants to actively strive for a PC's downfall, therefore, the game's framings imply an important change of paradigm; one that in gaming jargon is known as 'play(ing) to lose.'¹⁶⁶ This approach, as we will discuss below, deemphasizes personal gratification - traditionally obtained by players individually through their avatars' accomplishments - while making the collective endeavor of storytelling the main objective of the game. As such, it can be said to "democratize" the pleasures of gameplay. This feature is further reinforced by the game's mechanics, which distribute narrative agency evenly among the players, allowing them to engage equally in both authorial- and character role-play.

Dramatic Structure and Narrative Progression

As mentioned earlier, one of the most notorious features of *Fiasco* is its use of a fixed, pre-established narrative structure. The latter is conceived in five stages or 'phases' which are based on the classical dramatic arc or "pyramid" as described by Gustav Freytag (Figure 36). These phases seamlessly integrate the mechanics of the game and its narrative progression. To better understand this, let us briefly summarize the game's formal development:¹⁶⁷

1. *Setup*: Players begin by choosing a 'playset' module and using its component element lists to generate a network of characters and setting 'details' (Figure 39). Once the

¹⁶⁶ The Nordic Larp Wiki database defines 'playing to lose' as "a technique or concept used by a player to create better drama by [...] letting their character lose. It is used in a collaborative play style rather than a competitive play style, and is a clear anti-gameism statement from Dramatists [...]" (www.nordiclarp.org).

¹⁶⁷ For an illustrative example of how *Fiasco* is played, see Wil Wheaton's YouTube series *Tabletop* episodes 8 and 9, as well as the accompanying video documenting the game's setup.

procedure has been completed, players generate an initial diegetic situation.

2. *Acts I and II*: Players develop the game's narrative via role-play over two acts within which each PC is assigned two 'scenes.' On each player's turn, he/she decides whether to 'establish' the outset or 'resolve' the outcome of their character's scene.
3. *Tilt*: After act I is completed, players use the 'tilt' table to generate a 'complication' or 'reversal' for the game's second half (see Figure 35).
4. *Act II*: Using the same mechanics as in act I, players continue developing the narrative, but now introducing the previously-established tilt elements.
5. *Aftermath*: Once both acts have finalized, players use the 'aftermath' table to establish their character's outcome which is then narrated as a montage.

Narratively, or rather dramatically, the '**setup**' is the rough equivalent to a play's '**exposition**;' it introduces the characters and their potential for conflict ('Relationships' and 'Needs'). It also establishes important facts about the setting ('Locations' and 'Objects'):¹⁶⁸

A small-town, middle-aged couple and their dysfunctional marriage; A self-centered husband with a gambling obsession; An unfaithful wife and her greedy lover; The couple's teenage daughter with a drug problem.

¹⁶⁸ In this regard, and although it does not directly involve role-play, the setup is more than just a procedure for generating characters and plot "seeds;" it is part of the narrative itself. As such, it can be described in terms of an intra-textual, entryway framing (Gray).

Act 1 is akin to a play's '**rising action**' phase and is meant to disclose, "delve into" and further develop the characters and their corresponding relationships and conflicts:

The husband reveals his growing jealousy towards his wife's work colleague; The wife and her lover make plans for getting rid of the rich husband and escaping to the Caribbean; The couple's teenage daughter and her best friend discuss the way of getting hold of a 'stash' of cannabis, etc.

Figure 35 Fiasco Tilt Table

TILT TABLE

1 MAYHEM

- ▣ An out of control rampage
- ▣ A frantic chase
- ▣ A dangerous animal (perhaps metaphorical) gets loose
- ☒ Magnificent self-destruction
- ☒ Cold-blooded score-settling
- ☒ Misdirected passion

2 TRAGEDY

- ▣ Death, out of the blue
- ▣ Somebody's life is changed forever, in a bad way
- ▣ Pain, followed by confusion
- ☒ Death, right on time
- ☒ Confusion, followed by pain
- ☒ Death, after an unpleasant struggle

3 INNOCENCE

- ▣ Somebody is not so innocent after all
- ▣ A neighbor wanders into the situation
- ▣ The wrong guy gets busted
- ☒ Collateral damage
- ☒ Love rears its ugly head
- ☒ A well-meaning stranger intervenes

4 GUILT

- ▣ A visit from the (perhaps unofficial) authorities
- ▣ Betrayed by friends
- ▣ Somebody develops a conscience
- ☒ Greed leads to killing
- ☒ Someone panics
- ☒ A showdown

5 PARANOIA

- ▣ A stranger arrives to settle a score
- ▣ What seems like dumb luck isn't - things are afoot
- ▣ Two people cross paths and everything changes
- ☒ A sudden reversal (of status, of fortune, of sympathy)
- ☒ The thing you stole has been stolen
- ☒ Somebody is watching, waiting for their moment

6 FAILURE

- ▣ A stupid plan, executed to perfection
- ▣ Something precious is on fire
- ▣ A tiny mistake leads to ruin
- ☒ A good plan comes unraveled
- ☒ You thought it was taken care of but it wasn't
- ☒ Fear leads to a fateful decision

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While the **tilt** phase is not part of the story in the narrow sense, it helps generate dramatic 'complications' or 'reversals' for the following scenes. Initially these are merely conceptual framings (Figure 35):

Guilt - 'someone panics'; Tragedy - 'Death, out of the blue'; Paranoia - 'The thing you stole has been stolen.'

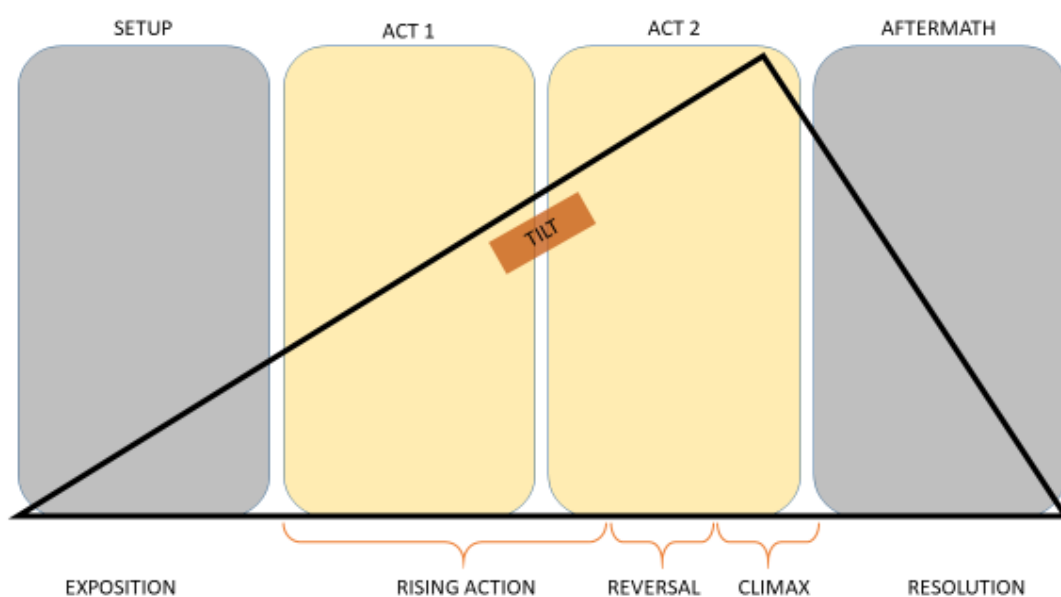
Act 2 develops the story towards its '**climax.**' The latter is catalyzed by the introduction of the narrative 'complications' generated during the previous 'Tilt' phase which are adapted to the narrative's particular context:

The husband panics while hiding in the closet to spy on his wife; The wife accidentally shoots her lover; The teenagers open the suitcase with the stash, only to find it empty.

