4 Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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This chapter discusses tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), sometimes also called "pen and paper" RPGs to distinguish them from their compatriot media, primarily the computer role-playing game (CRPG) and live action role-playing game (LARP). Once some preliminary matters of definition and description are taken care of, the discussion in this chapter proceeds largely along historical lines, presenting TRPGs as (1) originating in the early 1970s with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* and its early offshoots, imitators, and derivations and (2) developing in variety through the 1980s and 1990s as designers sought to emulate different fictional settings and genres as well as explore various game-mechanical approaches before (3) experiencing a period of "mainstream" consolidation and

countervailing "indie" experimentation in the first years of the 21st century. It concludes with an attempt to discern the direction of future developments, as the arrival of crowdfunding, print-on-demand, and other Internet-enabled publishing tools change the face of the industry.

The historical arc traced here draws in large measure upon two recent histories of the origins of TRPGs, Peterson's *Playing at the World* (Peterson 2012) and Appelcline's multi-volume *Designers and Dragons* (Appelcline 2013)*.* Peterson describes the precursors to and influences upon the development of *Dungeons & Dragons* as well as the early history of the game itself **(see Chapter 3)***,* while Appelcline details the fortunes of the myriad TRPG publishers that emerged, decade by decade, in the wake of *D&D*'s publication. These works provide detailed overviews of the history of role-playing game publishing, extending earlier, briefer accounts but in large measure confirming their outlines. Erik Mona, for example, alludes to the origins of *D&D* as an offshoot of the miniatures wargaming hobby (Mona 2007), but Peterson's account shows how the social networks of U.S. wargamers extant in the late 1960s and early 1970s were instrumental in facilitating the creation and dissemination of role-playing games in their infancy, and Appelcline describes how the wargaming culture affected the reception of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a set of rules.

Similarly, Michael J. Tresca connects the original popularity of fantasy role-playing to a pop-cultural desire to appreciate the work of J.R.R. Tolkien (Tresca 2011) while Peterson traces the origins of specific *D&D* rules and terms to their sources in 20th century fantasy and science fiction. Both Appelcline and Peterson describe some of the legal ramifications and rhetorical strategies surrounding *D&D*'s use of Tolkien-derived material, which for the most part were resolved by changing the names of the infringing items, so that "hobbits" became "halflings" and "ents" became "treants."

Our presentation of TRPGs as a coherent form relies to a large extent on their character as *ergodic texts* (Aarseth 1997) that must be played or performed to be truly "read." This performativity underscores the complexity and interactivity of the audience/author relationship by blurring the distinction between the two and establishing multiple circuits of textual production and interpretation. In other words, the enacted performance of TRPG play at the table is a kind of *tertiary authorship* that emerges in conjunction with the *secondary authorship* of the game master (GM) as story-builder or scenario writer, which mediates the *primary authorship* of the game designer as world-builder and rules-maker

(Hammer 2007; see also Cover 2010). It goes without saying that the author at each successive stage is the audience of the prior one. In practice, this neat scheme is more complicated, since individuals can occupy multiple roles within the overall process—a GM acting as designer by devising "house rules" (alterations or extensions of "official" rules from a published rulebook) and home-brewed setting, or a game designer filling the preparation part of the GM role (versus the GM's role as presenter, moderator, and referee) by writing "modules" or pre-packaged adventures for commercial sale, for example.

Defining the Form

We now expand upon the introductory material in Chapter 2, which identifies the basic elements of a tabletop role-playing game and discusses how such games are played.

Dungeons & Dragons as Prototype

Gary Alan Fine's seminal ethnography of TRPG players (Fine, 1983) adopted a broad understanding of fantasy roleplaying that had appeared in an early gaming magazine. It defined an RPG as "any game which allows a number of players to assume imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment," (Lortz 1979, p. 36, quoted in Fine 1983, p. 6) notably

including science fiction and other genre-based settings. This definition is sufficiently broad as to encompass later variations such as LARP, CRPGs, and MMORPGs, but the groups that Fine observed and played with were exclusively tabletop gamers.

Dungeons & Dragons (TSR, 1974) as described by Fine is the prototypical example of a TRPG: an ongoing wargame-derived adventure game set in a fantasy world devised by a single GM (albeit usually as a pastiche derived from sources including genre fiction, medieval history, and pop culture-inflected mythology) within which a more or less stable group of other players each take the role of a single player-character (PC) who is a companion in an adventuring group. Together, the group or "party" explores some aspect of the setting prepared by the GM (usually a "dungeon" or underground labyrinth) wherein they encounter adversaries, overcome them, and take their treasure.

The prototypical game presumes a continuing *campaign* (the term is derived from miniatures wargaming)*,* taking place across multiple instances or *sessions* of play each encompassing several hours of real time. Over the course of a campaign, characters gain experience and "level up" or improve in terms of game-

mechanical effectiveness, enabling them to overcome greater or more consequential in-game challenges.

Adventure: A play scenario enacted as a sequence of in-game events in a TRPG that in retrospect can be said to comprise a narrative arc or plot trajectory, with a beginning, middle, and end. In simplest form, this consists of a hook (a reason for the PCs to get involved or take action, such as finding a treasure map or being hired by a patron), in play development (e.g., the exploration of a dungeon and identification of its important features, puzzles, or dangers, or interaction with key NPCs to gather information and exert influence), climax (e.g., a showdown fight with a major villain or the solution of a central mystery or problem), and aftermath (e.g., gathering treasure and returning to town, or being rewarded or betrayed by a patron).

Call-out 4.1: Adventure

Dungeon: A maze-like underground labyrinth or otherwise self-contained setting for TRPG play, such as a crypt, cavern, or castle ruin, said to be "stocked" with in-game opponents (monsters), obstacles (traps), and rewards (treasure).

Call-out 4.2: Dungeon

Wilderness: An outdoor or overland adventure setting typically defined by the probability of randomly encountering different numbers and types of monsters, although certain locations within the wilderness may be "keyed" to specific encounters or situations. To the extent that a wilderness setting is less structured than a dungeon, whose corridors tend to channel PC choices along pre-determined paths, it lends itself to "sandbox" play, in which PC choice is less constrained.

Call-out 4.3: Wilderness

Even within this basic format there is room for variation in terms of the direction and focus of play, with some groups interested in facing adventurous challenges while others are invested in exploring the fictional game setting. Fine provides the example of two groups participating in M.A.R. Barker's well-known early *D&D* variant *Empire of the Petal Throne* (TSR, 1975) campaign, one of which was said to "follow the game much more as a game," while the other wanted "to know how it really is on [Barker's game-world of] Tekumel" (Fine 1983, 145).

However, it is not always easy to reconcile the play preferences of even small groups of players. People play TRPGs for different reasons, and observers of RPG play have made numerous attempts to categorize the different types or styles of players (e.g., Blacow 1980; Laws 2001). One approach that tries to show how different play preferences shape the way TRPGs are played is the "Big Model" (Edwards 2004), developed by an online TRPG design community known as the Forge out of earlier discussions on Usenet and elsewhere **(see Chapter 10)**. According to the Big Model, TRPG play groups are oriented toward fulfilling different "Creative Agendas" (CA). These agendas may be more or less well served by the game system or techniques of play employed by the play group; to the extent that individual preferences are not well-served, unsatisfying or even "dysfunctional" play can result.

Playing the Game

Regardless of the presence or absence of adjuncts such as miniature figurines to represent characters, a TRPG session takes place as a conversation among players and the GM (for an example, **see Chapter 2**; for more detailed analyses, see Hendricks 2006 or White 2009), the point of which is (a) to establish particular events, occurrences, or circumstances as true within the fiction, (b) settle disputes

or disagreements about those events, and (c) maintain a shared understanding among participants about the facts of the game-world.

