THE ELUSIVE SHIFT

How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity

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Game Histories

edited by Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins

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Series Foreword

What might histories of games tell us not only about the games themselves but also about the people who play and design them? We think that the most interesting answers to this question will have two characteristics. First, the authors of game histories who tell us the most about games will ask big questions. For example, how do game play and design change? In what ways is such change inflected by societal, cultural, and other factors? How do games change when they move from one cultural or historical context to another? These kinds of questions forge connections to other areas of game studies, as well as to history, cultural studies, and technology studies.

The second characteristic we seek in "game-changing" histories is a wide-ranging mix of qualities partially described by terms such as *diversity*, *inclusiveness*, and *irony*. Histories with these qualities deliver interplay of intentions, users, technologies, materials, places, and markets. Asking big questions and answering them in creative and astute ways strikes us as the best way to reach the goal of not an isolated, general history of games but rather of a body of game histories that will connect game studies to scholarship in a wide array of fields. The first step, of course, is producing those histories.

Game Histories is a series of books that we hope will provide a home—or maybe a launch pad—for the growing international research community whose interest in game history rightly exceeds the celebratory and descriptive. In a line, the aim of the series is to help actualize critical historical study of games. Books in this series will exhibit acute attention to historiography and historical methodologies, while the series as a whole will encompass the wide-ranging subject matter we consider crucial for the relevance of historical game studies. We envisage an active series with output that will reshape how electronic and other kinds of games are understood, taught, and researched, as well as broaden the appeal of games for the allied fields such as history of computing, history of science and technology, design history, design culture, material culture studies, cultural and social history, media history, new media studies, and science and technology studies.

The Game Histories series will welcome but not be limited to contributions in the following areas:

- Multidisciplinary methodological and theoretical approaches to the historical study of games
- Social and cultural histories of play, people, places, and institutions of gaming
- Epochal and contextual studies of significant periods influential to and formative of games and game history
- Historical biography of key actors instrumental in game design, development, technology, and industry
- Games and legal history
- Global political economy and the games industry (including indie games)
- Histories of technologies pertinent to the study of games
- Histories of the intersections of games and other media, including such topics as game art, games and cinema, and games and literature
- Game preservation, exhibition, and documentation, including the place of museums, libraries, and collectors in preparing game history
- Material histories of game artifacts and ephemera

Henry Lowood, Stanford University
Raiford Guins, Indiana University Bloomington

Acknowledgments

On the evening of October 30, 2013, I had the pleasure to make Jonathan Tweet's acquaintance at Peter Adkison's place in Seattle. As we hunkered down over a board game, Jonathan cunningly distracted me with a series of historical questions, one of which became lodged in my mind: Which game system first attempted to simulate the structure of a story rather than the physics of a world? Some initial research into how the gaming community of the 1970s positioned that distinction opened up a series of related inquiries. Our ensuing conversation spilled over into telephone calls, emails, coffee shops, and Gen Con bars until in July 2015 I floated, "Do you think there's something that needs to be written about all of this?" So Jonathan served as the initial impetus for the present volume and became the first critical reader of early drafts, which centered on the chapter now called "The Role of the Referee." As punishment, he does appear in this narrative, but out of gratitude it is only at the very end.

Around the same time, the *Role-Playing Game Studies* anthology settled on a publisher. As Evan Torner developed the section "RPG Theorizing," I supplied him with some few primary sources and eventually with a draft of the present work. In the course of working on the anthology, I identified a few areas where historical light might be shed on the development of role playing in theory and design alike. Most of the "Toward a Philosophy" chapter followed from that research. Evan also helped to introduce a bit more academic rigor into my bibliography and citations.

Discussion about this growing project also slotted readily into several ongoing dialogues I was having, such as my discussion with Luke Crane about the features that distinguish recent role-playing game designs from their "old school" forebears in the 1970s. Luke was even kind enough to tap the brain trust of the Burning Wheel Headquarters to assemble a list of such key features. It was thanks to Luke's influence that the chapter here called "How to Play" came into being. Victor Raymond, who reviewed early drafts, provided valuable insight into the fan experience of the 1970s and the epidemiological spread of role-playing games beyond the Midwest.

A Note on Sources

Fanzines are notoriously difficult resources to work with. They often lack clear dates, operating on irregular schedules that mask their lapses by stubbornly attesting their "official" publication date or sometimes eliding it entirely. It is not always clear who wrote a given piece of text in a zine, given unconventional layouts or confusing attributions. Zines do not always have consistent page numbering schemes, a trait they share in common with early self-published role-playing products, which often shared a publication process. The same zine can even feature slightly differently titles across issues at the whim of its publisher.

Editorially, zines also present some challenges. Quotations from zines and related amateur publications here try to stay close the original, and although some spelling errors have been tacitly repaired, the grammar is true to the original, and there will be no [*sic*] warnings. Wherever there is emphasis in quotes, it is copied here from the original, though emphasis is also sometimes discarded for readability.

It is common in this literature to see abbreviations for key terms. "DM" for dungeon master is pervasive, and used equivalently with "GM" for gamesmaster. The community of the day knew well abbreviations for such game properties as armor class (AC), gold pieces (GP), and class names like magic-user (MU) or fighting-man (FM). "RP" signifies role-playing, and "FRP" fantasy role-playing.

The following fanzines are referenced in the text. Note that designations like "quarterly" or "monthly" refer to the intended production schedule; in reality, zines rarely appeared like clockwork.

AB: *Abyss* (Issue 13, June 1981; 16, December 1981; 21, October 1982)

AE: *Alarums & Excursions* (Monthly: issue 1, June 1975; 7, January 1976; 18, January 1977; 30, January 1978; 41, January 1979; 53, January 1980; 65, January 1981; 77, January 1982 . . . 149, January 1988; 161, January 1989)

AG: *Adventure Gaming* (Issue 1, July 1981)

AHG: *Avalon Hill General* (Bimonthly: issue 12 (4), November–December 1975)

APL: *APA-L* (Weekly: issue 497, November 1974; 499, December 1974; 508–511, February 1975; 513, March 1975; 519, April 1975; 520–523, May 1975)

APR: *Apprentice* (Quarterly: issue 3, winter 1979; 4, spring 1979)

AW: *American Wargamer* (Monthly: issue 2 (8), March 1975; 2 (12), July 1975; 3 (7), February 1976)

CO: *Courier* (Bimonthly: issue 2 (7), 1970; 4 (1), 1972); 6 (6), 1974)

CP: *Campaign* (Bimonthly: issue 77, January–February 1977; 94, November–December 1979)

CW: *Canadian Wargamer* (Irregular: issue 13, 1969).

DB: Domesday Book (Monthly: issue 3, April 1970; 13, summer 1972)

DR: *Dragon* (Bimonthly until 1978, then roughly monthly: issue 1, June 1976; 5, March 1977; 12, February 1978; 22, February 1979; 33, January 1980; 45, January 1981; 57, January 1982)

DW: *Different Worlds* (Bimonthly: issue 1, February–March 1979 [?]; 6, December 1979–January 1980; 11, February–March 1981)

EM: *Empire* (Irregular: issue 21, September 1975)

EU: *Europa* (Irregular: issue 3, November 1974; 4/5, January 1975; 6–8, April 1975; 9, July 1975; 12–13, February–March 1976)

FTA: *Fire the Arquebusiers* (Irregular: issue 1, November 1975; 2–3, June 1976)

GL: *Gamesletter* ("published every 1–4 weeks": issue 9 (58), June 1973)

GPGPN: *Great Plains Gameplayers Newsletter* (Monthly: issue 7, April 1974; 10, August 1974)

IW: International Wargamer (Monthly: issue (5) 1, January 1972)

MG: *Midgard* (Irregular: issue 1, January 1974; 2, April [?] 1974)

MF: *Midgard Forum* (Irregular: issue 1, August 1972; 6, April [?] 1973)

MN: *Minneapa* (Monthly: issue 39, March 1974)

MV: *Moves* (Bimonthly: issue 42, December 1978–January 1979; 47, October–November 1979)

QQG: *Quick Quincey Gazette* (Bimonthly: issue 1, October 1976; 3, December 1976)