The **aftermath** serves as the narrative's '**resolution**' or '**denouement.**' In contrast to acts 1 and 2, however, it is conveyed as a *montage* rather than through role-play.

The husband visiting his wife in jail to inform her that their daughter has overdosed; The wife staring absently out of her cell's small window, looking at the planes passing by; A letter on the (dead) lover's desk confirming that he is now the legal owner of the wife's house; The daughter buying the drugs before the overdose with the money stolen from her father's safe.

Figure 36 Dramatic Structure in *Fiasco*



Authorial, Narrative and Simulation Rules

Not only does *Fiasco's* dramatic structure make it highly effective in conveying a specific type of narrative, it also limits the game's temporal extension, making it more akin to the corresponding movie genre. In this regard, rather than generating a "vast" narrative world so common in traditional TRPGs, the game allows the creation of the formal equivalent of the 'short-story.' As a result, players are encouraged to focus on narrative relevance when creating and role-playing through scenes. Following with the cinematic analogy, Morningstar equates this activity with the role of a film director:

If you choose to Establish the scene, you have the privilege of acting as director. Who is present? Do any Objects or Locations factor into it? Does it address a Need? When does it take place - is it a flashback, concurrent with other scenes we've already played, or at some other time?
[capitalizations in original] (Morningstar 28)

Each scene is therefore conceived as a discrete, "framed" unit where the events are concentrated and focused towards their relevance for the overall plot. As a result, players are made aware of the selection process involved in the activity of storytelling itself. As Morningstar states:

There aren't any hard and fast rules about what constitutes a good scene [...] just avoid scenes that are aimless, don't advance the plot in an interesting way, or are self-indulgent. You don't get very many scenes! Make them count. Be bold.
(Morningstar 29)

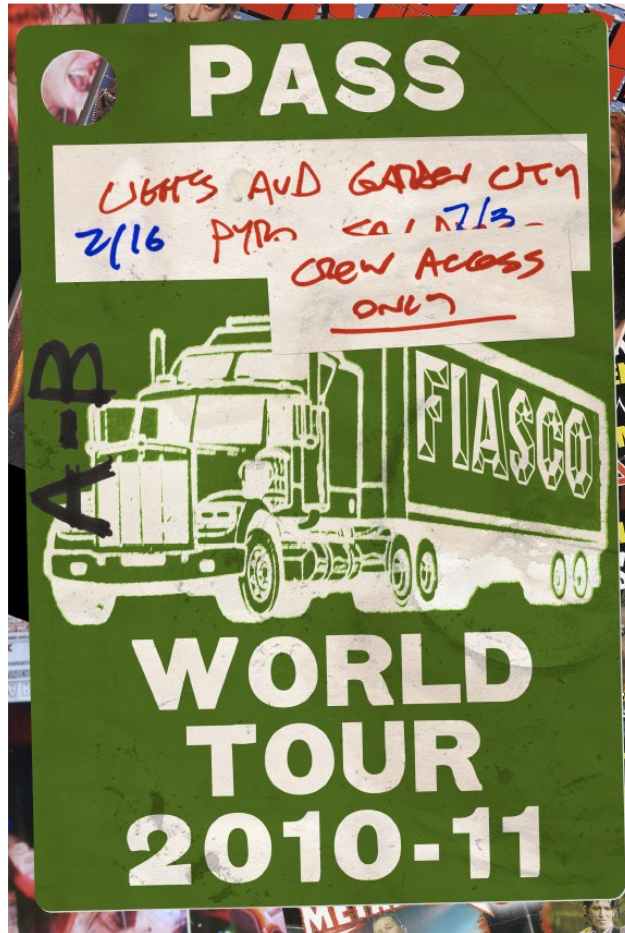
This notion is again reinforced by Morningstar's recommendation to "edit aggressively" when creating and playing through scenes. As he puts it, players should "[c]ut to the meat of a scene, [avoid] beat[ing] around the bush, and wrap it up when a decision has been made, a truth has been discovered, or a Rubicon has been crossed" (35). Nevertheless, while the sourcebook is very explicit concerning *how* the story is to be conveyed, there are no rules to determine *what* happens in a specific scene. Thus, a player stating "I shoot him in the leg" is immediately establishing a fictional fact: the character shoots and hits. Whether or not the shot is fatal can be decided by the players through open (meta-game) negotiation. Here, again, it is the narrative relevance of survival vs. that of death, rather than a character's specific abilities such as 'resilience,' 'health' or 'strength,' that will serve to determine the outcome. In other words, rules in *Fiasco* are mainly related to narrative development and the distribution of authority while leaving the question of simulation open and ambiguous. This is only possible because the framing network activates what we may call players' "fictional literacy," that is, their understanding of the implicit rules and meta-concepts of the genre. We will understand this better when looking at the game's 'Playset' texts.

Playsets: Setting, Modularity & Iterability

As a game system, *Fiasco* relies on the use of 'Playsets,' or stand-alone textual "modules" whose main function is to provide participants with a "framework [to] build on to create characters and [a] situation" (Morningstar 60). They include a cover and title page (Figure 37); a brief section with information on the module's premise and setting (Figure 38); and the lists of elements that will be used for character generation

during the game 'setup' (explained further below).¹⁶⁹ Although they cover many possible settings and backgrounds - from science fiction to roman wars - playsets contain very little "world-building" information in the sense of a 'fictional encyclopedia' (Doležel, *Heterocosmica*).¹⁷⁰

**Figure 37 "Touring Rock Band"
Playset (Cover)**



¹⁶⁹ Due to the fact that playsets are authored by different people, the exact form and style of the included setting descriptions may vary. In general, however, it will be very brief (¾ page max) and will offer cues as to the desired atmosphere and thematic focus of the setting.