Setting: The fictional background against which the adventures of the player-characters are set, or the world in which the game takes place (Fine, 1983, p. 76). Settings may be "home brewed" (i.e., created by the GM for personal use; a more-or-less "original" creation, although almost certainly incorporating elements of favored historical, popular culture, or literary productions) or commercial (i.e., purchased as a published product for incorporation into play).
Call-out 4.4. Setting

System: The procedures by which elements in the fiction are introduced, modified, changed, or removed. These include strictly game-mechanical procedures such as combat rules and character generation processes as well as implicit procedures for scenario or adventure design and world-building. More broadly, it can be taken to mean the broader set of behavioral norms and performative conventions that guide participation in the game, which will vary by play group.
Call-out 4.5 Setting and system.

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Any given game is more or less completely described *qua* game by its *setting* and *system*, with setting understood to refer to the fictional background of the game and system referring to the particular rules set that it employs. System is typically used to mean the mechanisms through which in-game actions by characters are "resolved"—that is, said to have been initiated, undertaken, and to have produced results. In his game *Everway* (Wizards of the Coast, 1995), Jonathan Tweet identified three ways of handling in-game action, which he labeled *Drama, Fortune,* and *Karma,* which resemble three of Caillois's (1961) four modes of play; i.e., *mimesis* (make-believe)*, alea* (chance)*,* and *agon* (competition)—the fourth, called *ilinx* or vertigo, is sometimes said to "clearly fall outside the boundaries of games" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 308).

[Box Insert 4.1 around here]

Edwards (1999) argues that resolution methods are typically deployed in the service of one of three outlooks or perspectives on play. A *gamist* game is oriented toward generating satisfying competition in which a player may hope to win. A *narrativist* game is aimed at producing a "good story" via the players'

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participation in it (rather than through merely recounting a pre-authored tale). A *simulationist* game seeks to satisfyingly reconstruct or model the dynamics of a particular historical, literary, or genre setting. These perspectives do not map onto resolution methods on a one-for-one basis, Edwards says; rather, any resolution method may be made more or less appropriate for a given perspective depending on its specific implementation.

[Box Insert 4.2 around here]

Perhaps because any given set of rules can only imperfectly anticipate the variety of player preferences it must accommodate and in-game situations it must satisfyingly resolve, the tendency of play groups to modify or "drift" the published rules by creating house rules applicable to a specific campaign or enacted by a specific GM is well-known among gamers. Despite the assumption that the GM is "omnipotent" and "in control" of the game (Fine, 1983, pp. 72-73) this tendency is to some degree counteracted by the publication of supplemental game materials, including adventure *modules* and sourcebooks that provide additional setting details, introduce new game rules and game-mechanical elaborations, and possibly advance a canonical setting's *metaplot.*

Metaplot: An overarching narrative line established as part of the canonical setting for a commercially published game, revealed either in the main rulebook or as part of supplemental game texts or sourcebooks. Cf. House System.

Call-out 4.6: Metaplot

Module: A self-contained adventure published for commercial sale. It may be set in a specific game-world (i.e., a "commercial setting"), or be intended to be adaptable to a wide variety of "generic" game settings.

Call-out 4.7: Module

As Mackay (2001) observes, a TRPG's system and setting are embedded within a larger set of frames of reference that simultaneously constitute play as a social experience inhabited by *persons*, a game conducted by *players*, and a (shared) narrative related by *raconteurs* (storytellers), as well as a performance enacted by *characters* and a world described by *addressers* (speakers). Frame analysis as described by Goffman (1974) has offered a powerful analytical tool for making sense of the shifting patterns of interaction at the gaming table, and understanding

TRPG play as involving a skillful performance within the multiple frames available to players can produce interesting insights about games, play, and identity, particularly the ways in which tabletop gamers negotiate the boundaries of and discontinuities among different frames (Waskul & Lust 2004; Waskul 2006). With this basic understanding of the structure of TRPG play in place, we turn now to an account of the history of tabletop games.

The Origins of Tabletop RPGs

The release of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons* early in 1974 marks the beginning of the era of role-playing games. But the original *Dungeons & Dragons* booklets did not describe themselves as a role-playing game, instead invoking the cumbersome construction, "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns, Playable with Pen and Pencil and Miniature Figures." Only gradually did the world discover that *Dungeons & Dragons* as it was commonly played was more than just a wargame, and that its innovations would inspire an entire industry that spans many genres and media.

The Emergence of *Dungeons & Dragons*

The first adopters of *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974) were largely wargamers and members of organized science-fiction fandom. Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), the publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons*, could initially afford to print only one thousand copies of the game, to be sold by mail order, and almost all of its promotion targeted the wargaming community via fanzines and conventions. In the Twin Cities of Minnesota, overlap between the local wargamer and science-fiction communities led to *Dungeons & Dragons* quickly breaking out of the confines of the traditional gamer circles (Peterson 2012, pp. 459-494).

Within the first year of its existence, *D&D* had inspired fans to experiment with altering and expanding its rules. The last page of the original booklets invited this community participation, welcoming fans to "write to us and tell about your additions, ideas, and what have you." Both wargaming and science-fiction fandoms had a long tradition of open collaboration, and the fanzines of the era record many attempts to add to the taxonomies of monsters, class, spells, and treasures in *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example, the idea for a Thief class originated with Los Angeles area fans who telephoned Gygax in the spring of 1974 to describe their idea; Gygax then wrote up a system description which he first informally circulated through fanzines, played at the summer Gen Con, and later made an official game system (Peterson 2012, pp. 469-471).

4Early Adopters and Early Adapters

Only months after the game appeared, some fans had already decided to reapply the core principles of *Dungeons & Dragons* to entirely new games, although not initially for commercial purposes. M.A.R. Barker had played *D&D* with university students in Minneapolis, which led him to adapt its rules to the setting of Tekumél, an imaginary world he had previously explored as a fiction author. The resulting game, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, circulated in draft form in the summer of 1974; it is notable for detailing a concrete setting and scenario for play, where *Dungeons & Dragons* left the nature of the world entirely to the discretion of the referee (Peterson 2012, pp. 518-522; see also Fine 1983, pp 123-152).

Outside of the Midwest, the game faced significant obstacles to adoption. The rules were notoriously disorganized and incomplete, and some early reviewers were simply unable to decipher them. The 1974 Gen Con, a convention held in TSR's home town of Lake Geneva, gave 350 gamers from around the country the opportunity to learn the game first-hand from its designers and playtesters, to participate in tournaments, and then to bring back their knowledge of the game to

their local groups. This kindled wider interest in *D&D* through various small pockets around the United States, many of which began their own campaigns and fanzines (Peterson 2012, pp. 474-482).

For the first year of its existence, the spread of *Dungeons & Dragons* remained essentially confined to North America. By mid-1975, some gamers in the United Kingdom began to adopt it. Most notably, Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson (one of two men with that name in the gaming business; the other established the eponymous Texas-based company) became fans of the game and distributed it locally via their company Games Workshop and promoted it through their magazine *Owl & Weasel* (Applecline 2015). Gygax began contributing material to Walter Luc Haas's fanzine *Europa*, which in turn became the *de facto* distributor for *Dungeons & Dragons* on the Continent (Peterson 2012, pp. 500-502).

It would also be in 1975 that *D&D*'s first close imitators began to appear in the marketplace. By June, Ken St. Andre of Arizona began selling his *Tunnels & Trolls* (Flying Buffalo, 1975) to fans at West Coast conventions. Though nominally an independent product, the first iteration of *Tunnels & Trolls* was brief

and highly dependent on knowledge of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Peterson 2012, pp. 514-518; see also Applecline 2015).