SA: *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (Quarterly: issue 7, summer 1980)

SFF: *Science-Fiction and Fantasy Newsletter* (Quarterly: issue 87, February 1976)

SG: *Space Gamer* (Bimonthly: issue 9, December 1976/January 1977; 12, July–August 1977; 14, November–December 1977)

SL: *Slingshot* (Bimonthly: issue 9, January 1967; 24, July 1969; 37, September 1971)

SN: *Supernova* (Bimonthly: issue 9, February 1972; 25, March 1975; 27, May 1977; 29, September 1977)

SR: *Strategic Review* (Quarterly: issue 1 (1), February 1975; 2 (1), February 1976; 2 (2), April 1976)

TTT: *Table Top Talk* (Quarterly: issue 5 (2), March 1966; 5 (4), July 1966)

WF: *Wyrm's Foonotes* (Quarterly: issue 5, summer 1978; 7, 1979)

WH: *Wild Hunt* (Monthly: issue 1, February 1976; 12, January 1977; 24, January 1978; 36, January 1979; 48, January 1980; 50, March 1980)

WN: *Wargamer's Newsletter* (Monthly: issue 95, February 1970; 97, April 1970; 99, June 1970; 106, January 1971; 116, November 1971; 130, January 1973; 135, June 1973; 137, August 1973; 141, December 1973; 149, August 1974)

Introduction

What is the thing that we call a role-playing game?

Dungeons & Dragons (1974) has the distinction of being the first game in this modern genre, according to a broad if restless consensus. But anyone sifting through the game's earliest rules will observe the conspicuous absence of *role playing* as a term. After experimenting with *D&D* just after its release, the Minnesota university professor M. A. R. Barker ventured that it "is not strictly a 'war' game" (*WN* 149). This contradicted the very cover of the product, which proclaimed itself "rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns," but Barker was only the first of many to disagree. A whole community of fans soon rallied around the new genre of game that *D&D* had inspired, to which the label *role-playing game* would imminently become attached.

So *D&D* did not pin this label onto itself, which ostensibly deprives the genre's foundational text of any authority over the definition of *role-playing game*. It may have established the category, but it did so unwittingly—it was really the game's audience who perceived in it or perhaps projected onto it this quality they came to call *role playing*. It is therefore that community of early adopters we must investigate if we want to understand why they chose this label instead of another and what exactly they believed it meant.

Surely the first people who called *D&D* a role-playing game did so without any rigid definition in mind. They favored this term because it expressed something that they felt separated the game from its predecessors, something about the experience of the game that was for some the source of its irresistible allure and for others the root of its most frustrating absurdities. Rather than agonizing over how to classify it, players were far more preoccupied with practical questions about play. What is the right way to approach *D&D* as a player or a referee? How could the base design of *D&D* be improved? In the early disputes surrounding those questions, which often contained appeals to *role playing*, we can dimly see what different people thought they meant by *role-playing game*.

Fueled by their passion for the game, the community raced through the problem space of theory and design, making astonishing progress in only half a decade. It was an educated and inquisitive community, one that would inevitably become self-conscious about coining such a term of art. In the first five years of the hobby, the quest to understand role-playing games exposed the most important questions of role-playing game design and theory. But the community's ambition to improve systems and practices drove much of the early philosophical investigation of role-playing games, more so than any academic interest in explicating games for its own sake. It might be more accurately stated that practitioners resorted to theorizing in an attempt to mend alarming divides that quickly emerged in the community, disrupting progress, and necessitating design experiments. Along the way, though, they developed some early and important ideas about what it might mean for a game to create a story.

The original *D&D* rules left so much unsaid, so much to the players' discretion, that to play it was to reimagine it. Its introduction billed it as "the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity."[1] As one early adopter put it in August 1975, "D&D is an outline for a fantasy game. The gamesmaster expands on the rules."[2] Much of the early writing about role-playing games captures that process: it is a tangle of variant rule proposals, breathless play reports, staunch critical opinion, and designer's notes. But a cluster of pioneering thinkers in this period crafted more considered essays that attempted to frame problems, define terms, and engage with prior literature. These key texts—by Lewis Pulsipher, Steve Lortz, Ed Simbalist, Glenn Blacow, and others—at first circulated in fanzines little read outside the insular and dedicated game community of the time. By 1980, the best of this literature had migrated to glossy trade magazines, where it reached a wider audience. Through the most prominent of those, *The Dragon*, Gary Gygax commanded a gravitas not to be underestimated, though his position as the steward of both the interpretation and evolution of *D&D* made him simultaneously the community's most prominent authority and its most reviled object of censure. Innovation and subversion in this period grew with the stridence of Gygax's orthodoxy.

Determining the practices that *role playing* identified would furthermore become a key goal for producers of early commercial titles competing with *D&D*. These designers wanted to establish not just what a role-playing

game is but also what it should be and how a next-generation system might realize that potential. One reviewer in 1979 quipped that "nearly every set of role-playing rules except D&D bills itself as a 'second generation' game" (*DW* 2), and, indeed, before 1980 some already discerned a third generation of systems.[3] Given that *D&D* originally attired itself as a wargame, some only grudgingly acknowledged *D&D* as even a first-generation role-playing game title. In this view, any self-proclaimed role-playing game could, by emphasizing and fostering role playing, improve on the genre's dysfunctional parent. But what were they emphasizing exactly? Early role-playing games did not break off cleanly from the legacy of conflict simulation, and many new titles incorporated systems and product marketing that could arguably identify them as either wargaming or role playing.

A study might follow any number of threads in illustrating how early players invoked the term *role playing* in their efforts to complete the shift to a new form of game. The most illuminating of these areas relate to a fundamental tension in role-playing games introduced by the earliest designs, one hinging on how players participate in the resolution of game events. One of the signature features of *D&D* is that its play takes place in a conversation between players and a referee, where players explain verbally to the referee what they want to accomplish. This makes it possible for new players to join the game without knowing the rules. The referee, by translating each player's statements of intention into game events, can let players feel as if they are in the situation of their characters, that they can attempt anything their characters are capable of—yet the secrecy and latitude required to exercise the referee's function can also paradoxically leave players feeling as if their actions hardly matter, as if they are helpless spectators of the referee's personal show. Some players felt it was the epitome of *role playing* to lose themselves in their characters' situation, leaving it to the referee to sort out the resolution of game events; others, however, felt that they could not be said to play a role without understanding how—or even if—their choices were processed by the system of the game. The original *D&D* rules, being merely guidelines, lent themselves equally to either philosophy. In the name of optimizing for sometimes ill-defined properties such as realism, story, control, and immersion, role-playing game players and designers attempted to resolve the tension between those two approaches by altering how players

interfaced with the game system. Comparing this early literature to debates still rumbling through the gaming community today amply demonstrates that the first philosophical problems to trouble role playing have proven the most enduring. Exploring these issues moreover sheds light on the fundamental question of why role-playing games have rules, and how those rules affect play.

Academics eventually began exploring the theory of role-playing games, with the first landmark study being the sociologist Gary Alan Fine's book *Shared Fantasy* (1983), but practitioners have never entirely relinquished their claim on this endeavor.[4] As the fanzines that carried the earliest theoretical works have receded into archival scarcity, much of the history of role-playing game theorizing in the crucial period from 1975 to 1980 is now little studied. Blacow's essay from 1980 dividing players into four types, "Role-Playing Styles," is widely known, but surveys of this literature characterize the period with language such as "there was still relatively little thought being applied to what constituted the act of role-playing itself."[5] Yet a close reading of the works in this neglected period brings us to a different conclusion and to novel insights into how and why the term *role playing* stuck.

It is hoped that this book will first and foremost serve as a guide to the key theoretical works of that period and as a summary of their conclusions. This critical literature builds on systems of the time, so to understand it we must further rescue from obscurity many published and experimental designs that have largely escaped the notice of posterity.[6] It is not the ambition of this study to settle on a tidy dictionary definition of *role-playing game* but instead to show historically how the game community came to grapple with agreeing on one.[7]

Students of the more recent theory and practice of role-playing games may discover in this body of work some prefigurements of later thinking in design and criticism, couched in the vernacular that practitioners spoke at the time. Later theory did not engage with this literature, however, and without sufficient caution it would be easy to fabricate a dialogue based on parallels that might be significant or superficial, thus coloring our view of early thinking with later inventions. Pointers to potential parallels are therefore confined here to notes in order to give the early writers the space to speak for themselves. It is, after all, to be expected that these ideas recur

cyclically in approaches to role-playing games if indeed the tension at the heart of their original design admits of no entirely satisfactory solution.