¹⁷⁰ Doležel describes the notion of 'fictional encyclopedia' as the "[k]nowledge about a possible world constructed by a fictional text" (*Heterocosmica* 178). As such, it constitutes "a global condition [for] the recovery of implicit meaning" and can be thus conceived as a "cognitive macroresource" (181).

Setting is mostly reduced to an introductory section called "The Score" which consists of a "motto," and a very succinct description of the supplement's general background and premise (often no more than half a page). In addition, there is a subsection called "Movie Night" which contains relevant film references for the particular setting (Figure 38). In terms of its framing functionality, a playset's initial section acts as a paratextual 'double-framing.' It is both an announcement of the playset's content as well as a "proto-" textual structure that establishes a specific range of 'future narratives' for the game session. The film references, for their part, continue reinforcing the game's guiding notion of cinematic adaptation while indicating relevant sources of inspiration and 'fictional poaching' (Jenkins). As a result, the films become intertexts that also work to expand the semantic potential of the diegetic text.

**Figure 38 "The Score" from the "Touring Rock Band"
Fiasco Playset**

THE SCORE

"I AM A GOLDEN GOD!"

It's all about the music, man. It's about becoming famous. It's about the chicks, the drugs, the fans. It's about burning bright and dying young, leaving behind a legend!

Or maybe it's about paying for the hotel room once the stupid legend has left the building.

Touring Rock Band is an over-the-top collection of iconic rock and roll glories and unwholesome lunacy. It's about golden gods rising to fame and falling back into addiction, stupidity and squalid failure.

MOVIE NIGHT

Almost Famous. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains. Paanch.

The true backbone of a playset, however, are its tables with their corresponding element lists. The latter are divided into

four general categories, namely those of 'Relationships,' 'Objects,' 'Needs' and 'Locations.'¹⁷¹ Each of these is further divided into six sub-categories of six items each.¹⁷² While the main categories are the same for all playsets, the sub-categories and the contents thereof are particular to each supplement. Thus, they reinforce and further expand the themes and motifs - that is, the guiding frames - suggested by the module's background. For example, in the *Touring Rock Band* playset, the general 'Relationships' category is divided into 'Family,' 'Good Friends,' 'The Grind,' 'Parasites,' 'Trouble,' and 'Bad Friends.' These sub-categories define a generic type of relationship which can be further specified by using the items or 'details' contained within it. In terms of the game's framing structure, each of these elements will contribute to it by activating a specific array of meta-concepts. Thus, while the sub-category 'Good Friends' might trigger notions such as 'loyalty' and 'intimacy', the additional 'detail' of 'Friends with benefits' will include possible sub-frames such as 'sex,' 'jealousy,' 'promiscuity' and 'ambiguity.' The 'Relationships' lists will therefore pre-determine the types of character configurations (com)possible within the game's potential narrative space.¹⁷³ The 'Needs', 'Objects' and 'Locations' lists, for their part, will generate expectations as to the space and time of a game's particular diegesis (Figure 40). For example,

¹⁷¹ It is important to note, however, that 'Relationships' is the most important category of them all as it allows participants to generate and define the player characters based on their diegetic social network. While being distinct categories of their own, 'Objects,' 'Needs' and 'Locations' are conceived as auxiliary categories aimed at further defining character relationships.

¹⁷² The number assigned to the elements of these lists (always 1-6) is relevant since the mechanics of the game are defined by the use of six-sided dice (see further below).

¹⁷³ Relationship 'details', on the other hand, can be seen as specific motifs, tropes and themes that will further define the interaction among the characters of the game. Thus, going for 'Creative Challengers' or 'The Collective Soul of the Band' will bring with them completely different consequences and character constellations.

in the case of the *Touring Rock Band* playset, a combination of a character's 'Need' "To get Piles of Cash: by signing a solo contract" with a 'Location' in "Detroit [at] a luxury suite above the Palace of Auburn Hills arena" and a "Fuckin' Weak" 'Object' such as "The Manager's true account books" will give a good idea of the general context in which the game's narrative conflict will arise.

Figure 39 Relationship List from the "Touring Rock Band" *Fiasco* Playset

RELATIONSHIPS...

1 FAMILY

- Brother and sister
- Brothers or sisters
- "Blood brothers"
- Cousins
- Twins
- Faked family

2 GOOD FRIENDS

- Best friends since grade school
- Best friends since yesterday
- Tour bus friends
- The collective soul of the band
- Creative challengers
- Friends with benefits

3 THE CRIND

- Boss / roadie
- Boss / wardrobe and merch
- Tour manager / dude under manager's thumb
- Boss / off-stage session musician
- Tour assistant manager / guitar tech
- Boss / weird guy with tool bag

4 PARASITES

- Dealer / drug fiend
- Sidekicks of The Great One
- Reporter / tour personnel
- Roadies
- Local celebrity / tour personnel
- Musician's teenager / tour personnel

5 TROUBLE

- Undercover cop / tour personnel
- Protective parent / tour personnel
- Underage fan / tour personnel
- Insane stalker / tour personnel
- Tour personnel who violently hate each other
- Former member of the band / tour personnel

6 BAD FRIENDS

- You owe him your life
- He owes you his career
- Manipulator / victim
- Public enemies, private friends
- Friends by court-ordered consent decree
- Public friends, private enemies

...IN A TOURING ROCK BAND

In view of the above, we may describe Playsets as highly optimized systems of self-reinforcing, 'genetic' framings. As such, they have a major impact on the creation and development of the game's emergent narrative. Emphasizing this, Morningstar points out that "[t]he Playset you choose will inform your game in a huge way, so pick one you like or make your own" (60). This

will become particularly evident once we have a closer look at the game's character creation system.

Figure 40 "Touring Rock Band" 'Needs' List

NEEDS...

1 TO GET FUCKED

- By a groupie, right the hell now
- To prove you are straight
- To win a bet
- In a new and unsavory way not even Led Zepelin attempted
- By your estranged sweetheart
- By the one person who can refuse you

2 TO GET WASTED

- Because your promoter told you to get in the papers
- As a cry for help
- With some cool local teenagers
- Just to make it through
- With a friendly drug dealer
- To handle the pressure of a TV interview

3 TO GET PILES OF CASH

- By ripping off the rest of the band
- By signing a solo contract
- With the help of faith healer Tito Luna
- By following your cousin's advice
- By keeping the band together no matter what
- With a sideline energy drink deal

4 TO GET REVENGE

- On these toolbags that call themselves artists
- For the humiliation you endure every day
- On your fucking manager
- On that strutting primadonna
- For ignoring your creative contributions forever
- Because nobody calls you a poser

5 TO GET RESPECT

- By showing the world that you have no limits
- By winning an American Music Award
- From the band, because you deserve ... respect
- From the crew, who laugh behind your back
- From your family, who think you are a failure
- By bringing the light of Christ to the tour