Dungeons & Dragons grew so popular that wargaming projects began to take on some of its characteristics. For example, *En Garde* (GDW, 1975), took a simulation of Renaissance-era man-to-man combat and appended to it some character-building elements reminiscent of the personal progression of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The board game *Magic Realm* (Avalon Hill, 1979), by a leading wargame company of the period, attempted to systematically represent the activities undertaken by adventurers in fantasy role-playing games, including "hiking, hiding and searching, fatigue, wounds, rest, trade, hiring natives, and combat" (Board Game Geek, n.d.) with a game board of giant reversible hexagons and hundreds of cardboard counters and chits.

It was only after reviewers began to see several games in the marketplace inspired by the character-driven nature of *Dungeons & Dragons* that the term "role-playing" gained currency as the core element these games shared in common. Richard Berg's reviews in *Moves*—the house organ of wargames publisher SPI, Inc.—in the fall of 1975 widely popularized the term; only later did it begin to

appear in TSR's own product literature (Peterson 2012, p. 534) as it produced a number of supplements and expansions that met the demand expressed by fans for additional game material.

The Second Generation

Three years after its initial publication, the original rules to *Dungeons & Dragons* had been augmented and amended by a raft of additional material which TSR had made little effort to integrate into a coherent system. This became a source of increasing consternation to players, who repeatedly called for TSR to address the problem or alternatively to grant fans permission to reorganize and edit the game themselves (Peterson 2012, pp. 578-579).

Moreover, the market began to demonstrate the advantages of consolidating and unifying role-playing game systems. *Chivalry & Sorcery* (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1977) serves as perhaps the best example of this drive to make the system precise and explicit: its dense rulebook abounded with charts covering a wide variety of circumstances neglected by *D&D*. With this system however came an increasing burden of complexity that ultimately rendered the game less playable (Fine 1983).

The *Arduin Grimoire* came out of the same Bay Area group that produced the Perrin Conventions, premiering at the second instance of DunDraCon, a West Coast gaming convention (Peterson 2012, pp. 576-577). Compared to previous unofficial supplements, its one hundred pages contained new material and also proposed fundamental changes to the base system. Moreover, the *Arduin Grimoire* did not stop at being a single stand-alone booklet; before the end of the year the author was busily cobbling together a second volume, which would be followed shortly thereafter by a third.

Perrin Conventions: An early D&D variant that streamlined and clarified procedures for conducting combat while also making it less abstract, created and popularized by communities of play in California.
Call-out 4.8 The Perrin Conventions

Ultimately, the industry's efforts to capture a deeper level of simulation of fantastic adventures led to a complete revision of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* product. In 1977, TSR split *Dungeons & Dragons* into two parallel

tracks: a "Basic" version of the game, edited by Eric Holmes; and an "Advanced" version developed under Gygax's direct supervision. The Basic version appeared in a boxed set in 1977 as a simplified introduction to the game that only guided characters through the first three levels of play; the packaging of the Basic Set positioned it for sale in traditional retail venues like booksellers and department stores. *Advanced Dungeon & Dragons* would come out in installments over the next three years, dwarfing the word counts of *Chivalry & Sorcery* and prior efforts with its increasingly rich system (Peterson 2012, pp. 579-581).

The publication of the *Dungeons Masters Guide* coincided with the 1979 Gen Con game exhibition, and completed the core trilogy of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* manuals (together with the 1977 *Monster Manual* and 1978 *Player's Handbook*). Roughly simultaneously with its publication, the disappearance of a young college student named James Dallas Egbert III set off a wave of media coverage of the game *Dungeons & Dragons* (see Chapter 19 as well as Laycock 2015, pp. 81-84). The publicity for role-playing games this prompted sparked a huge increase in sales, and marks the beginning of the *Dungeons & Dragons* fad (Peterson 2012, pp. 597-599). From revenues short of $1 million in 1978, TSR went to revenues over $20 million in 1982 (Peterson 2012, pp. 600-601). Over those years, role-playing games truly became their own industry.

The Next Wave: Differentiation and Counter-Movements

This section describes the emergence of variant and alternative forms of TRPG as game designers, game masters, and players began to explore the possibilities of the form. It uses examples from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to illustrate the ramifying design philosophies.

D&D and FRPG Variants as Alternative Design Philosophies

By the end of the 1970s, TRPG designers had already begun to move beyond the "dungeon crawl" that was the original mode of fantasy gaming by seeking to emulate other fictional genres and settings. Even TSR, Inc., the publisher of *D&D,* had published games set in the Wild West (*Boot Hill,* 1975), a rudderless interstellar spaceship (*Metamorphosis Alpha,* 1976), and a post-apocalyptic wasteland (*Gamma World,* 1978). One publisher had produced a cops and robbers game set in the 1920s called *Gangster,* (FGU, 1979) as well as a superhero RPG, Jeff Dee's *Villains and Vigilantes* (FGU, 1979). *V&V* had been anticipated by an earlier superhero game called *Superhero 2044* (Lou Zocchi, 1977). Other FGU games let players be feudal Japanese samurai (*Bushido,* 1980), post-apocalyptic marauders (*Aftermath,* 1981), pulp-era adventurers (*Daredevil,* 1982), and 17th

century French swashbucklers (*Flashing Blades,* 1984), and even adventurous hares in a game inspired by *Watership Down* (*Bunnies & Burrows,* 1976).

A number of "open world" or generic science fiction games had been published or would shortly see print by the end of the 1970s; the most well-known of these being GDW's *Traveller* by Marc Miller (GDW, 1977), which focused on "interplanetary exploration" and by allowing players to control planets or spaceships gave them "more authority than in other games" (Fine 1983, p. 20). *Traveller* eventually generated its own elaborate canonical future history describing the rise and fall of the interstellar Third Imperium and was frequently licensed to other publishers for translation into other game systems (Appelcline 2015).

Even within the genre of fantasy role-playing *per* se, variant approaches were being explored. Jon Freeman's well-informed *Winner's Guide to Board Games* could list four games as "alternatives to *D&D"* for those seeking adventure in quasi-medieval fantasy settings: Flying Buffalo's *Tunnels & Trolls* by Ken St. Andre (1975)*,* Metagaming's *Melee* (1977) in combination with its companion game *Wizard* (1978) by Steve Jackson (who would later use the design ideas

pioneered in these "The Fantasy Trip" games to construct his "generic universal role-playing system" *GURPS*), Chaosium's *Runequest* (1978) by Steve Perrin (which drew inspiration from imagery from the Bronze and Iron Ages), and Fantasy Games Unlimited's *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1975) by Ed Simbalist and Will Backhaus (Freeman 1979).

Universal System. A rules set intended to be adapted by individual play groups for any of a variety of possible settings with different fictional trappings including time period, technology levels, and degree of incorporation of supernatural elements such as magic, psychic powers, and monstrous beings; e.g. Generic Universal Role-Playing System (Steve Jackson Games), Hero System (Hero Games).

Call-out 4.9 Universal System

House System. A rules set or game "engine" developed by a game company to be used with slight variations across its different products; e.g., Basic Role-Playing (Chaosium) in Call of Cthulhu, Pendragon, and Runequest; and more recently, the Gumshoe system (Pelgrane Press) in Trail of Cthulhu, Esoterrorists, Ashen Stars, and others.

Call-out 4.10 House System

Setting-Specific System. A "bespoke" rules set created to represent a specific fictional setting or historical time period, without much thought to its portability to other settings; e.g., Puppetland (Hogshead Ltd.), Dogs in the Vineyard (Lumpley Games).