The organization of this book is loosely chronological. The first chapter explores the cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom, with a particular emphasis on character-playing precursors to *D&D* and early attempts to develop games with systems built around conversations. Chapter 2 looks in particular at the dialogue at the core of *D&D*, the sort of agency players have in the game, as well as the nature of statements of intention. Next, the basic system concepts "abilities," "alignment," and "experience" ground chapter 3 in a study of how the game community of the 1970s first understood the idea of playing a role. Chapter 4 tackles simultaneous discussions of the purpose of a referee or gamesmaster in role-playing games with regard to world building, system management, and story-telling. A brief interlude then explores skeptical arguments about the value of system design in games that are so open ended. The fifth chapter surveys the first crop of theoretical essays that attempted to define and situate role-playing games as well as the pressures introduced by the growing popularity of the genre and the changing demographics of the community. Finally, chapter 6 shows how the foundational concepts defined in the 1970s gelled at the start of the next decade into a point of maturity for role-playing games. An epilogue visits the conversations about the philosophy of role playing that recurred later in the 1980s, setting the stage for the modern era of role-playing game theory.

1

The Two Cultures

Dungeons & Dragons famously resulted from the intersection of two cultures: a gaming culture of conflict simulation and a literary culture engaged with speculative and fantastic fiction. Or as Gary Gygax put it in 1976, "It arose from a combination of warfare with miniature figures and the desire to create heroic epics of the strange and supernatural" (*SFF* 87). To understand the first audience for *D&D*, it is therefore necessary to understand the two preexisting cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom, where the latter is understood to encompass fans of fantasy fiction. Science-fiction fandom got organized decades before the first games fans banded together, and the wargaming community would copy the pioneering structures that enabled science-fiction fans to forge their own identity: national and regional clubs, which hosted both local and large-scale conventions and published amateur magazines, or *fanzines*, for disseminating ideas throughout their membership.[1]

The two cultures shared a substantial overlap in membership, and almost as soon as wargaming fanzines began circulating in the 1950s, we see attempts to make fantastic literature the subject of wargames, most notably in Tony Bath's Hyboria. The monumental popularity of both the *Lord of the Rings* novels and the *Star Trek* television show in the late 1960s brought a new wave of enthusiasm for importing science-fiction and fantasy themes to wargames. These experiments led to the publication of Gygax's fantasy medieval wargame rules *Chainmail* (1971), which in turn triggered the collaboration of Gygax and Dave Arneson on *D&D*.

Wargaming was at the time, by any measure, a small and insular hobby. The most optimistic estimates placed its total scope at around 100,000 players, with a recognition that perhaps a tenth of that number were truly dedicated members, but even prominent clubs with a national reach had memberships numbering only in the hundreds.[2] It was moreover a homogenous community: Manuela Oleson, who identifies herself as "an amateur sociologist," conducted a survey in 1975 that led her to conclude that wargaming was "nearly exclusively a white, male pastime."[3]

Participation by female players perhaps measured at around half a percent of the total. A much larger and more diverse set of people read science and fantasy fiction, but active participants in organized science-fiction fandom still leaned toward white, male, middle class, and college age.[4]

There can be no doubt that Gygax, Arneson, and their respective gaming circles identified far more with wargaming culture than with science-fiction fandom—but science-fiction fandom would embrace *D&D* immediately after its publication and play a crucial role in determining how the game's notoriously vague rules would be understood and popularized. Tellingly, during the game's development in the spring of 1973, when Gygax and Arneson solicited feedback from interested parties, their notice ran through *Gamesletter* (9 (58)) of the National Fantasy Fan Federation, one of the largest science-fiction fandom organizations. The fact that such an organization even supported a games-related fanzine shows how welcoming science-fiction fandom could be to a game like *D&D* and establishes that the science-fiction community's merger with games fandom had begun long before *D&D* went to press.

But the authors of *D&D* appreciated that there were two distinct markets. "From the sampling of wargame players I have spoken to about fantasy and SF," Gygax wrote in the fall of 1974, "and this number runs into several hundreds, it appears that there is a correlation between interest in imaginative writing and imaginative game playing. Some 90% of the sampling declare an interest in fantasy and SF" (*EU* 3). As a columnist for wargaming magazines who polled his readerships on these sorts of subjects, Gygax spoke from deep and direct experience with the wargaming community, but he could only speculate on the other culture: "I wonder if among fantasy and SF fans not introduced to our hobby there is a corresponding possibility of interest in wargaming! As a guess I'd say while it is not as high as 90%, there must be quite an untapped source of new players among scifi fans." The fate of Gygax's publishing company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), greatly depended on the accuracy of that guess.

Both of the two cultures supported an open, collaborative environment where fans shared ideas freely, usually without much concern for intellectual property—the possibility that someone would pay money for the sort of half-baked ideas that filled these fanzines would have struck

most as laughable. But it was nonetheless a peer-review community: the amateur press association (APA) fanzines exchanged by science-fiction fans in particular fostered a tradition of critical evaluation, where a regular group would publish material on a schedule while simultaneously commenting on other participants' ideas in prior issues, both of which led to lengthy and often rigorous discussion threads. Although such theoretical discussions appeared less frequently in the periodicals of the wargaming community, the merger of the two fandoms triggered by *D&D* would repurpose APA discussion toward understanding and perfecting that game. Gygax sporadically contributed to the APA dialogue, at least for the first few years, but he could not control it—the interpretations of *D&D* that took hold in the community would, in several particulars, stand in open defiance of his stated preferences.[5]

Ultimately, *D&D* would not belong entirely to either culture: its reception depended on both, and the friction between them helped to shape the way the game was first understood, played, and modified. As originally published, *D&D* was unapologetically incomplete, leaving much to depend on the assumptions that players brought to it. Posterity might be tempted to suppose that the initial interpretation of *D&D* rigidly followed the simulation-driven precepts of wargaming and that only later, after some shift that we might pinpoint to a juncture in history, did a faction of the community adopt practices that focused more on stories and characters. Identifying that unheralded moment could prove difficult, though, because any number of theoretical constructs or design features could be argued to demarcate a transition.[6] But what the earliest literature around the game reveals is that those two philosophies were instead equiprimordial, deriving as they did from preexisting cultures, and that the original players of *D&D* drew equally from both camps. The theory and practice of early role-playing games emerged from the two cultures' messy reconciliation.

The prior study *Playing at the World* (2012) gives a detailed analysis of the roots of *D&D* in the activities of these two cultures—the difficulty of separating the playstyle that emerged after the publication of *D&D* from prior practices of wargamers and science-fiction fans is a major theme of that work. It is worth briefly recasting those findings here to emphasize less the causal chain leading to *D&D* and more the breadth of parallel activities in the two cultures that would shape the imminent critical and theoretical discussion about *D&D*.

The Legacy of Wargaming

The inventors and earliest practitioners of *Dungeons & Dragons* largely came to it from wargaming, bringing with them wargaming's critical apparatus and lexicon, such as they were. By the 1970s, organized wargaming fandom had existed for decades, so its design principles had been subjected to years of scrutiny by both commercial publishers and amateur players. However exhaustively the wargaming community had previously explored these design principles, though, transposing them to the new context of *D&D* altered them due to two key differences: the role of the referee and the scope of the simulation.