6 TO GET OUT

- Of certain promises you made to certain dangerous people
- Of a debt you owe and can't repay
- Of your fuckin' contract
- Of your fuckin' marriage
- Of your menial role, and thereby thrust into greatness
- Of your responsibility - permanently

...IN A TOURING ROCK BAND

Character Creation: Authority and Engagement

In terms of the game's mechanics, players begin character generation by rolling a common pool of six-sided dice. Using the numbers generated by the roll, they take turns in establishing 'Relationships' between each pair of neighboring players at the table. In addition, they must include and define at least one 'Need', 'Location', and 'Object.' To do so, they must "spend" a die according to the number of the element 'type' or 'detail' on the corresponding list (see Figure 39, Figure 40 and Figure 41). For example, establishing that two characters maintain a 'Good Friends' relationship requires a player to use a '2' from the dice pool. To further define the relationship as, "Friends with benefits," the same or another player would need a '6.' If

no sixes are left, he or she will have to choose a different item from the list. This means that players' choices are subsequently constrained by the given lists; the aleatory result of the initial dice roll and the decisions of their own fellow players.¹⁷⁴ The above has two major consequences in terms of how the mechanics affect players' expectations and emotional response to the game's diegesis: First, the collective aspect of the character generation system makes diegetic information equally available to all of the game's participants. Eliminating the privileged epistemic position of a traditional GM, this distribution of knowledge will be key in allowing players to share authorial agency and control during gameplay, in particular when framing scenes. In addition, it enables players to effectively shape the narrative by role-playing to make the most of each character's background and particular situation. This, as discussed in the previous chapter ("Backstories"), can be described in terms of the game's high "transparency of information" (Torner, "Uncertainty"). Second, the tight agential constellation generated in the character creation process means that any development in the story will be consequential for each and every player character, much in the same way that a move in chess affects the value of each component element in the system. As a result, character interaction becomes relevant to all game participants beyond their "own" character's direct involvement in a scene. This is an aspect which is typically problematic in traditional game systems. Indeed, because TRPGs often require players to be spectators during each other's turns, keeping players engaged can often be a challenge to GMs, especially when characters act separately from each other (for example during "solo" missions). *Fiasco's* relationship system, in contrast, is crucial in fostering player involvement with the story at large.

¹⁷⁴ This could also be seen to be thematically related to the idea of 'inevitability,' 'fatality' or 'tragedy' that constitute a centerpiece of the game.

This is further emphasized by the shared authority of the character creation process itself. Because they can determine relationships and details related to any two characters, players co-author each other's avatars and, as such, become creatively "invested" in them. *Fiasco's* character creation system is thus a good example of achieving 'convergence' through a well-balanced use of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' authority (Booth; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Ryan, *Avatars*). The above affects players' stance towards the diegesis, allowing them to shift easily between a character-centered and an authorial-centered perspective and thus, between role- and authorial play. From this point of view, the framing activity can be conceived as an empowering mechanism that encourages players to take responsibility for constructing the game's narrative.

Figure 41 "Touring Rock Band" 'Locations' List

LOCATIONS...

1 THE TOUR BUS

- ▣ Bathroom
- ▣ Bedroom
- ▣ Driver's seat and door well
- ▣ Video game lounge
- ▣ The roof, in motion
- ▣ The capacious but empty liquor cabinet

2 THE ARENA

- ▣ Above the stage
- ▣ In the wings
- ▣ Beneath the stage with the pyro package
- ▣ The green room, with snacks
- ▣ On stage, before an angry crowd
- ▣ In the mosh pit

3 WHEREVER THE HELL WE ARE TODAY

- ▣ A Circle-K Cafeteria
- ▣ A dodgy truck stop
- ▣ An elementary school
- ▣ A used CD store
- ▣ "Musician's Buddy" megastore
- ▣ An industrial trash incinerator

4 DETROIT

- ▣ A greasy all-ages club in Ferndale
- ▣ A luxury suite above the Palace of Auburn Hills arena
- ▣ A shabby bungalow in Hamtramck
- ▣ The studio of WRIF at five in the morning
- ▣ A Canadian 25 foot powerboat on Lake St. Clair
- ▣ Cargo terminal at Detroit Metro Airport

5 LOS ANGELES

- ▣ The laundry room of the LA Airport Hilton
- ▣ The American Music Awards ceremony
- ▣ A powered wheelchair showroom in Ventura
- ▣ A crack house in East Los Angeles
- ▣ The Wilshire Community Police Station
- ▣ Cedars-Sinai Medical Center

6 CHADWICK, IDAHO

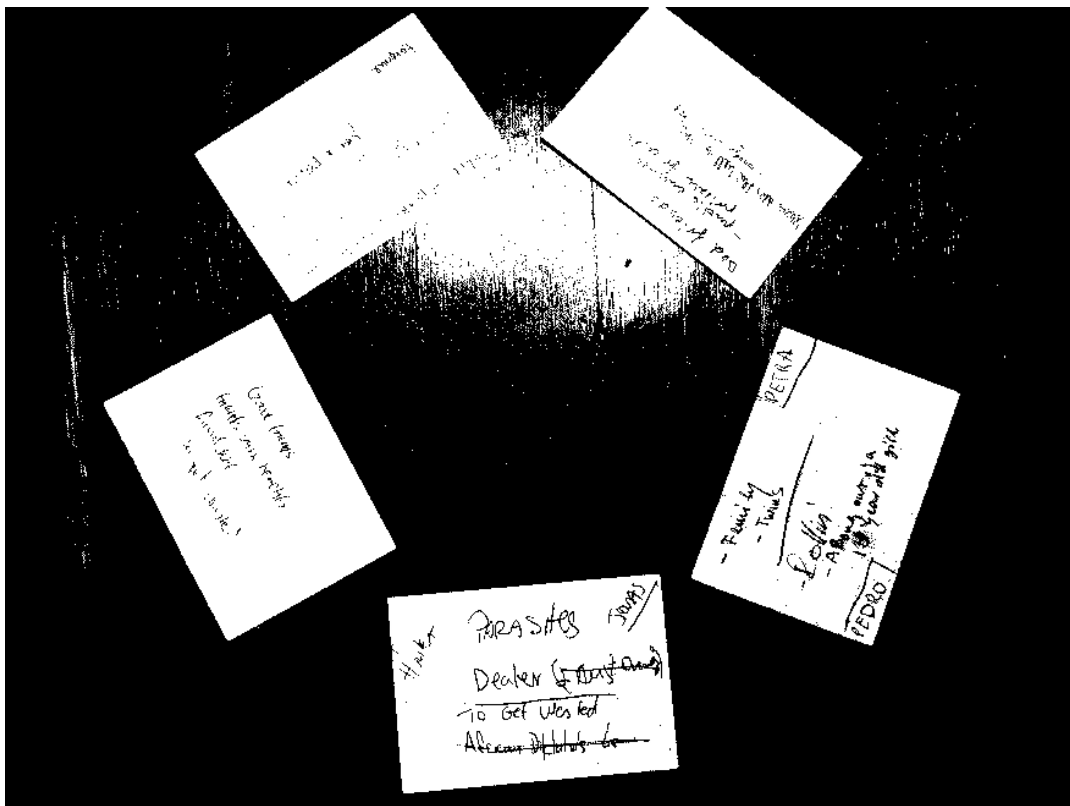
- ▣ Cerulean Skies Studio
- ▣ The Sucker Creek Spawning Channel
- ▣ A barn, on fire
- ▣ The bed of an F-150 pickup, underwater
- ▣ A dog-fighting ring behind a trailer park
- ▣ The Mayor's house on Plessy Street