Call-out 4.11 Setting-specific System

These alternatives illustrate the range of different design philosophies that shaped game designers' efforts to "improve" *D&D* in the period immediately following its publication. Both *T&T* and *Melee/Wizard* were efforts to craft less complicated rules systems, emphasizing simplicity, playability, and accessibility; Flying Buffalo went so far as to offer adventure scenarios for *T&T* capable of being played solitaire, in the eventuality that a player was unable to find others with whom to game. *Runequest,* like M.A.R. Barker's earlier *D&D* variant *Empire of the Petal Throne* (TSR, 1975)*,* focused on adventuring in a game-world that was clearly distinct from the sort-of-Europe with magic and monsters of other games, with an original fantasy background evocative of Bronze Age migrations and Iron Age empires. *Runequest* was also notable for eschewing *D&D*'s system of

"character classes" (e.g., fighter, magic-user, cleric, thief) and experience levels in favor of a more granular skill system that allowed characters to be well-rounded generalists or highly focused specialists based on how a player distributed available skill points. Additionally, it self-consciously incorporated setting design into its game mechanics, particularly in character creation. *C&S* went in the other direction from *T&T*, a product of its designers' dissatisfaction with the lack of medieval verisimilitude in *D&D* (White 2013).

Dungeon-Crawling: A mode of RPG play involving the exploration of a site, such as a catacomb, tunnel complex, or ruined fortress, stipulated to exist within a larger game-world. The site's specific features and denizens are initially unknown to the player-characters, who venture inside with the goal of defeating its guardians and obtaining any treasure contained within.
Call-out 4.12: "Dungeon-crawling."

In general, the quest for alternatives to *D&D* was oriented toward seeking out *alternative mechanics,* meaning different ways of representing the imaginary action or imagined abilities of fictional characters, or *alternative settings*, whether in the form of more richly imagined non-European game-worlds or as greater

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fidelity to the ostensibly medieval backdrop of *D&D* itself. Some games combined both elements.

For example, Jonathan Tweet's *Everway* (Wizards of the Coast, 1995) was centered on a fantasy city that served as a portal to many different alternate planes or "spheres," with characters who could walk between these spheres to have adventures. Character generation began with players selecting an image from a "vision card" and answering questions about it; the vision cards were specifically selected so as to include a wide variety of non-Western images. Even more striking than this effort to open up the setting of the game was its reliance on a tarot-like "fortune deck" from which cards could be drawn and then interpreted by the game master (GM) in order to establish what had occurred.

A fine example of the commitment to medieval verisimilitude is Greg Stafford's *Pendragon* (Chaosium, 1985), in which the player-characters were Arthurian knights of the Round Table, engaging in quests and serving their lords in raid and battle while simultaneously maintaining their fiefs and siring children who would eventually grow up to follow in their fathers' footsteps (and be player-character knights as well), all against the backdrop of Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*. But

Pendragon also included the game-mechanical innovation of introducing "social attributes" that defined aspects of the character's personality in a way that could influence behavior: if a character with high Pride wanted to forgive an insult he received from a non-player character (NPC) guest of his lord, for example, the GM could call for a die roll that might result in the character refusing to bite his tongue, regardless of the player's wishes.

These two games also illustrate an historical design trend in which during the 1980s, designers (perhaps hewing to role-playing's roots in wargames) emphasized more complex or at least more detailed game mechanisms as solutions to their design problems, whereas in the 1990s designers began to explicitly emphasize mechanisms that would encourage, facilitate, or enable "role-playing" (which came to be invidiously perceived by many to be vastly superior to mechanistic "[die] roll-playing"). We do not intend a normative distinction, here, however. Both *Everway* and *Pendragon* are much admired within gaming circles, albeit for different qualities.

[Box Insert 4.3 around here]

A Universal Revolution: Champions and GURPS

Two games illustrate the 1980s design trend towards "universal" systems

ostensibly capable of emulating multiple genres. *Champions* (Hero Games, 1981)

by George McDonald and Steve Peterson began as a game for playing comic

book super-heroes. Debuting at the 1981 Origins gaming convention, it made an

immediate impact for its elegant, albeit somewhat arithmetically complex, system

for designing super-powers. The fact that the "special effects" (i.e., in-game

depiction) of those powers were distinct from their basic game-mechanical

descriptions meant that, say, Superman's heat vision and Green Lantern's

willpower-created giant glowing green hammer could both be treated as variations

of the generic power "Energy Blast". This, with the addition of a system for

representing innate skills or talents allowed the same game system to plausibly

represent pulp fiction and "lost world" adventures, as with *Justice, Inc.* (Hero

Games, 1984). With this example to guide its designers, there began a

transformation of *Champions,* a game designed to emulate super-heroes, into the

Hero System (Hero Games, 1989), a role-playing toolkit intended to enable GMs

to develop their own bespoke campaign settings (Allston, Long, and Watts 2006).

Meanwhile, the *GURPS Basic Set* (Steve Jackson Games, 1986) took Steve

Jackson's initial designs for *The Fantasy Trip* (Metagaming, 1980) and

transformed them into a "Generic Universal Role-Playing System" intended to be "detailed and realistic, logical and well-organized, and adaptable to any setting and any level of play" (Appelcline 2013, p. 743). Following the publication of a tactical combat system for individual-level fights in 1985, the basic rules provided a "point-buy" system for character creation like that of *Champions*, allowing the player to purchase attributes, talents, skills, and other abilities at a certain cost, perhaps offset by accepting certain disadvantages. *GURPS* was supported by a steady stream of supplements for specific genres, settings, and licensed properties such as the *Horseclans, Conan,* and *Wild Cards* series in the late 1980s, and *Traveller, Discworld,* and *Hellboy* in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The *GURPS* "world books" that describe specific historical settings and time periods have a well-deserved reputation for being high-quality reference works worth consulting even if one doesn't intend to run a *GURPS*-based campaign (Hite 2014).

Today, *GURPS* and the *Hero System* are perceived similarly by tabletop role-players, being regarded as complex in preparation albeit relatively straightforward in play. "The core of GURPS 4e [4th edition, published in 2004] is not complex," asserts an on-line commenter on the RPG.net forums. "It's a basic roll under your skill on a 3d6 and that core is consistent. . . . However, the other core of GURPS is the Modifications and Limitations that are the working parts in Advantages. . . .

This was an awesome development and what makes 4e so powerful and far-ranging. But it is complex. It really takes a long time to figure out all the little details in a [game mechanical] structure" (walkerp 2008). Similarly, regarding the *Hero System,* another poster remarked "I can dig people saying it's too complex, but one of the advantages of HERO [sic] is that it tells you where you can trim. You can run a very streamlined HERO without having to playtest house rules" (Brennan 2005).

Drawing Trumps: Amber Diceless

With a new generation of role-players that had not cut their teeth on military miniatures or hex-and-chit wargames entering the hobby, Erik Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* (Phage Press, 1991) helped initiate the "storytelling game" movement of the 1990s, which sought to emphasize immersive "role-playing" and collaborative storytelling rather than tactical combat simulation as the centerpiece of play. *Amber* was based on the novels by Roger Zelazny, beginning with *Nine Princes in Amber* (1970), that detailed the intrigues, rivalries, and vendettas among the immortal scions of the house of Amber, an interdimensional city at the heart of reality.