When we think of a wargame, we may first think of a competitive two-player board game in the vein of Avalon Hill's *Tactics* (1954), which has little practical need for a referee. Both players would study the game's rulebook and supervise one another's conformance to the system during play—which is not to say that heated disputes over rules interpretation never arose. But the wargaming hobby divided broadly into two categories at the time: board wargamers and miniature wargamers. Among miniature players, there existed a long tradition of referees who not only arbitrated disputes but also managed the execution of the system, a practice that dates back to the Prussian *Kriegsspiel* of the early nineteenth century.[7]

In the pioneering Reiswitz system developed in the 1820s, players no longer moved pieces on a board but instead wrote orders just as they would to subordinates in wartime, and the referee—in consultation with the rules and sometimes dice—would determine the outcome. Reiswitz intended his game as a teaching tool that would instruct officers in the science of command, especially in drafting written orders, and so the authority of a referee in his game resembled the authority of a teacher over a classroom. By having his referee respond to player orders with only the limited intelligence that wartime commanders would receive, Reiswitz hoped his game would instill in a player "the same sort of uncertainty over results as he would have in the field."[8] Later *Kriegsspiel* authors such as Julius von Verdy du Vernois had learned from experience that prescriptive rules could make the game dull, overcomplicated, and unrealistic, so they granted referees total discretion in determining the outcome of game events, a movement then called "free" *Kriegsspiel*.[9] This broad referee discretion in deciding events unlocked a corresponding principle codified by Charles

Totten's wargame *Strategos* in the 1880s: "anything can be attempted." Players can propose that their forces attempt anything that people in that situation could realistically do.[10] This idea was unearthed and reinvigorated by Twin Cities wargamers in the late 1960s, from whence it then exerted a crucial influence on *D&D*.

The core idea of the referee reached *D&D* through other intermediaries as well, of which Michael Korns's *Modern War in Miniature* (1966) is probably the most important. The referees, or "judges," of Korns's wargames "are the only ones who need to be familiar with the rules. The players only give orders as they would in actual combat."[11] But "orders" in this case included verbalizing the actions that a player wanted his personal soldier to take. Korns thus structured his game around a dialogue between the referee and the player. He gave an example where the player, a German soldier, hears from the referee, "The American is on your left about 12 meters away running at you with his bayonet." The player asks, "Can I still move?" and the referee replies, "Yes, but you are almost unconscious." The player then declares his intended action: "I'm turning around and firing the rest of my schmeisser's clip into him."[12] The immediacy of this first-person dialogue creates a far more dramatic pace than the traditional *Kriegsspiel* conducted through written orders; this mechanism would appear essentially unaltered in *D&D*.

Korns recommended that referees keep maps and other canonical information about the state of the game world secret from the players so that "they know only what the judge tells them that their troops can see or hear. In this way the judges are used to isolate the players within the confines of the knowledge of their troops."[13] The importance of this referee function, of "isolating" the player, to later game designs cannot be overstated. Korns effectively did not want players to participate in the execution of the game system but rather to delegate that entirely to referees so that the players act as a person would in the situation that the game simulates—it might even be detrimental for players to understand how the referee decides events. Moreover, Korns did not clutter his book with rules; he instead gave real-world probability tables that referees could consult to decide game events if they had no better data for decision making. "There is only one rule to our war game," Korns wrote, and that is to "simulate reality." Although the "statistics and tables are designed to help" with that simulation, "when they get in the way, if they ever should, then you should

discard them" in favor of any "procedure that better simulates reality than ours."[14] Referees have complete discretion to reinvent the rules as they go along.

Korns's "one rule" is in fact a requirement that a referee be ready to improvise any rule on the spot. Systems that built on Korns made this principle explicit: early drafts of *Fast Rules* by Mike Reese and Leon Tucker of Gygax's Lake Geneva group, for example, bear on their cover the legend "The presence of a judge may become more than ordinarily necessary due to the abbreviated form of these rules. No attempt has been made to deal with every conceivable situation. Some disinterested party will have to adjudicate the unpredictable situations which will arise and will have to invent new rules consistent with the basic framework laid down here." One person who observed *Fast Rules* in play in the summer of 1969 in Gygax's basement remarked, "I never got to see the actual rules for the game, but they used a referee who did nothing but interpret the rules and tossed the dice. Nice idea" (*CW* 13). Historically minded wargamers recognized that this principle went directly back to the *Kriegsspiel* tradition, and they received periodic reminders of it: a 1972 article on the early history of wargames in the widely-read magazine *Strategy & Tactics*, for example, offered a gloss on how in Verdy du Vernois's system "the umpire would make up the rules and apply them as he went along and the players would have the freedom to attempt things that might or might not be allowed by the umpire."[15]

This referee latitude surfaced like a rhizome in the miniature wargaming community, and not just in the United States. Tony Bath was one of the founding fathers of British hobby wargaming in the 1950s, and as the referee of his long-standing Hyborian campaign, he had implemented similar principles for managing rules, players, and information. As Bath explained in *Setting Up a Wargames Campaign* (1973), a work that is a close cousin of *D&D*, "Each campaign week every player is provided with a situation report giving him all the information to which he is entitled; he then issues his instructions, based on this information, and I put them into practice." Like Korns, Bath did not make players privy to the execution of the system. "They are not concerned with the mechanics of the affair; I formulated the rules without consulting them and ultimate decisions are mine to make." This did not mean that the rules were immutable, and, indeed, Bath welcomed input from players: "Suggestions as to the way

affairs are conducted are of course welcome, but are only implemented if they happen to suit me—in other words I am totally selfish about the whole thing. But nevertheless it works out pretty well."[16] Bath and others expressed this view of the role of the referee in the newsletters of his Society of Ancients, which were known to the designers of *D&D*.[17]

These examples show how miniature wargamers had long granted the referee total authority over the execution of the system. Accordingly, published miniature-wargame systems positioned themselves as mere guidelines that referees could and should modify as needed. In this sense, miniature-wargaming systems are a plastic thing: they get their shape in play at the tabletop as the players and the referee tool them to the purpose of a particular game. In the noncommercial and collaborative community surrounding miniature wargames of the day, the distinction between a designer and a referee was fluid; a referee moonlighted as a designer on the spot when the situation warranted. "War gaming in miniature is a personal activity," one author wrote in 1962, "and each war gamer has ideas different from the next. No one conforms."[18] A referee who implemented modifications to a system needed only the audacity to then publish these new ideas to warrant the stature of a designer, and whether those rules circulated as a stand-alone page of tables in a fanzine to handle some particular wargame situation, or as an avowed variant of some prior ruleset, or as a wholly new wargame with a personal title emblazoned on its own fresh booklet was entirely at the whim of their inventor.

D&D inherited the plastic approach to system of miniature wargaming. The original rules insist that, "as with any other set of miniatures rules," they are merely "guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign," explicitly granting referees the power to change the system to suit their own tabletop.[19] This language echoes what one could already read in Gygax's *Chainmail* three years earlier, that "these rules may be treated as guide lines around which you form a game that suits you," language that effectively charged readers to become designers.[20] Gygax would elaborate in an article months later that in the *Chainmail* booklet "many unusual circumstances are not covered in these rules as they are meant primarily as guidelines. . . . The rules are purposely vague in areas in order to encourage thinking and initiative on the part of contestants" (*IW* 5 (1)). This vagueness granted players the latitude to attempt all manner of

wacky actions, but "there is seldom any reason for precluding something unusual, although the final ruling should be left to the game judge."

This concept of referee latitude carried over into the *D&D* rules. "New details can be added and old 'laws' altered," the *D&D* rulebook continues, suggesting that "if your referee has made changes in the basic rules and/or tables, simply note them in pencil." Instead of players engaging in contentious "rule interpretations," *D&D* calls on referees "to decide how you would like it to be, and then make it just that way."[21] Although game variants are quite common in games of all types—people play everything from poker to *Monopoly* with "house rules"—*D&D* follows Korns in furnishing a system that makes the development of local rules essential to play.

The authors of *D&D* took their own advice on this matter. Already in mid-1975, Gygax could write that "Dave and I disagree on how to handle any number of things, and both of our campaigns differ from the 'rules' found in D&D" (*AE* 2). If referees strictly adhered to the published *D&D* system, Gygax would actually see that as a failure: "I don't believe there is anything desirable in having various campaigns playing similarly to one another," he wrote, and "if the time ever comes when . . . players agree on how the game should be played, D&D will have become staid and boring indeed." Gygax explicitly encouraged others to innovate, urging, "if you don't like the way I do it, change the bloody rule to suit yourself and your players." This latitude naturally inspired experiments that led to the development and specification of variants—and ultimately to the release of competing commercial products, a consequence of the game's surprising success that Gygax apparently did not foresee.