...IN A TOURING ROCK BAND

Relationships, Conflict and the 'Pregnant Moment'

Dispensing completely with the concept of statistically quantifiable 'traits' and 'abilities', *Fiasco* relies on the generation of relationships and motivations as a mechanic for character creation. As a clear illustration of this, the game replaces the 'topic' individual character sheet used in traditional games with a set of index cards to collectively represent the game narrative's agential constellation.

Figure 42 *Fiasco* Index Cards



It is only after this network of relationships has been established that the players "flesh out" the actual characters, giving them names and specific backgrounds. The setup implies therefore, a complex process of feedback and interpretation where players establish a framing network and then fill in its textual and semantic blanks. As Parker observes,

[t]he fatalistic undertones of the caper-gone-wrong are highlighted right from the set-up in *Fiasco*, in which every character begins not as an individual, but a node in a randomly-generated network of relationships, needs, locations, and objects. **These plot elements in many ways have more agency than the characters derived from them**, as they act upon the characters through the players, determining the range of possible identities available to them, and constituting their roles in the story [my emphasis].
(par. 8)

The above allows the game and its players to focus on the social and emotional dimension of the characters, giving particular relevance to their potential for conflict. More importantly, when considering Doležel's observation that the latter "is the most common mode of interacting" in narratives (*Heterocosmica* 107), we can understand how *Fiasco's* use of procedural and formal constraints actually enables rather than limits emergent storytelling. As Doležel notes,

[d]espite its often chaotic course, conflict is a structured interaction arising in a certain agential constellation, under specific motivational pressures and following distinct stages. [...] [I]t is the plasticity of the conflict that makes it a perennial feature of fictional stories. (ibid.)

Conflict becomes thus, the structural basis for character and player interaction in the game.¹⁷⁵ As elements are added during the setup, the choices made by players generate an “unstable” narrative starting point for the game. As such, it can be described in terms of what Lessing has called a “fruchtbarer Augenblick” or “pregnant moment.” Indeed, in his 1766 essay on the Laocoön sculpture, Lessing observed that for the plastic arts to express a plot or narrative, they should be able to represent a situation that is so highly connoted as to allow an external observer to cognitively reconstruct both the events preceding and following it. In an analogous fashion, the framing construction generated by players during the setup represents an undecided and highly ambivalent “moment”; a “narrative sculpture”, so to speak, which is nonetheless so semantically overdetermined as to inform to a high degree the narrative’s further development.

Structuring Narrative Emergence

As we have seen, the framing structure of *Fiasco* generates expectations as to certain types of character interaction, narrative structure, closure and, most importantly, social and emotional configurations. In addition, the game’s lack of simulation rules and detailed setting information in favor of atmospheric quotes, intertextual references and lists of character relationships and motivations implicitly tell us that *Fiasco* is not so much about *where* and *how*, but about *who* and *why*. This makes the figuration of complex interpersonal relationships and non-normative forms of behavior one of the game’s principal goals and sources of pleasure. As such, the game relies greatly on its capacity of offering a social ‘alibi,’ “mak[ing] it” as Wil Wheaton puts it, “feel good to be bad”

¹⁷⁵ In contrast with *Universalis*, however, where authorial agency was contested among players, *Fiasco* encourages the latter’s authorial collaboration to generate character confrontation.

(Foreword to *The Fiasco Companion* by Morningstar and Segedy 9). In addition, by making character failure part of the game's immediate objectives, *Fiasco* redefines the nature of player enjoyment, distributing the responsibility for its obtainment among the group rather than ascribing it to a single player. Furthermore, its use of a fixed dramatic structure openly challenges Ryan's assumption that "the Aristotelian plot of interpersonal conflict leading to a climax and resolution does not lend itself easily to active participation because its strength lies in a precise control of emotional response that prevents most forms of user initiative" (*Avatars* "Internal-Exploratory Interactivity"). The strength of Morningstar's game, however, lies in the way it encodes "emotional response" into the game mechanics, giving players "precise control" over the characters' social and affective dimension. Ultimately, it is the group's collective understanding of the game's genre and themes that allows them to put these "building blocks" in a formation that will result, more often than not, in a variation of the tragically comic "caper-gone-wrong" narrative.

Re-defining the "Storytelling" TRPG

Tabletop role-playing games allow the construction of highly complex, collaborative and interactive narratives. In this context, coherent game interaction among players must rely on shared understandings of the fictional world and general thematic concepts related to it. This form of common interpretation has been aptly deemed 'equifinality.' Nevertheless, as stated by Ryan, "sense making can also result from the drawing of analogies and contrasts between phenomena, rather than from the chronological and causal ordering of individual events" (*Avatars*, "Defining Narrative"). Indeed, as with any other form of art, TRPGs involve many instances of non-representational meaning. This occurs both on the level of a

player's individual interpretation of a game-session as well as on the level of the basic poetic structures of a game.

Beginning with *Universalis*, we have discussed the way in which the use of explicit rules for authorial negotiation may impact players' interest and engagement with the narrative while shifting the focus of the game towards the activity of fictionalization - or "storytelling" - itself. Not only does this distribute authority more evenly among players - and therefore also the responsibility for making the game enjoyable - it does so by marking 'uncertainty' as a central *locus* of pleasure. More importantly, TRPG gameplay is revealed to be a space of contested expectations and desires, making player interaction and the resulting text a form of affective (con-)figuration (Poppenberg).¹⁷⁶ This notion is also apparent self-reflexively in the framing paradigms of *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Houses of the Blooded*. Furthermore, our analysis of these games demonstrated how fiction framings such as *mise en abyme/cadre*, embedded narratives and fictive prologues (among others) are used to make polysemy and ambiguity constitutive elements of a game's design, thereby foregrounding the poetic (or meaning-making) aspect of role-play. Finally, we used Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* as an example of the successful implementation of 'narrative rules' to inform the discourse of the game, in this case by determining the development of a specific 'dramatic arc.' This feature - by means of iteration and recurrence - enables the generation of a semantically overdetermined play space which is, nonetheless, still emergent. This aspect, we argued, is further reinforced by game mechanics - in particular a conflict-based character creation system - that allow players to construct a powerful initial framing