As a diceless game, *Amber* simply offers no alibi for when a player-controlled character (PC) is overwhelmed by another PC or a non-player controlled character (NPC): the PC and/or GM involved would be directly responsible. Thus, the game replicates the dysfunctional family structure of the *Amber* novels (competitive siblings vying for the attention of a remote and arbitrary patriarch) by coding that structure into the rules, since it is exactly by gaining the attention and favor of the GM (whose interpretations of the meaning of different character attributes and actions determine the success or failure of a player's plans) that PC Amberites prosper in the game.

Social maneuvering in courtly situations suddenly became more interesting than exploring dungeons and fellow players became frenemies. Player unpredictability remains the primary source of tension in *Amber*, even though the game otherwise promises "story" (Torner 2014). Deep investment in backstory, explicit social player vs player (PVP) elements, and the corresponding secret-note-passing behavior all would become hallmarks of popular 1990s TRPGs. We will briefly examine one of these next.

[Box Insert 4.4 around here]

Telling Stories in the Shadows: The World of Darkness

White Wolf Publishing's "World of Darkness" series of horror games set in the modern world, loosely inspired by Anne Rice's vampire novels, began with the publication of Mark Rein-Hagen's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf, 1991), which became one of the most successful TRPGs, "second only to the *lingua franca* of the hobby, *Dungeons & Dragons*" (Hindmarch 2007). The World of Darkness games used White Wolf's "Storyteller System," which was billed as explicitly designed to facilitate the creation of good stories. A lot of the onus for this was placed on the Storyteller (i.e., GM). At its best, the Storyteller procedures facilitated highly immersive character-focused drama as the PCs confronted the choices laid out for them by the development of the narrative; at its worst, it led to disengaged play as they either resisted or succumbed to the Storyteller's "railroading." Railroading is a pejorative term for a style of game-mastering in which the GM prepares and runs an adventure whose course proceeds along pre-determined lines without the possibility of being affected by players' in-game actions, in a way that is objectionable to the players **(see Chapter 27).**

The Current State: Analog RPGs in a Digital World

As the turn of the millennium approached, TRPG enthusiasts frequently expressed anxiety about the future of the medium and the industry. Not only had the popularity of tabletop games been irreversibly eclipsed by digital games—which survived the 1983 crash of Atari to become a multi-billion dollar-industry—but the massive success of fantasy-themed collectible card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* had made TRPGs a second-tier medium even within analog fantasy games.

Despite these seemingly bleak prospects, TRPG fans, creators, and publishers would embrace practices inspired or enabled by digital technologies. Digital printing, digital distribution, and online funding methods allowed new and existing publishers to more easily reach their audiences and manage financial risk **(see Chapter 16)**. At the same time, new means of communication increased the interconnectedness of far-flung communities of play. Together, these developments have forever changed the ways in which TRPGs are conceived, produced, distributed, and played, unleashing a transformation of the medium that is still ongoing.

The Internet Arrives

TRPG enthusiasts have always included a sizable number of people with strong ties to the computer and software development industries (Peterson 2012, pp. 618-632). TRPGs were discussed and played over some of the earliest networks, due to the common alignment of computing, TRPGs, and tech-savvy nerds.

By the early 1990s, the Internet began to spread to the general U.S. population. For the relatively small and dispersed hobby of roleplaying, connectivity was revolutionary. Websites conveyed information about what games were available and how fans could acquire them, reducing reliance on hearsay, hobby store employees, and ads in comic books. Newsgroups, bulletin boards, forums, mailing lists, blogs, and chat clients provided ways for distant or even local enthusiasts to find each other, organize meetings, and share their thoughts, experiences, advice, and play techniques. Publishers, creators, and fans could communicate directly.

Several digitally supported or digitally inspired practices fundamentally altered the ways in which TRPGs were published including: online sales, media piracy, digital distribution, open content, PDF ebooks, digital printing, beta testing, print-on-demand, crowdsourcing, and crowdfunding.

The D20 Boom and the Open Gaming License

Wizards of the Coast (WotC)—founded by Peter Adkison—began as a TRPG publisher (Applecline 2015). But the unprecedented success of Richard Garfield's collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993) provided it in 1997 with the financial wherewithal to acquire the publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons*: TSR.

At first, the new management mostly cleaned house at TSR: paying debts, publishing projects that were nearly finished, securing all rights to *D&D* from Gygax and Arneson, and making sure that Gen Con gatherings continued to happen. But in 1999, they announced a third edition of *D&D*. The core designers of D&D's third edition included WotC veteran Jonathan Tweet as well as Monte Cook and Skip Williams, old hands at TSR. The game's rule framework, dubbed the "d20 system" shared much in common with second edition AD&D but was greatly streamlined.

A TRPG system published by Wizards of the Coast in 2000. It was developed for the 3rd Edition of Dungeons & Dragons and all basic resolution was handled by rolling a single twenty-sided die (d20). The system was later licensed and adopted by other publishers across a variety of games and supplements.

Call-out 4.13: d20 System

Following the model set by AD&D, the game was divided into three massive hardcover books, the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*, each released months apart in 2000. These were accompanied by the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* (Wizards of the Coast, 2000), which also used the d20 system. By any measure, third edition was a massive success, spawning hundreds of official products and thousands of open-content products, revitalizing both *D&D* and the TRPG industry as a whole.

One of the biggest successes and challenges of the d20 era involved Wizard of the Coast's relationship with "third-party" publishers—a term borrowed from software and digital game development. The Open Gaming License (OGL)—largely the brainchild of Ryan Dancey, brand manager of the TSR properties at Wizards of the Coast—allowed any publisher, of any size, to publish products

derived from *D&D*'s core mechanics. One of *D&D*'s biggest strengths, it was

argued, was the broad community of fans that created content and rules variants

for the game. Additionally, Peter Adkison reportedly wanted to prevent the

possibility that *D&D* might be "imprisoned" by a single company and driven into

the ground by financial or managerial mismanagement, as it nearly was before the

sale of TSR (Applecline 2015, vol. 3., p. 156).

A public copyright license that game developers and publishers can use to allow

others to modify, copy, and redistribute content from their games (usually the

game mechanics). It was originally developed by Wizards of the Coast.

Call-out 4.14: Open Gaming License (OGL)

Wizard of the Coast's own publishing policies were partially behind the third-

party shift toward stand-alone products. In 2003, Wizards surprised many

publishers by releasing a slightly updated version of third edition known as

Dungeons & Dragons v3.5 (borrowing decimal edition numbering from the

software industry). While the changes were not too substantial, they included

numerous tweaks to basic features of the game, enough to prevent easy

conversion and arguably rendering many third-party products "out of date." Consequently, publishers felt an incentive to create distinct sub-brands of *D&D* that they controlled, rendering their design and publication choices semi-independent of whatever Wizards of the Coast did. This also occurred during a period of perceived market saturation and audience burnout in d20 publishing, which lasted throughout the mid-2000s and contributed to d20 publishers' anxieties.

Digital Distribution in the New Millennium

The third prong of the millennial transformation of TRPG publishing in addition to Internet-enabled community and the OGL-inspired d20 boom was digital distribution, which initially had two main forks: digital sales of printed TRPG products and digital distribution of digital products. In terms of print products, individual publishers and brick-and-mortar game stores started selling games through their websites as soon after it became possible to accept credit cards online. Streamlined platforms such as PayPal were also adopted quickly.

Prior to these developments, publishers often ran months-long online preorders for forthcoming products, in an effort to pay for a print run in the thousands of

copies, which was close to the minimum for traditional offset printing. By the 2010s, crowdfunding and high-quality digital printing would later replace preorders entirely and reduce the minimums for quality printed products. In the early 2000s, several multi-publisher fulfillment houses were established, complete with online storefronts, but the unexpected collapse of the fulfillment house Wizard's Attic in the mid-2000s left many small publishers with huge financial debts from unpaid revenues and copies of their games that were never returned. Since then, publishers have mainly sold games online through their own websites and large online retailers, in addition to working with traditional print distributors that service book and game stores.