Thus far in its development, *D&D* followed a design trajectory established by prior miniature wargames. But key differences in the role of the *D&D* referee created novel opportunities and challenges. In traditional miniature wargames, the power to tinker with the rules was invested in the referee because the referee was ostensibly neutral, whereas the players would have clear incentives to game the rules to their personal advantage to defeat opponents. A *D&D* referee commonly—though by no means exclusively—oversees a collaborating group of players in their conflict against a game world that the referee controls.[22] The *D&D* referee designs a game world that poses challenges and tests to the players in a way that may,

to varying degrees, be adversarial rather than neutral. The immense power that referees of *D&D* command over the system and its execution means their own impartiality could be threatened by their discretion over how events are resolved. If only the referee understands how the system is run, with the players "isolated" from it, then how do players know that the tests they take are fair ones? In hindsight, this change in the referee's position introduced a tension in play, if not an outright design flaw, that would become a major focus of critical commentary and design energy in the years to come.

Wargamers quickly recognized that *D&D* did not fit the usual mold, though many still initially received it within the competitive tradition of wargames, qualifying, if not rejecting, the putative neutrality of the referee. Echoing Barker, George Phillies wrote in "Phillies on *Dungeons & Dragons*" in April 1975 that "D&D is not a wargame in the usual sense," but he added that it "reduces to you vs. the gamesmaster and the dice." Dice provided at least something of a check on the referee's discretion: since the early days of *Kriegsspiel*, dice let referees remove themselves from a decision path. By rolling against printed probability tables in the rulebook to ascertain the success of an attempted action rather than simply deciding its outcome, the wargame referee ostensibly avoids unduly favoring or punishing a given player. The completeness and complexity of the system therefore guards against the referee's bias: the more the system prescribes the die rolls for possible situations, the less referees need to contrive their own ways to decide an outcome on the spot and thus the less they might inject bias into play. Effectively, this promises an informal separation of authority between the game designer and the referee, an expectation that the referee will defer to die rolls conceived by the designer rather than exercising personal discretion whenever possible.

However, the referee of *D&D* responds to proposed player actions that go far beyond the purview of a wartime commander, conceivably any activity that a person in the game's situation might attempt. *D&D* did not scope its simulation to commanding in times of war but expanded it to include control of the everyday activities of people, both in crisis and in repose. Transposing the game from a battlefield to a world of fantasy, where anything might be possible, intensified this shift. As such, the *D&D* referee took on a set of responsibilities and powers that had little precedent in wargames.

How could you design a system that would account for anything a player might propose? Rulebooks could grow only so long and complicated before a game became unplayable. The degree of complexity and completeness of a system is one of the fundamental decisions in wargame designs. Traditionally, wargame designers cast the complexity choice as a trade-off between *realism* and *playability*: on the one hand, optimizing for the breadth and accuracy of the conflict simulation by providing a quantified, probabilistic model of as many game events as possible and, on the other hand, satisfying the often countervailing desire to make the game fun to play by minimizing the work of executing the system and keeping the rules simple and intuitive. Conventional wisdom held that a design could not do both: you increased one at the expense of the other. A game such as *Diplomacy* (1959) epitomized playability with its minimal rules and highly interpersonal seven-player structure, whereas the mega-games of the 1970s, such as *Drang Noch Osten* (1973) by Game Designers' Workshop, exemplified far more complex and realistic simulations by deploying legions of chits on a massive board. A referee could soak up the complexity of a wargame system, shielding players from it, but a careless designer could demand that referees take on Herculean responsibilities: Korns stressed that the ultimate goal of his system was to simulate reality, and he urged referees to construct the most realistic models possible to decide game events, all the while expecting referees to fill in any blanks on the spot.

The wargaming community had long since learned that different players might prefer different levels of realism or playability when they sat down to game around the same table. In 1970, Gary Gygax ascribed to his *Chainmail* coauthor Jeff Perren a distinction between the attitudes of two types of players he called "warriors" and "gamers," where "warriors seek to duplicate actual conditions of battle" to emphasize realism and "gamers are willing to twist realism any which way if a fun game results" (*DB* 3). Proposed player typologies along these or similar lines recurred in wargaming literature of the era. A few months later Steve Thornton advanced a more nuanced three-type model. Thornton spoke most warmly of the first type, those "fun wargamers who play just for enjoyment and who like non-complex, unambiguous rules that are quick to use" (*WN* 106). These he first contrasts with "'simulators' who try to re-enact battle conditions to the Nth degree," and then least favorably with "competitors,"

who "only play to win, invariably wrangling over the rules." Commentators who adopted Thornton's typology quickly recognized how divergent expectations could lead to unsatisfying outcomes at the table. Fred Vietmeyer observed, "For an Avalon Hill box game competitor to be engrossed in simulation of uniforms, flags, dioramas, etc., may be for him a waste of time." A corollary is that "a simulator's interest simply cannot be held with the simple games" favored by those emphasizing playability above all else. For Vietmeyer, the key to avoiding conflict was to embrace relativism and accept that players could come to the table with different incentives: "For one type of player to place his own viewpoint as superior to another's hobby enjoyment is simply being too egocentric."[23] The recognition that players could be sorted into buckets by the properties they want out of games thus became part of the theoretical apparatus of wargaming inherited by the earliest adopters of *D&D*.

As many would soon point out, the simulation implied by *realism* transitions poorly to the realm of fantasy, but the designers of *D&D* nonetheless strove for a system that represented magic and monsters in a balanced way, preserving the logic of the fantasy literature that these systems emulated. But it might be said that its rules opted for playability over realism: no design could hope to encompass all of the situations that might arise in a fantasy game like *D&D*, especially a game that hoped to simulate people and not just wars. So the rulebook explicitly authorized the referee to alter the design, and with that *D&D* created an opportunity for referee bias that could not be governed by mere dice.

This necessarily brought the neutrality of the referee into doubt. In 1976, Kevin Slimak reaffirmed Phillies's tenet that, "really, D&D is a game between the dungeonmasters and the players; they are the two sides. The dungeon designer sets the problems for his adventurers and they try to solve them." But Slimak further recognized that this creates a peculiar conflict of interest for the referee: "Remember this when you run your game. You are playing with/against the adventurers, true, but you have ALL the advantages. If you use all these advantages, you'll get those players, for SURE, but in the long run, you lose. Doing this will kill off your game for sure" (*AW* 3 (7)). This power imbalance would persuade many that *D&D* could not be played as a wargame and that it was instead the foundational entry in a new game category.

The earliest literature that engaged with *D&D* largely did so on wargaming's terms. Wargamers loved variants and expansions on prior games, so much ink was spilled filling in blanks and extending *D&D* with sprawling arrays of new fantastic monsters, spells, character classes, and so on, which might be transposed from the dungeon to outer space or a postapocalyptic wasteland, where an adventurer might fall victim to a critical fumble or to a hit in a vital location or to any of a legion of novel combat mechanisms. These sorts of contributions to the system closely followed the variants that had long been developed for wargames. But to understand the intersection of the two cultures, we need to explore another conversation familiar to wargamers before *D&D* was released: one about playing characters in wargames.

Gaming as Characters

Narrowing the scope of wargame simulation down to individual people had consequences, ones long documented by the community. Joe Morschauser, author of the seminal book *How to Play War Games in Miniature* (1962), had popularized a "roster system" that let miniature wargamers track data about groups of toy soldiers with paper and pencil, information such as their collective losses and morale. In 1966, his article "Humanizing the Roster System" proposed taking this a step further by keeping a roster for each individual in a small-troop action. A number would be tagged onto each toy soldier, corresponding to an entry in the roster that listed the soldier's name and attributes. "Think of it first in human terms! Does this particular man have good, bad or average eyesight? Is he a big, rough-tough man who would handle several of the enemy at once in hand-to-hand combat or is he just an average man with an average chance of surviving a rough-and-tumble?" (*TTT* 5 (2)). Crucially, Morschauser suggested that all of these sorts of data are quantifiable: "All these things can be expressed in terms of numbers or dice odds." For example, he proposed that "staying power" could be one such factor, and that as soldiers survived battles, their "staying power number may be increased."