¹⁷⁶ As Poppenberg explains, a literary figure must be seen as a dynamic entity that "configures the process of transformation from desire/lust into wisdom" [my translation from the original: "Sie konfiguriert den Vorgang der Verwandlung von Lust in Weisheit"] (164)

situation or "pregnant moment" that heavily influences the story's further development. Rather than using the above-mentioned features to confer ideological meanings to these games in the form of "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost, *Persuasive Games*), these texts enable the creation of potentially (poly)semantic spaces where poetic knowledge can emerge from player interaction via their metaphoric articulation. Moreover, in their capacity for generating deeply "significant" narratives, these games allow us to revisit and expand our understanding of storytelling in the TRPG medium and, more specifically, of "storytelling" as a specific category of TRPGs. As we have seen in our analysis, current developments in game design have drastically challenged Costikyan's assumption that (traditional) TRPGs "don't generally provide a structure to shape [stories], leav[ing] it up to the gamemaster and players to shape the tale" ("Games, Storytelling" 10). This, he has argued, is related to the fact that "their rules are concerned more with determining the success or failure of individual actions" (ibid.). By contrast, one of the distinctive characteristics of this new generation of "storytelling games" is their inclusion of explicit rules and mechanics governing both the form or discourse of the narrative (*Universalis*; *Fiasco*) as well as the semantic paradigms that inform its poetic texture (*1001 Nights*).¹⁷⁷ In addition, these games generally deemphasize or completely dispense with rules to simulate the game world and the interactions that occur within it. Accordingly, they tend to replace character representation in terms of alethic qualities (*what* they can do) in favor of establishing their function within a network of social relationships (*why* they do it). Characters are thus conceived

¹⁷⁷ Games such as *Universalis* and *Fiasco*, for example, include mechanics to determine the game's narrative structure while also implementing framing strategies such as "fade to black" or "flashback." *1001 Nights*, on the other hand, establishes sensory framing as a semantic paradigm to create its characters, thereby affecting the texture of the narrative.

more in terms of human qualities; that is, as social and emotional entities. This allows players to explore an affective rather than a 'mimetic' landscape (Hayot and Wesp; Ryan, *Avatars*), adding an aspect of emotional depth to the games while increasing the personal relevance and therefore the "tellability" (Culler) of the experience and the narratives thereby generated within the player group. Ultimately, the fact that these games make their focus the *how* and *why* rather than the *what* of storytelling foregrounds a self-reflexive use of the medium that enhances its poetic dimension (Jakobson). In this regard, storytelling games generally involve a profound deliberation on their own nature as a narrative medium by either implicitly or explicitly asking the question "what is good storytelling?" "How do we tell *this* kind of story as opposed to *another* one?" Describing his experience with one such game, Damien Walter observes:

Swords Without Master is a very different game to *D&D*, reflecting the shift within RPG design away from rules and dice rolls, towards pure storytelling. [...] You emerge from reading [the game] not only convinced you understand every nuance of heroic fantasy, but also with the impression of having spent time in a world very different from our own. ("The Joy of Reading Role-playing Games")

Storytelling games can be therefore said to implement framing structures that encourage participants to adopt a 'narrative creative agenda' during gameplay.¹⁷⁸ This is further supported

¹⁷⁸ A similar opinion has been expressed by Hite who describes the goal of the "new wave of "indie" role-playing game[s]" as the "present[ation of] a

by the fact that these games often reduce or eliminate the need for extensive pre-session planning and, consequently, of a single, privileged game authority such as a game-master. In correlation to the above, "authorial" rules and mechanics are often included in order to achieve a more "symmetrical" and therefore "even" distribution of creative power and agency among participants. In this context, it is the semantic *potential* generated by framings rather than a unifying authorial agency that makes the emergence of complex and meaningful narratives possible. More importantly, by "democratizing" the creative process, storytelling TRPGs heighten players' feeling of involvement in the game and therefore their affective relationship and sense of immersion in the story. Such an understanding would seem to corroborate Hayot and Wesp's assumption that ergodic texts such as TRPGs have the capacity to create specific types of readership:

If the reader's choices determine the path of the text's sign-production (and thus, in many cases, its narrative), one can begin to imagine that the encounter with ergodic texts might engender particular types of readers, readers whose participation in the texts produces particular types of experience (and not simply different interpretations of the same signs). That is, ergodic readers may acquire or adopt strategies in relation to the text or game whose narrative and semiotic trajectory they produce. Or, perhaps better: because ergodic readers must collaborate with the game-text, they become responsible to some extent for the

"narrativist" game that explores individual reactions to a predestined story arc" (74).

strategy of their particular experience in the game-text. (Hayot and Wesp 408)

Ultimately, the fact that 'storytelling' TRPGs are as (if not more) capable than conventional games of generating coherent, well-structured and meaningful narratives reveals mediality rather than narrativity to lie at the center of the perceived conflict between story and gameplay in TRPGs. From this point of view, it becomes evident that otherwise common gameplay problems such as "railroading" arise not from any inherent properties of stories, but from an attempt at conveying them in a manner that is - at least to an extent - discordant with the medium's particular affordances.¹⁷⁹ In this regard, the conventionalized function of the game-master can be seen as an "inheritance" of the author figure from non-interactive, "legacy" media. As a result, the tendency of "old school" TRPGs to implement traditional conventions of "literary" authority in the gaming medium can be described in terms of a process of 'remediation' (as by Bolter and Grusin) by means of which "a newer medium first copies aesthetic and structural elements of the older before it develops its own specific, materially receptively and institutionally contingent mediality" (Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming* 53-54). From this point of view, however, rather than understanding them as a reaction to print media alone, 'storytelling' TRPGs are best to be appreciated from a homo-medial perspective; that is, as a reaction to early forms of role-play.¹⁸⁰ As we have discussed previously, the inherent

¹⁷⁹ "Railroading" can be described as a GM's imposition of pre-established events or plot developments upon a game in a way that often conflicts with the players' own interests.