In terms of purely digital distribution, the PDF market for TRPG products is huge and fairly unique to the medium, operating independently of the more recently established ebook market. Many digital TRPG products were initially distributed for free or as shareware. Early TRPG fan sites often included "netbooks" (before the term "netbook" referred to a small, internet-capable laptop), which were unauthorized fan supplements for commercially published TRPGs. Among the most common free TRPG products were blank character sheets. By the late 1990s, PDF had become the dominant format for transmitted fixed documents and was

also commonly used in online TRPG piracy to share scanned copies of otherwise expensive and space-consuming collections of rulebooks.

Designer Monte Cook left Wizards of the Coast around the launch of third edition *D&D*, forming Malhavoc Press with the intention of publishing third-party material for the game. Cook initially experimented by releasing a PDF supplement for D&D called *The Book of Eldritch Might* in May of 2001, which almost immediately sold several thousand copies and proved that there was a substantial market for d20 PDFs, especially from a well-known designer (Cook 2011). Later in 2001—the same year that Apple launched the iTunes Store—the TRPG entrepreneur James Mathe founded a service called RPGNow, an online marketplace where publishers could create accounts and sell PDFs to customers in a central location. In the beginning, the bestselling products on RPGNow were nearly always d20 products. Mathe made attempts to reach out to established publishers of other types of games, but many were hesitant about selling digital versions, worried that it would increase piracy or cannibalize existing print sales. Nevertheless RPGNow recorded better than 10% growth in every year of its operation (Mathe 2015).

BitTorrent became a turning point. The peer-to-peer file-sharing software was released in 2001, but by 2004 it was reported to account for 1/3 of all Internet traffic. While most of this traffic did not consist of pirated TRPGs, gaming materials were commonly found on torrents. In the end, Steve Wieck—formerly of White Wolf—founded a rival service to RPGNow, known as DriveThruRPG, offering a variety of anti-piracy DRM measures, promoting significantly higher PDF prices that were closer to the cover price of print copies, and attracting many established non-d20 publishers. Most of the DRM measure were quickly discontinued in reaction to fan complaints, and, in 2006, the two companies merged, creating a PDF distributor with an overwhelming share of the market, which later become the PDF sales service for Wizards of the Coast's products as well.

Countercurrents: Indie RPGs

As new technologies made it steadily easier and less risky to publish TRPGs, many new games and supplements challenged popular perceptions about what TRPGs were, how they should be played, and what subject matter they could explore. One major source of this new style of games has been the loosely connected and self-identified "indie RPG" movement, parallel to and directly

inspired by contemporaneous indie movements in comics, music, film, and digital games.

The roots of this movement lie in the Usenet newsgroup rec.games.frp.advocacy (RGFA), which began in May 1992. As John Kim explains, "in the process of hashing out differences, a set of contributors began to actually discuss core concepts of role-playing: what it is, how it works, what styles and techniques exist, how to do it better…[leading to] an acknowledgement that there are different valid styles of role-playing. Different role-playing games are not merely different methods to achieve the same goals, but actually different goals in themselves" (Kim 2007).

These discussions influenced the web forum indie-rpgs.com, which became known as the Forge, which launched as a discussion site for independently published TRPGs in 2001 and remained active throughout the following decade until formally shut down in 2012 (White 2015). The indie RPGs movement has also been organized around Game Chef, an annual game design competition founded by Mike Holmes in 2002; Games on Demand, a structure for pick-up play at conventions developed by Katherine Miller in 2006; Story Games, a more

casual web forum created by Andy Kitkowski in 2006; and the Independent Game

Developers Network, founded by Mark Diaz Truman in 2011.

The Forge promoted creator-ownership and self-publishing over freelance game

design on a work-for-hire basis, the latter of which was and is still often the

standard in the industry. It also promoted the idea that every aspect of a game's

rules should be carefully designed to emphasize the game's core themes, rather

than relying on popular TRPG conventions. This meant that games were often

modeled as structural emulations of particular fictional genres. The game designer

was viewed as an auteur, producing unique and special rules that were designed

very intentionally to produce a specific kind of roleplaying experience.

Consequently, indie TRPGs in the Forge tradition often took responsibility for

and authority over the game experience away from the GM and gave it to the

game designer or the players. Responsibility for sub-optimal play experience was

thought to lie either with the game designer for poor design and explanation or

with the players for not playing the game "properly."

GM-less Games. Some indie games have explored the possibility of GM-less

roleplaying, as in Jason Morningstar's Fiasco (Bully Pulpit Games, 2009) and

Ben Lehman's Polaris (TAO Games, 2005). Both include specific rules to

govern how play proceeds in the absence of the GM. They depend on co-

operative play, with all players taking on some of the functions of the GM. The

mechanics of both games focus on how players support each other in telling of

the stories of their characters. In Fiasco players create a network of characters,

relationships, needs, locations and objects. Each player in turn then chooses

either to set up a scene for his or her character or determine its outcome,

assigning the other function to the rest of the table. Polaris similarly focuses on

each player-character in turn and divides GM functions among other players in

a more formal way as different kinds of supporting character. Note that some

early TRPGs permitted GM-less play by layering role-playing elements on top of

wargame-inspired hand-to-hand combat and social advancement systems, as in

En Garde (GDW,1977), or by creating programmed scenarios for single-

character solitaire play, as in Tunnels and Trolls (Flying Buffalo, 1975).

Call-out 4.15 GM-less Games

The relatively specific American "indie scene" in TRPGs is not the entirety of

independently produced TRPGs, of course. A larger number of other independent

designers exist among fans of more traditional or conventional styles of play.

Most d20 publishers, after all, were one-person creator-owned operations. Other

gaming traditions and communities of play exist, often associated with regional,

national, and cross-national gaming cultures.

[Box Insert 4.5 around here]

Fourth Edition D&D, the Old School Renaissance, and D&D Next

The publication of 4th edition *Dungeons and Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast,

2008) represented a significant departure in style and approach from previous

editions: it emphasized tactical combat almost to the exclusion of all other

activities. Characters were assigned specific combat roles and represented by

miniatures or tokens on a grid or "battle mat" in a way that many "old school"

players felt was an attempt to emulate the aesthetics of on-line fantasy gaming,

particularly MORPGs. Essentially, while many of these were optional elements in

third edition D&D, fourth edition D&D was built specifically around this method.

The designers felt that this focused approach—rather than something more open

to GM and player interpretation—could be more easily translated into online play,

backed by a newly announced (but ultimately unsuccessful) software platform.

Resistance to this approach was pronounced, with former *Dragon* magazine

publisher Paizo Press using the Open Gaming License to produce *Pathfinder*

(Paizo, 2009) as a legacy of third edition D&D. Other independent designers

would coalesce into an "Old School Renaissance" (OSR) that has produced a

number of "retro-clones." These games take advantage of the OGL to recreate

older editions of D&D and allow others to release new content for these editions

Perhaps stung by the response to Fourth Edition, Wizards of the Coast announced

a new edition of *D&D* in 2012, under the working title of "D&D Next." Learning

from Paizo and taking advantage of digital technologies, D&D Next received an

extensive open beta test though distribution of free PDF files—though to get them

one had to sign up on the *D&D* website—and the game was finally released in

2014 as three hardback books. Fifth Edition D&D returns to the aesthetic of

previous editions, but with revisions and innovations that streamline many aspects

of the game.