"To really add a delicious personalized touch to games played under the Humanized Roster System," Morschauser continued, "one could go so far as to give each figure a name, an age, a biography of sorts perhaps. Thus

when he fights on the battlefield he will become the closest thing to a real soldier as is possible in miniature war gaming." He gave as an example the blue-eyed Private Henry Isaacs, who "isn't very fleet of foot but he's a damn good shot and a rough customer in a hand-to-hand tangle." No sooner had Morschauser published this idea than an article in response from a gamer in Greensboro, Illinois, revealed a similar "personal roster system" that had been in use there since 1960 and now encompassed approximately 400 individual soldiers.[24]

By the time Don Featherstone included the brief section "Personalised War-gaming" in his book *Advanced War Games* in 1969, he could speak to the consequences of the experiments with individual-level gaming that had transpired over the past decade. "It brought to table-top battles a strange sense of compassion," Featherstone wrote, "a self-identification with the little figures producing a marked reluctance to commit them to sacrificial missions." As an example, Featherstone described a set of miniatures as a fictional British rifle platoon from the Second World War, with a total strength of 37 men, each with a name and rank. "One thing is certain—in a very short time definite personalities and characters will be grafted upon these small, hitherto inanimate, figures. Some will be brave, others not so courageous; some will be killed and their names will vanish, leaving a feeling of tangible regret."[25] Even when strategy and chance governed the battles, players could not help but project onto the figures personalities that explained their performance in game. Featherstone would later make such wargame actions the subject of his book *Skirmish Wargaming* (1975).

Once a wargame soldier acquires this projected personality, new questions arise about how a player should incorporate the soldier's attitudes into play. These implications are fully on display in *Fight in the Skies* (1968), a First World War aerial simulation where each player controls a single pilot character, which takes "self-identification" to a new level. Mike Carr, the designer of the game, wrote in April 1970 that "one of the greatest things about *Fight in the Skies* is the fact that it is such a personal game" because "in *Fight* you control only one man, and in a sense, the way he performs is an extension of your personality. That is, if you want him to." Carr instead encouraged "creating a personality for individual pilots" and having each pilot "perform according to his personality, not yours. If the opener says he's aggressive, then have him fly aggressively," though players presumably recognized this would not always be the most effective

tactic (*Aerodrome* 11). Under the influence of films such as *The Blue Max* (1966), Carr encouraged players to write backstory "memoirs" for their characters, so fanzines dedicated to his game soon carried "Personality Profiles" relating the pilots' life stories to provide a better context for their actions in game. Carr promised that with these embellishments "it should be more fun for all of us."

The case of the *Western Gunfight Wargame Rules* (1970) most vividly demonstrates how a one-to-one-scale wargame—where each miniature figure represents one person—when staged as an ongoing campaign, leads to practices that players hesitated to call "wargaming." In the rulebook, its three designers, Steve Curtis, Ian Colwill, and Mike Blake of Bristol, England, entreated players to "Create Interesting Games with These Rules" based on scenarios familiar from Western films, usually pitting the "goodies" against the "baddies" in a showdown. "Each figure is given a specific task or individual order to carry out," details that were kept on a record sheet.[26] A report on a game from March 1970 has Ian Colwill acting as an umpire managing a game with ten players. In one scenario, Steve Curtis played his John Slaughter, who led a team of American lawmen against the forces of the outlaw El Manolito. Apparently, during the course of the battle, "Whilst the rest of the hardcases were frantically trying to kill each other—well, Mano and his amigo just calmly rode down the street, out of town with lead whining round their heads and the Wells Fargo bullion slung between their saddles. Not a scratch on either bandit. Magnificent!" (*Bristol Wargames Society Journal* 8).

Featherstone's review of the *Western Gunfight* rules in *Wargamer's Newsletter* hailed the "fascinating field of one-man-on-the-table-representing-one-man-in-real-life style of wargaming" (*WN* 99), leading to such a flood of interest that the Bristol Wargames Society brought out a second, more detailed edition the following year. Its rules explain how "each player must select a personal figure which . . . will act as the player wishes."[27] It is one thing for the figures to represent individual characters, but another for a particular individual figure to be "personal" for each player. These personal figures in *Western Gunfight* were differentiated by more than just a name: they were separated into three ranks—novice, average, and professional—and with higher rank they had more points available to spend on three quantified combat skills, such as hand-to-hand, rifle, and revolver talent.

Much of the action in the Bristol *Western Gunfight* campaign centered around the exploits of their "stock characters," who reside in Pima County in the New Mexico Territory. A given session "might follow from a previous game," where the story had last left off, or it "could revolve around an entirely new factor," such as a surprise Apache invasion (*WN* 135). After many visits to Pima County from the late 1960s on, the characters began to develop distinct personalities, and the players began to write articles about the theoretical implications of that shift to a situation where "the players take on the attitudes of the characters they use, playing to both the spirit of the game and the time," as they put it at the beginning of 1973 (*WN* 130). "Having characters with lives of their own who find themselves in situations and then behave in character rather than simply acting in their own best interests, adds greatly to the enjoyment of the game" (*WN* 135). It is quite striking that this language—prior to the publication of *D&D*—already invoked the construction "in character" to describe how players should direct their personal figures. Or as Steve Curtis put it in another contemporary letter, their approach "really makes you play to the spirit of the game and makes each man (or woman, remembering the saloon girls) stay in character and do what each would do in a similar real-life situation. Who wins doesn't really come into it" (*WN* 137).

"Who wins" no longer matters? Once the *Western Gunfight* designers had reached that point, one of them, Mike Blake, had to submit an article to the *Wargamer's Newsletter* called "Yes, but Is It Really Wargaming?" Blake suspected "this is perhaps a question some readers may have asked themselves when reading one of the spate of articles on Skirmish wargames which have graced these pages of late." Instead of providing another battle report and meditation of the virtues of one-to-one-scale wargaming, this piece posed a tactical problem—addressing the reader in the second-person singular. "It is noon on Sunday, 18 June 1815, on a hot dusty day near Lahne in Belgium." After describing the scene and furnishing a helpful overhead diagram, Blake built a bit of tension into this Napoleonic situation: he pointedly asked, "So, what do you do?" But before you could answer, he brought you deeper into the scene: "You are lying in the dust, peering through the heat haze at a dilapidated farm, with the sweat trickling into your eyes as your head swelters under its high, heavy and unwieldy bearskin, damning all generals as fools and wishing you were back in Paris!"

In a follow-up article, the *Western Gunfight* authors stressed how they hoped thinking about games this way would encourage "individual characters rather than faceless figures" (*WN* 141). They too felt the need for something like Carr's "memoirs" for their characters: "This development of miniature personalities, each with his or her own biography, is not a written rule, though perhaps it should be. As we have mentioned in previous articles, writing a story setting the scene for the game, and continuing the tale based on the game played, on into the next game soon develops into an interesting saga. The worth of your story depends largely on your own writing talent." Hobby wargaming had a long tradition of turning battles into stories: Robert Louis Stevenson and H. G. Wells, both fathers of the hobby, had turned their literary talents to dramatizations of their own early experiments with wargaming nearly a century earlier. But they largely narrated past conflicts—the Bristol wargamers instead applied the story-telling to set the scene before the game because "a narrative is invaluable for whipping up enthusiasm among the players." Putting all of the elements together led to something that did not seem so much like a wargame: "an informal 'campaign,' open-ended, with no particular side trying to rub out the rest—well not completely!" Victory was no longer the objective of play but instead the creation of an ongoing Western saga, serialized into individual game sessions. But was it really wargaming? And if not, why not, and which elements precipitated a shift away from wargaming? And, finally, what should we call it instead of "wargaming"?