¹⁸⁰ Taking a similar position in his analysis of hyperpoetry, Schnierer has argued convincingly for the use of homo-medial perspectives in order to understand the literary and poetic aspects of new media. As he explains, hyperpoetry "is not a new category *sui generis*, but rather - and merely - a type of poetry [that] seeks to set itself apart not from 'old' poetry, but

"dissonance" created by early or conventional TRPGs between narrative and gameplay is often bridged by players through implicit and explicit negotiation via framing and rule-bending. Storytelling games, in contrast, have developed a deep understanding of the medium's workings, allowing them to **abandon rather than enforce onto the gaming medium traditional - or "print-based" - notions of narrative and authority.** By relying on the interpretive guiding function of fiction framings, these games are able to generate both narrative structure and meaning without limiting player interactivity or textual emergence. As such they exploit the specific affordances of role-playing games to produce complex, emotionally engaging narratives with heightened literary and aesthetic value. It is ultimately these features, together with the complex cognitive and affective processes involved, that continue to give these games an edge over newer technologies and media. As Wallis notes,

[t]he current generation of story-making games does not create a fully fleshed story, which is one of the reasons they do not lend themselves to computer versions or computer-moderated play. Instead, they provide the pieces of the story's skeleton and the rules for assembling it. The players' interaction with the game builds these pieces into the framework of a story, while the players' imagination and improvisation simultaneously add the flesh of the narrative, bouncing off the prompts and inspirations provided by the game engine. (73)

from hyperprose" (97). The same can be held to be true when regarding the relationship between traditional and contemporary storytelling TRPGs.

Tabletop role-playing games are thus intricate systems of information that allow participants to improvise, collaborate and interact via fiction in real-time. Furthermore, as an effective storytelling medium, these games have come to reach a high level of artistic sophistication that continues to develop with newer releases. In this regard, the games we have just discussed reveal a keen awareness among designers of the crucial function that framings have in allowing all of these aspects to combine efficiently in a purposeful manner. Where player framing activities in traditional games often emerged organically as ways to subvert or compensate for the inherent "power inequality" of conventional, GM-based mechanics, more recent games have made this form of subversion part of the game itself. This has broadened what we may call the participants' "horizon of influence" upon the fictional spaces with which and within which they play.

Conclusion: Closing Frames and Open Doors

It is a life-long obsession but at the end of the day, just like any kid, the reward is just to play.- Dave Grohl, *Play*

I keep telling you: it's the mystery that endures.
Not the explanation.- Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*

Over the course of this dissertation, I have argued that TRPGs present us with a special use of fiction framings and paratexts as a means of interpreting, negotiating and, most importantly, creating fiction. Beginning with an in-depth discussion on the relationship between literature and play, I argued in the **first chapter** that traditional disciplines, in particular literary studies, continue to be of key relevance to understanding not only the history and genesis, but also the workings and semiotic complexity of the TRPG medium. Conversely, I also pointed out the possible benefits of re-conceptualizing the literary endeavor as one of ludic pleasure and how this might allow us to make current game theories part of the literary studies' "toolbox."

In **chapter two** I presented a general review of the tabletop role-playing game's history, hinting at the idea that current developments in game design rely increasingly on framing structures to enable a shift towards "storytelling" rather than strategic gameplay. In addition, I briefly discussed some of the main definitions and theories related to the TRPG medium, showcasing the wide spectrum of approaches currently in use. In particular, I pointed out some of the shortcomings of early, primarily structuralist approaches, indicating the general necessity of re-introducing hermeneutic perspectives to TRPG studies.

Chapter three was dedicated to understanding the complex textual nature of the TRPG. As I explained, TRPG gameplay not only

involves the simultaneous interaction of participants within various levels of meaning, but also the establishment of a fictional 'world' with meanings of its "own"; that is, of a "hypothetical primary framework" that is treated as "real" during gameplay (Fine). It is this emergent diegesis or diegetic interface, I proposed, that can be seen as the TRPG's main text.

In **chapter four** I discussed the valuable insights offered by discourse analysis as to how players 'key' their utterances in order for them to be interpreted within a specific frame of meaning as well as the way in which players negotiate different identities during the game. Nevertheless, we also argued that a different approach is necessary in order to describe the way meaning is created *within* the fictional framework itself. Consequently, and because of their prominent role in the hermeneutic negotiation of fictional texts, I proposed to adapt the concepts of paratextuality and literary framing to the TRPG medium.

Due to the inherent unavailability of a TRPGs diegesis, I proposed in **chapter five** to approach sourcebooks as paradigmatic examples of the medium's specific use of framing devices - a use which is particular in that these framings not only precede the text's *reception* but also its *creation*. In this respect, I argued that setting and rules not only provide the structural basis to the game but that they also frame it as they invariably imply reductions of the imagined world.¹⁸¹ Rulebook paratexts, for their part, were revealed to be especially notorious for having a "double" framing function. As such, they extend their influence from the printed text towards the emergent diegesis by triggering important meta-concepts such as genre and mood. In addition, the rulebook's intra-textual framings were shown

¹⁸¹ As Nephew has stated, "[t]he text necessarily presents the world as incomplete and fragmentary, as no sourcebook can describe every inch of a fantasy world" (39).

to add diegetic meaning to the game setting's otherwise purely factual information. In consideration of these features I described sourcebooks as *systems of framings* that generate a space of narrative potential or 'future narrative' within which the game emerges (Bode, Dietrich, and Kranhold); a notion I proposed calling *genesisic framing*.

In **chapter six**, I offered a general overview of the framing possibilities and strategies implemented by players during actual game sessions. In addition, I was able to demonstrate how players often compensate for their lack of "embedded" or "systemic" agency in traditional games by relying on framing as a method of transaction, allowing them to obtain and exert authorial power over the narrative. Furthermore, my analysis revealed how the fulfillment of divergent expectations is made possible by participants' ability to adapt, exchange and foreground different sources of pleasure during the game. In this regard, some of the more salient (and particular) framing practices such as 'mock role-play' were used to illustrate how enjoyment is derived both from the "actual" as well as the postulated yet non-actualized events of the fictional world. This, together with the self-referential and self-conscious use of fiction as a playful tool for real social interaction (Castronova), revealed 'transception' - understood as the active and self-reflexive transgression of the fictional-ludic border (Bunia) - to be at the center of the role-playing game activity. Exemplary of this was participants' recurrent use of framing strategies such as metalepsis and pervasive gameplay.

Finally, **in chapter seven** I looked at how more recent games have implemented contextual, meta-textual and textual framings to foreground the self-reflexive and "literary" aspect of role-play. As I argued, this is accomplished for the most part by making uncertainty, polysemy and ambiguity constitutive rather than marginal elements of their game design. Contrary to the

common understanding that narrative and ludic features of games appear in direct opposition to each other (see among others Costikyan, "Games, Storytelling"; Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*), my analysis revealed how these games make the "act of fictionalizing" itself part of gameplay. As a result, I proposed defining the category of "storytelling" TRPGs in terms of their capacity to generate deeply meaningful, immersive narratives by exploiting the specific (narrative) affordances of the medium. Key to the latter is the use of literary framing to both guide player understanding and input into the game while also allowing for a more even distribution of agency and authority.