[Box Insert 4.6 around here]

Digital Mirages: Challenges and Opportunities in Hybridity

The integration of TRPGs with the opportunities provided by new digital

technologies has not proceeded entirely without difficulty, however. The story of

White Wolf, publisher of the popular line of World of Darkness games, is

instructive. During the d20 era, White Wolf attempted to take advantage of the

renaissance in fantasy games in multiple ways. They created their own d20

imprint, *Sword & Sorcery*, licensing the print rights to all of the PDF products

published by Monte Cook's Malhavoc Press, licensing the classic *Ravenloft* and

Gamma World settings from Wizards of the Coast, and publishing d20 TRPG

adaptations of the popular *EverQuest* (White Wolf, 2002) and *World of Warcraft*

(White Wolf, 2003) MORPGs. They also launched a new, highly successful, non-

d20 fantasy line with *Exalted* (White Wolf, 2001), an anime- and Japanese

CRPG-inspired game using a variation on their existing "Storyteller" system and

taking place in an antediluvian setting.

In the early 2000s, the decision was also made to reboot the entire World of

Darkness. The World of Darkness setting was destroyed in 2004 through a series

narrative events described in published supplements. The new World of Darkness

launched with a core rulebook specific rules for vampires, with additional

supplements to follow for werewolves and other denizens of the World of

Darkness. While sales were strong initially, they quickly fell off (Applecline 2015, vol. 3, p. 42).

In 2006, White Wolf was purchased by CCP Games, the Icelandic video game company responsible for the *EVE Online* science fiction MORPG. CCP hoped to use their experience with *EVE* to create a World of Darkness MORPG that would be unlike anything else on the market. White Wolf's properties had previously been the inspiration for a cult digital game called *Vampire: The Masquerade— Bloodlines* (Troika Games, 2004), which was released with many flaws but is still considered a classic due to its innovative structure and storytelling. Initially, it didn't seem like the acquisition of White Wolf would change things very much, but that changed over the next few years as staff were pulled from White Wolf to work on the MMO and Ryan Dancey—the person behind the OGL, now working for CCP—said, "The focus of the company is on making MMOs and our legacy table top business is a legacy business" (Applecline 2015, vol. 3, p. 45). White Wolf continued to publish a few game products, but they were minimal. CCP itself faced major issues with *EVE Online*, which took up increasingly more attention and gradually led to official cancellation of the World of Darkness MMO in 2014 after years of rumors.

Yet, just when digital mirages seemed to have killed one of TRPGs most successful publishers, digital technologies also helped save White Wolf, though in a new form. In the midst of this crisis, White Wolf made the fortuitous decision to hire a team of veterans to create a 20th anniversary edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade* that combined, condensed, and revamped the best material across all the game's editions. While "V20," as it was called, was made possible by an old-fashioned pre-order and custom print job, the project was so successful that a new company—Onyx Path—was created by several White Wolf vets, licensing the rights to White Wolf properties from CCP and then using the Kickstarter crowdfunding service to raise money for PDF and print-on-demand (POD) products, the latter of which had just recently become available through PDF publisher and distributor DriveThruRPG/RPGNow (also owned by a former White Wolf staffer). By going PDF and POD only, Onyx Path could minimize risk by neither having to pay for printing and warehousing nor waiting to be paid by distributors. Working with DriveThru meant they didn't even need to handle sales themselves. This has proven to be a hugely successful model for them, meaning that White Wolf's games are flourishing again, even though they are rarely in game stores and are published by a different company.

Forward to Tomorrow

Recent evidence suggests that gaming is not a zero-sum game in that the success of the digital games industry and peer analog game mediums such as board games, card games, and larp seem to have synergistically promoted an appreciation for and interest in TRPGs among younger generations of gamers. The contemporary attendees of game conventions like GenCon or PAX are typically consumers of a wide variety of digital and analog games, of which TRPGs are often a part. There are also hybrid media emerging that combine elements from tabletop, live action, card, board, educational, "serious," and/or digital games to create new forms of play.

The demographics of TRPGs are changing. The passing of *D&D*'s creators Gary Gygax in 2008 and Dave Arneson in 2009 was mourned across the TRPG landscape. This coincided with the older "grognard" generation of TRPG enthusiasts that became hooked in the 1980s and 1990s sharing the table—both literally and figuratively—with younger generations raised on modern CRPGs. This younger "video game generation" is noticeably more diverse—at least in gender and ethnicity—and seems to be more open to different kinds of TRPG experiences. There has been some backlash against this diversification— manifested prominently in arguments about the visual or written portrayal (or lack

thereof) of women and people of color in TRPG publications, as well as many cases of online or in-person harassment or mistreatment. At present, queer participants and those living with disabilities seem to be welcomed more warmly, though there are continuing struggles there as well.

The social status of TRPGs seems to have also changed over the years. While TRPGs are often considered to be a touchstone of nerd or geek culture, the rising social status of both games (thanks to the profitability and rising social status of digital games) and nerds (thanks to the profitability and rising social status of tech industry jobs) have gradually transformed gaming into something that's cool or at least interesting for adults to be involved in, rather than something inherently shameful and juvenile **(see Chapter 9)**. The changing demographics have also helped bring TRPGs closer to the mainstream, as have the buzz surrounding "gamification" and other game-based social engineering projects.

[Box Insert 4.7 around here]

In the digital age, TRPGs are not a dead medium or even a kind of partially revived "zombie" medium (Hertz & Parika 2012). They have been left behind in narratives of progress and digitization in mainstream game studies, but they are very much alive, in fact, more alive than ever before. The current state of TRPGs is more like Frankenstein's monster: put together from media that were assumed to be dead but galvanized—to true life, not undeath—by the electricity of the digital age, a hodge-podge of different overlapping parts that function together as a surprisingly robust, powerful, and yet misunderstood whole.

[Box Insert 4.8 around here]

Summary

This chapter presented a mostly historical discussion of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) starting with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1970. Along the way we explored how this form has changed over the years, both broadening in terms of emulating different fictional settings and genres as well as in terms of various game-mechanical approaches. This chapter also covered the changes experienced by the TRPG industry as it has grown, consolidated, and adapted to the rise in popularity of the internet. These changes have included lower barriers to publication and distribution that helped foster an "indie" TRPG

community that has led to a significantly greater diversity of games, subject matter, and also players.

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Box Insert 4.1: *Everyway*'s Handling of In-Game Action

Drama Resolution: Any game-mechanical procedure that produces outcomes by assigning a player (usually the GM) the responsibility of deciding what is most appropriate, given the needs of the narrative and the conventions of the literary or other genre the game seeks to emulate. This is similar to Caillois's mimesis, or pretense-play.

Fortune Resolution: Any game-mechanical procedure that produces outcomes by some chance method, such as die-rolling, card play, or using a roulette wheel (as one indie TRPG did in the 2000s). This is similar to Caillois's alea, or luck-based play.

Karma Resolution: Any game-mechanical procedure that produces outcomes by comparing relevant character attributes and assigning success to the character with the highest or best score; e.g., prescribing that a character with a particular Strength score will always win at arm-wrestling against anyone with a lower Strength score. This is similar to Caillois's agon, a competitive mode of play.

As described in Jonathan Tweet's Everway (Wizards of the Coast, 1995).
(see also Chapter 10)

Box Insert 4.2: Creative Agenda from the Big Model

Gamism (Step on Up): A preference for games that reward a competitive or agonistic attitude toward play, in which there are clear winners and losers, and in which victory and defeat are associated with player skill, ability, or tenacity.

Narrativism (Story Now): A preference for games that produce moral statements, aesthetic propositions, or other value judgments through the process of play, in the manner of fiction.