In this Western setting, with its connections to Hollywood story-telling, the Bristol wargamers discovered something difficult to distinguish from the "self-identification" later forged between *D&D* players and characters. Gygax read the reports about the Bristol group with interest, noting them in a letter that ran in *Wargamer's Newsletter* in May 1973, so he was directly acquainted with the Bristol ideas at the time that work toward a first draft of *D&D* was under way. Experiments with the Western setting in Lake Geneva led to games that would shape the system of *Boot Hill* later on.[28] In Dave Arneson's circle in the Twin Cities, they had similar experiences in the "Brownstone" campaign setting going back to 1971, where the exploits of Arneson's villain "El Pauncho," a local corollary to El Manolito, show that experimentation with characters in genre-based games was part of a broader movement in wargaming culture.

The name "Brownstone" signaled that the game was a variant of the Braunstein wargames in the Twin Cities pioneered by David Wesely. Under the influence of Totten's *Strategos*, Wesely ran a series of games that gave players control of individual characters in a crisis situation, characters who might not be soldiers and who might have objectives aside from military ones. Although Braunsteins had no formal rule system and were little documented at the time they transpired, Arneson would retrospectively cite them as crucial to unlocking innovations in playing characters: he credited Wesely with giving local gamers their "best boost away from traditional body counts, when you could actually win one of his Braunsteins without killing someone!" (*DW* 3). This was of course just one influence in the Twin Cities he cited, among many others: "Whether it's a 1-for-1 WW II Battle using the Korns rules or WW I Air Battles using Mike Carr's rules, there has been no lack of innovation." Mike Carr, who belonged to Arneson's Twin Cities group, played a preacher in the Brownstone setting.

If, as Featherstone believed, one-to-one scale games inspired a "self-identification" in wargamers, which in turn led to a shift toward acting in character, then we should be able to predict what happened when Gygax's *Chainmail* brought the one-to-one scale to a fantasy setting, including heroes and wizards inspired by Tolkien. Just as the Bristol wargamers would chronicle the exploits of their characters in *Wargamer's Newsletter*, Gygax sent in battle reports to that same magazine describing the conflict between the Warlock Huldor ap Skree and Count Aerll (*WN* 116). *Chainmail* emphasized fixed battles, using the rules to "refight the epic struggles related by J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and other fantasy writers."[29] Gygax hoped to stage such battles in his own imaginary campaign setting, the Great Kingdom of the Castle & Crusade Society. Arneson, a member of that society, set his own fantasy adventures around the town of Blackmoor in the "Northern Marches" of the Great Kingdom. Local gamers effectively played themselves—Duane Jenkins, who had run Brownstone, became Sir Jenkins—in unique situations devised by Arneson, including dungeon explorations. Mike Carr, following his religious calling in Brownstone, became the "village priest" of Blackmoor. Arneson refereed these personal characters in a system granting him total latitude over the rules but also quantifying many attributes of character, most importantly an experience measure that let characters grow more powerful over their episodic adventures in the campaign. When Arneson shared with Gygax the

playstyle developed for Blackmoor, the path to the publication of the "rules for fantastic medieval wargames campaigns" known as *D&D* had begun.

But, of course, Gygax and Arneson were not the first to try to blend wargaming with fantasy literature. Gygax's fantasy rules in *Chainmail* owed a significant debt to the prior work on adapting Tolkien for wargaming done by Leonard Patt (CO 2 (7)). And Patt's work was merely the closest ancestor in a long tradition of wargames inspired by fantasy fiction. Tony Bath pioneered these techniques, as we can see in such essays as "The Hyborian Age as a War Game Period" (1957) and "Campaigning with the Aid of Fantasy Fiction" (1967).[30] Bath ran lavish, protracted, world-scale wargame campaigns where multiple nations clashed, and to motivate international conflict he developed systems to simulate key persons in the governance of countries and their armies. Bath would sometimes award control of existing nonplayer characters to new players, as was the case with Charles Grant, who wrote in 1969, "I've had more fun out of my twelve months as Prince Vakar of Hyrkania (a greedy, treacherous and disloyal character, as I was informed) than I've had from any wargame campaign yet" (*SL* 24). Bath handed Grant a character with a preordained personality, quite a nasty one, and Grant understood it was his responsibility as a player to direct the character's behavior accordingly. And at the same time as these wargamers drew in genre settings to inspire their games, genre fiction fans, especially in science-fiction fandom, were experimenting with ways to wring story elements out of games or to add gamelike qualities to collaboration on narratives.

Collective Authorship

Back in the fall of 1974, Gygax could only wonder if there was an appetite for gaming among fans of science fiction and fantasy literature. A couple of years later in a piece called "Swords & Sorcery Is a Game, Too!" he laid out his case to that potential market. "Until about two years ago . . . the swords & sorcery buff was unable to do much more than read" (*SFF* 87). With the release of *Dungeons & Dragons*, fans could take things further. Players would "set off on a series of 'adventures' which take place in towns, labyrinthine dungeons, or in the wilderness," and the referee "must set about building a whole fantasy world—large or limited—for his group of

players to operate in." As a result, Gygax could report the game was "making inroads amongst college students and sword & sorcery fans. It is a game of personal adventuring which allows creativity on many levels and considerable player identification with the creation."

D&D captivated science-fiction fandom because that community was already predisposed toward games that would unlock a particular sort of communal creativity.[31] When Kevin Slimak postulated that a referee abusing the powers of the position would "lose" the game in the long run, he largely restated a sentiment that had been circulating in science-fiction fandom for a year. A key Los Angeles fan who wrote under the name "Ted Johnstone" posited of *D&D* in 1975 that "it's not a zero-sum game; the Referee, or Dungeonmaster, wins if the players enjoy his setting enough to want to come back and explore farther" (*APL* 511). It is a simple corollary that the referee "loses" if players abandon a game out of boredom or frustration. For both Slimak and Johnstone, a victory lay not in some triumph of the referee over the players but rather in that a good time was had by all. The two came from different cultures, but underlying both of their views is the same fundamental insight: that even under the most despotic referee, players always have the power to vote with their feet and escape the game. This implicit power, at the very dawn of *D&D*, steered the wise referee toward collaborating with players instead of ignoring their preferences—though Slimak, versed in the legacy of wargaming, would already caution that "different people prefer different types of games" (*AW* 2 (12)).

Johnstone at the time authored genre novels under his real name, David McDaniel, and his perspective on how the referee might "win" recalls the path to success in writing fiction: keeping the readers satisfied. This implies that in *D&D* the referee has an opportunity, if not an obligation, to curate an experience that players will find enjoyable, perhaps a responsibility not dissimilar to that of an author. In another early 1975 piece, Johnstone explicitly rejected an approach to the game based on conflict between players and referees: "This is not supposed to be an adversarial situation— the point of the game is not to kill off the tourists but to give them an exciting ride" (*APL* 519). The referee had to work with the players, if not on their behalf, to create a story that would be thrilling enough to keep them wanting more.[32]

We should not be surprised to find Johnstone already devoted to a collaborative and authorial approach to *D&D*: a couple of decades earlier Johnstone was one of the protagonists behind Coventry, a fictional world realized by Los Angeles–area science-fiction fans in the late 1950s through a mixture of writing and live-action, in-character meetings.[33] In Coventry, participants directed the actions of their personal characters in that world through writing fiction, detailing the regions of Coventry controlled by their characters. But it was not a solipsistic exercise: they submitted their ideas as proposals to a central authority, who resolved any conflicts between participant narratives. On a few occasions, the players even met in person, in costume, and acted out their parts in negotiating treaties. Although Coventry never had a game system as such, it allowed a free-form approach to story generation that anticipated many far later developments.