In conclusion, we can say that the TRPG activity is made possible by the dynamic relationship between the emergent text of the game and the framing structures generated around and within it. Framing is, so to speak, the "glue" that brings all aspects of role-play together: performance, interactivity, and narration. In this regard, *genesic* framing structures such as TRPG rulebooks not only act by shaping narrative expectations, but also by "teaching" participants about the game's own workings and mechanics. In doing so, they incite both the modification of the latter and the further production of diegetic text. This imitative, "ludo-pedagogic" dimension of TRPGs is key in allowing the "generation of fiction from fiction" that characterizes the medium. In this respect, TRPGs not only invert the traditional relationship between framings and texts, but also their conventional function. Indeed, rather than being used solely as (authorial) tools for controlling and exerting power over fictions, our analysis has demonstrated how framings can be implemented as a way of distributing authority and responsibility within these collective imaginary playgrounds. From this point of view, the TRPG medium reveals the framing activity to be both a mechanism for exerting as well as sharing narrative power. Consequently, *genesic* framing is to be conceived as a mode of self-disclosure that is, to a certain

extent, diametrically opposed to metafiction. Rather than undermining aesthetic illusion, TRPG framings make players accomplices to its construction. Describing a similar application of footnotes in detective fiction, Malcah Effron has observed that "while the artificial paratexts in detective fiction underscore the textuality of the narrative as is done in metafictional artificial paratexts, in general these artificial paratexts emphasize this textuality to establish—rather than to destroy—mimetic reality" (203).¹⁸² In addition to the above, the plasticity shown by players in their ever-creative uses of framings together with the ongoing diversification of the latter in more recent "storytelling" TRPGs suggests an inextricable link between the "constant productivity" of literary framing (Gray) and the perpetual flux of the fictional activity in general. This makes sense if we consider the notion that all fiction is in fact a form of pretense play (cf., among others, K. Walton; Iser; Sutrop). Indeed, much as the players' particular visualization of the game events, any aesthetic or literary work is only truly available as the individual experience of a given recipient. When communicating about these texts, reducing them to framings - interpretations, blurbs, reviews, opinions, etc. - allows us to bridge the gap between our own experience of the text and that of others.¹⁸³ More importantly, players and designers seem to show an intuitive understanding of this, allowing them to use these elements as a basis for interaction both within and "outside" of the game diegesis. From this point of view, framings

¹⁸² In fact, Effron's description of these elements' function is remarkably similar to that of our previously discussed notion of pervasive framing as he states that, "because of their marginal position ... footnotes are able to cross the border between the narrated events and the reader[,] creat[ing] a reality effect by placing the characters *in* the narrative and the readers *of* the narrative on the same plane of reality" (203).

¹⁸³ As a matter of fact, Stefanescu has pointed out that "all comprehension of a literary work is ultimately a negotiation between the interpretive frames imposed by the reader and those suggested by the text itself" (330).

are not merely to be conceived of as gateways that grant us access to textual artifacts and their fictional worlds; they are in fact thresholds between different experiences of the imaginary. Ultimately, because they make it possible for us to configure our expectations, desires and fantasies in direct articulation with those of others - collectively defining and re-defining divergent sources of pleasure - TRPGs reveal fiction to be a fundamental mode of human interaction.¹⁸⁴ As expressed by Yuval Harari:

[T]he truly unique feature of our language is [...] the ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all. As far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled. [...] This ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of Sapiens language. [...] But fiction has enabled us not merely to imagine things, but to do so collectively. (24-25)

Thus, instead of being based on univocal relationships of direct correspondence with external reality, interaction in TRPGs emerges within a space of "imperfect" communication where new meanings are constantly unfolding, and where old ones are taking on new shapes (Ilieva). From this point of view, as Franz Mäyrä has stated, "playing is a form of understanding" where the

¹⁸⁴ In a similar fashion, Doležel proposes an approach to fiction that "presents literary communication as interaction" (*Heterocosmica* 203).

"receiving and decoding [of] messages exactly as they were originally intended" is less relevant than the act of interplay itself" (14). So understood, TRPGs can be said to reflect, quite literally in fact, the mechanisms by means of which all art functions; namely, by making the reality of appearance (*Schein*) accessible as a form of knowledge. As Poppenberg explains,

Das Simulakrische, Lügnerische und Scheinhafte ist nicht - wie es eine Tradition der Auslegung des Platonischen *Sophistes* will - das Nichtseiende, demgegenüber das Wahrhafte und Wirkliche das Seiende wäre. [...] Die Wahrheit ist, daß es im Sein eine Scheindimension gibt und daß der Schein eine Gestalt des Seins ist. Sie sind im Grunde von gleicher Wirklichkeit und doch unterschieden. (165)

Thus, there is not so much an opposition between reality and fiction as a difference within the reality of being itself, where both "face" and "mask" are aspects of truth. In this context, play - whether in the form of poetry, drama or game - can be said to be the essential feature of the poetic trope, where the physical, social and psychic realities that define us can be simultaneously articulated. This idea resonates strongly with other researchers' observations. Nephew, for example, considers that "the conflict between the initial, unrestrained desires of the player characters and their moral judgment is an aspect of roleplaying that defines it as an ethical forum for the exploration of the nature of human existence" (6). Torner, on the other hand, reflecting on his experience participating in *Just a Little Lovin'*, a LARP about the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the New York of the early 80s, notes that:

[a]esthetic experiences can seep into our lives and change us in unexpected ways. For many people, this may take the form of Beethoven's 7th Symphony or hearing the Thug Life album for the first time or seeing *Inside Out* (2015) and feeling understood. For me, JaLL and its participants have become a part of me, a fake Saratoga whose propositions produced real feelings, real community and real ideas. (Torner, "*Losing Friends*")

TRPGs, therefore, give us a clear sense of how individuality, identity and community are greatly defined by how we collectively negotiate our spaces of imagining. Key to the latter are the framing structures and strategies that shape the potential of fictional play for generating meaningful experiences.

As I mentioned at the outset of this dissertation, we are still far from fully understanding the myriad ways in which fiction framings accomplish this. Likewise, an exhaustive theory based on a "ludic" understanding of literature as a form of (role-)play is yet to be developed. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to postulate that any such understanding will be closely tied to the notion of framing and paratextuality as part of a text's dynamic structural elements. How does the discourse of a sourcebook - gameplay examples, designer commentaries, writing style, etc. - affect our stance towards the game? How do different forms of meta-textual representation such as character sheets affect our sense of emotional attachment to, or displacement from the characters we embody? If we can read TRPG sourcebooks as a form of fictional poetics, can we see gameplay as a form of literary criticism? How can our experience of a TRPG such as *Houses of the Blooded* help us re-appreciate the genre of the tragedy in Elizabethan and Jacobean era theater?

Can we better understand the writing style of H.P. Lovecraft by playing *Call of Cthulhu*? These are all questions that have yet to be addressed in depth. I hope, however, that this work has helped carve out some of the first new steps in an old, old pathway, even if just to indicate further destinations and partings in the road. Wherever this adventure might take us; wherever we choose to go.

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