Simulationism (The Right to Dream): A preference for games that permit the exploration of a particular historical, literary, or other setting via an internally consistent method of emulating its dynamics.

Creative Agenda from the Big Model, per Edwards (2004) **(see Chapter 10)**

Box Insert 4.3: Different Character Creation Methods

Random character generation: Any procedure in which character aspects are established by methods of chance such as rolling dice or drawing cards, using the results either as a quantitative measure of some attribute or as an index for a table look-up.

Point-buy system: A character creation method in which character aspects are established by spending points from a budget to purchase useful traits or advantages possessed by the character; selecting negative traits or disadvantages may provide additional points to the player.

Life-path system: A character creation method involving making successive choices for a character at particular points in his or her career, such that prior choices influence the range of later options. Each choice may produce randomly determined consequences or accrue certain character resources or both.

Attribute auction: A seldom used point-buy variant in which players bid points from their budget for particular character attributes; the bids are compared and then used to rank the characters along that attribute.

Box Insert 4.4: The Call of Cthulhu

Sandy Petersen's *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium, 1981) adapts the fictional universe of H.P. Lovecraft to role-playing games, pitting mortal "investigators" against malign horrors from beyond space and time. In place of the dungeon crawl, *Call of Cthulhu* characters investigate mysteries, during which disturbing revelations or shocking face-to-face encounters with otherworldly horrors prompt the loss of mental equilibrium represented by "Sanity points," with complete madness occurring at zero Sanity and lesser maladies emerging along the way. This device, which "has a rather unsettling way of replicating real-life emotional problems and the way they feed upon themselves" (Herber 2007, 42), opened up a space for psychological horror in RPGs. Lovecraftian horror would prove quite robust, generating a number of alternate settings by Chaosium and others, including one called *Delta Green* (Pagan Publishing, 1997) that combined the Cthulhu Mythos with conspiracy theories and the UFO craze.

Box Insert 4.5: Australian Systemless Role-playing

A form of game presented at Australian roleplaying conventions since the late 1980's. It grew out of horror roleplaying, specifically *Call of Cthulhu*, and the reaction that form of gaming represented to more traditional heroic styles typified by *D&D*. Systemless roleplaying emphasizes in-depth characterization, atmosphere, and exploration of emotional and/or moral dilemmas. While these are

important (or at least present) in many other examples of roleplaying, in systemless gaming they have center stage. Many of the examples are psycho-dramas, with realistic protagonists, the games explicitly aimed at evoking intense emotional responses in the players. In this, they resemble the "jeepform" live-action role-playing games of the Scandinavian tradition.

Box Insert 4.6: Indie and "Old School" Games

The US "indie" RPG scene and the "Old-School Renaissance"(OSR) are 21st century TRPG game design communities of play that tend to focus on rules approaches that develop a particular style of play. The indie scene was known for its thematically focused, player-empowering approach to games, while the OSR hearkened back to what it considered to be the original character immersive, GM-centered approach of early TRPGs. Below are a few games from these traditions.

Sorcerer (Adept Press, 1998). Demonic magic in a modern-day setting, with the focus on sorcerer PCs who must fulfill the needs of the demons they summon, bind, and command in order to gain the power they desire to achieve their own potentially twisted ambitions, written by Ron Edwards.

My Life with Master (Half-Meme Press, 2003). Designer Paul Czege's Gothic horror RPG in which PCs are the minions and servitors of a terrifying master who must follow their awful orders until they can muster the will to defiance.

Dogs in the Vineyard (Lumpley Games, 2004). A western-themed RPG by designer Vincent Baker where young quasi-Mormon gunslingers empowered by their Church defend the Faith from demonic influence and pass judgment upon the scattered desert communities of the Faithful.

OSRIC (Stuart Marshall, 2006). The Old School Reference and Index Collection is a "retro-clone" of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, using the provisions of the Open Game License to make its rules more widely available.

Fiasco (Bully Pulpit, 2009). A GM-less game of criminal capers and misadventures in which a network of objects, relationships, and ambitions connects ne'er-do-well PCs in a chaotic web of darkly humorous mayhem.

Labyrinth Lord (Goblinoid Games, 2007). An OSR game mimicking the 1980

D&D Basic Set second edition by Tom Moldvay

Dungeon Crawl Classics (Goodman Games, 2012). A *D&D* variant within the

OSR tradition that emphasizes the deadly nature of low-level adventuring. It is

notable for its heavy reliance on random tables and its quirky incorporation of

non-polyhedral dice.

Adventurer Conqueror King (Autarch LLC, 2012). A level-based system OSR

game emulating the 1977 D&D Basic Set by J. Eric Holmes that emphasizes the

accrual of increasing military and political power as characters advance.

Source: Kim (2013).

Box Insert 4.7: The US and the Rest of the World.

The relationship between international TRPG communities and markets and those

of the United States remains both fruitful and problematic. Games published by

American companies and creators often dominate TRPG communities outside of

the US, either among populations fluent in English or through localized

translations. While there are many countries with strong local traditions of

TRPGs—including Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the Nordic

countries, Brazil, and Japan, among others—it has not been a two-way street, with

international games typically finding limited success in the United States. That

said, some US-based TRPG publishers do make an effort to hire international

creators, particularly as visual artists but also as writers and designers.

Additionally, many international games are very successful in their local TRPG

communities and are more often recognized there (including by government arts

funders) as important creative works, since TRPGs operate in a different social

and cultural context in many countries. More international connections are now

being built, thanks to the Internet, so there is hope for a more integrated future.

Box Insert 4.8: International Games

The Dark Eye (Germany, 1984). *Die Schwarze Auge* is a fantasy game that has

been hugely succesful in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, where it outsold

Dungeons & Dragons. Originally published by Schmidt Spiele; the most recent

edition is from 2015, published by Ulisses Spiele.

Drakar och Demoner ("Dragons and Demons") (Sweden, 1984). Notable early TRPG, still in print. A generic medieval fantasy originally based on a translation of Steve Perrin's "Magic World" setting from Chaosium's 1982 Worlds of Wonder universal RPG. Originally published by Äventyrsspel ("Adventure Games"), its sixth edition was published by Riotminds.

In Nomine Satanis/Magna Veritas (France, 1989). An urban fantasy set in the modern world where angels and demons occupy human bodies to fight for good or evil. Was re-designed to make it less tongue-in-cheek and released in the US by Steve Jackson Games as *In Nomine*. Originally published by Siroz.

Kult (Sweden, 1991). A game of surreal modern-day gnostic horror, originally published in Swedish by Target Games and then in English translation in 1993 by Metropolis, Ltd, with a third edition appearing in 2004.

Fanhunter (Spain, 1992). A humorous game set in the Fanhunter comic-book universe. The first edition was self-published, but the second was published by Farsa's Wagon.

Universo (Spain, 1993). A universal Spanish-language TRPG system that assigns characters percentile ratings in skills and characteristics, written by Pedro Alcántara and published by Ediciones Cronópolis.

Tenra Bansho (Japan, 1997). A fantasy story game heavily influenced by and steeped in Japanese culture. It was created by manga author/artist Junichi Inoue and published by FarEast Amusement Research (F.E.A.R). An English translation of *Tenra Bansho Zero*, the game's 2000 second edition, is produced by Kotodama Heavy Industries, which also produces translations of other Japanese games.

Source: Kim (2013).

List of keywords defined in callouts at the end of the document

Adventure, d20, Dungeon, Dungeon-Crawling, House System, Metaplot, Module, Open Gaming License (OGL), Perrin Conventions, Setting, Setting-Specific System, System, Universal System, Wilderness