Several participants in Coventry, including Johnstone, went on to be early adopters of postal *Diplomacy* in the 1960s—at first, *Diplomacy* belonged far more to the culture of science-fiction fans than it did to wargamers. Tabletop *Diplomacy* required its seven players, each acting as the leader of an early-twentieth-century European nation spoiling for conquest, to reveal simultaneously their secret moves for a turn. In order to transpose that simultaneity to a postal game, John Boardman's pioneering adaptation required all players to mail their orders before each turn's deadline to a nonplayer *gamesmaster*—a term whose current use derives from *Diplomacy*—who was then responsible for distributing the results of moves to the players via a newsletter; Boardman called his *Graustark*. This gamesmaster exercised no personal discretion whatsoever, instead resolving any conflicting player moves exactly as the rules demand in a publicly verifiable manner.[34]

Los Angeles fans brought to postal *Diplomacy* a hint of Coventry's collaborative fiction through the medium of propaganda. Propaganda began as player-authored *Diplomacy* broadcasts distributed through game newsletters, nominally a means of intimidating or confusing rivals with public statements, but in practice propaganda let each gamer fictionalize the game world in his or her own way. These statements could pass themselves off as pronouncements by a country's leader, where the player took up the pen of the leader as a character; propagandists would hail or dismiss one another's public statements to serve their diplomatic ends. The propaganda narratives sometimes digressed from the intended setting of the game and

ventured into whatever subjects the players found interesting, injecting a strand of fiction that could be tangential at best to game events. Johnstone himself has the distinction of authoring the first piece of postal *Diplomacy* propaganda in *Graustark* 2 in 1963, and he thus set the tone for decades of scandal sheets that would follow. Both Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, the authors of *D&D*, were veteran postal *Diplomacy* players, and records of their own protracted in-game propaganda survive today: their creation, *D&D*, would not be the first game to serve as a collective story-generation engine.

Some board games building on the principles of *Diplomacy* placed constraints on the players' behavior. In *Dynasty* (1969), which describes itself "as a socio-economical-political game" set in feudal East Asia in which each of the four to eight players is assigned a random "Personality." For example, the Personality briefing stipulates that if you are playing the Emperor, "you are forceful and thoughtful," "just and reasonably compassionate," and will "reward those who obey and assist you." The description of each briefing ends with a phrase something like "For as long as you are the Emperor, your actions must be consistent with your personality stated above." Under various circumstances, players can end up switching roles: if the Warlord supplants the Emperor, say, then the rules dictate that each "must now play the game according to your new 'personality.'" This game was known in Los Angeles circles, and Jack Harness even "invented a playable game combining Monopoly and Dynasty, called Revenge!"[35] Other fan activities took *Diplomacy* into far less structured activities. The *Diplomacy* variant game "Slobbovia," conducted by mail starting in 1972, inspired players to serialize protracted comical adventures by adjusting the *Diplomacy* rules to make victory more or less impossible: with propaganda as the end rather than the means, individual issues of the *Slobpolitan Zhurnal* could easily exceed 25,000 words.[36]

In the shadowy zone between games culture and science-fiction fandom, all sorts of peculiar, hybrid beasts were born, some more viable than others.[37] In the early 1970s, new varieties of postal games offered players an opportunity to act "in character" in more open-ended games. They followed the precepts of postal *Diplomacy* in requiring a central authority to coordinate player contributions, though the powers that this referee wielded over the state of game world varied. Some experiments gave the referee

absolute powers familiar from wargaming; others created a system closer to collective game design.

Perhaps the closest cousins of *D&D*, the Midgard family of postal games granted thirty or so players the characters of rulers, heroes, or merchants in a communal world. Hartley Patterson's earliest efforts to organize a Midgard game, as documented in *Midgard* 1 in January 1971—before the release of *Chainmail*—relied heavily on an "umpire or gamesmaster . . . to whom the players send their moves and from whom by return they learn the results of their actions," a design that borrows from postal *Diplomacy* but is leveraged to support a very different sort of game, one more reminiscent of free *Kriegsspiel*.[38] Crucially, Patterson imagined that the game would have no victory conditions and would be so open-ended that the development of the rules would effectively be part of the game: "The rules will not be permanent and will be changed by the gamesmaster and players as the game progresses." Patterson recognized that he had positioned his game between the two cultures: "Basically I'm trying to balance Midgard on the fence between two at present totally separate fan groupings, whether it will succeed I just don't know" (*MG* 2). In order to build support outside of science-fiction fandom circles, Patterson even advertised in wargaming zines such as the *Wargamer's Newsletter*.

The viability of crossovers between the two cultures was boosted enormously by wargamers' receptiveness to gaming as characters. Hal Broome had been working on a Middle-earth wargame of his own devising in 1972 when he first learned of Midgard and its underlying principles, which quickly changed his plans. He insisted that "when Gandalf (played by J. Doe e.g.) runs across Frodo (J. Smith), they communicate as the characters do" (*SN* 9). This extended not just to adopting the voice of a character but also required that "players act in character and not have alliances that would contradict" the setting of the *Lord of the Rings*, as in having Gandalf team up with Sauron. Acting "in character" rather than according to the player's strategic or tactical interests became just as important in the fantasy setting as it was to the First World War flying aces of *Fight in the Skies* or the high-plains drifters of *Western Gunfight*.

The collaborative development of rules became a hallmark of games in the Midgard tradition and a key way to allow players to attempt anything. In 1972, Tom Drake's solicitation of players for Midgard II represented it as

his main responsibility as the referee in the game: "One of the basic rules of this game is innovate. Use your imagination. The rules are simply the norm, a set of guidelines expressing the underlying physical, economic and natural laws. If you want something, or want to do something, not covered in the rules, suggest it to me, and if it doesn't violate the basic tenets of the game, we'll work out a set of rules between us."[39] Players openly discussed the rules and potential modifications in Drake's *Midgard Forum*, and from its sixth issue forward they even filled out a "Voting Sheet" covering proposed rule changes.

But how democratic could the system of a Midgard game really be? Tellingly, the first question Drake's player base voted on was "Are you willing to allow the GM to change a rule if it results in an obvious inequity as long as the change is made impartially and proposed in the next ish [issue] of *MF*?" (*MF* 6). The measure passed unanimously; interventions like this would surely be required for the smooth operation of a game. Similarly, Steve Messamer wrote in February 1972 about his plans for a fantasy game based on Midgard wherein "players are free to do as they like in the framework of the rules, the 'rational laws,' which are as loosely formulated as possible. This puts a lot of responsibility on the GM to interpret the rules and determine situations not covered by the rules explicitly. He also makes the players creative (hopefully)" (*SN* 9). The *Kam-Pain* (1974) rules used by the Midgard Ltd. game explicitly summarized a principle called "the GM's Cloak," which empowered the gamesmaster to "freely alter or delete existing rules, and add new ones" because the "rules make no pretensions to completeness or covering every contingency—that's why there is a Gamesmaster."[40] The language of *Kam-Pain* is notable for how unilaterally it bestows on the gamesmaster this authority to shape the rules or improvise new ones—latitude that may remind us of Korns—whereas we might sense in Drake's Midgard II phrasing more collaboration, or negotiation between the referee and the player.

Some of these experiments found little cause to empower the referee. Veterans of the British version of Midgard conceived the game Elsinore, which in 1974 lighted on a play-by-mail collective authorship structure similar to Coventry—but unlike Coventry, the organizer of Elsinore explicitly deemed it a "fantasy game," insisting that despite its lack of a recognizable system, it had crossed that vague boundary between

authorship and play. A contemporary review by Lewis Pulsipher in *Supernova* summarized, "It is very freely structured. Each player writes a story about himself and his activities as a sorcerer, merchant, or whatever in the fantasy world. The GM puts these stories together, printing all but the secret parts, rejecting parts that don't mesh with other stories."[41] The role of the gamesmaster in such games, apart from establishing the initial setting and marshalling players, is effectively editorial, necessary only for reconciling conflicts like those in postal *Diplomacy*; the players collectively wield total power over the state of the game world. In some respects, this was the diametrical opposite of "the GM's Cloak" because the gamesmaster of Elsinore had only the authority to select and curate excerpts from players' contributions.

The slow pace of postal play hampered the growth and viability of Midgard and Elsinore, but it did not prevent numerous attempts to build on their framework.[42] Most of these activities in science-fiction fandom remained quite obscure, so early witnesses of *D&D* ignorant of these precursors and parallels found its character-playing system revolutionary. *D&D* positioned itself in its foreword as a tool for "those whose imaginations know no bounds," for fans of "Howard's Conan Saga" or "Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser" rather than for "those wargamers who lack imagination."[43] In the early, impecunious days of TSR, Gary Gygax relied heavily on pseudofictional articles presenting dramatized accounts of *D&D* game sessions to serve as free advertising, including his stories "The Giant's Bag" (1974) and "Expedition into the Black Reservoir" (1975), which mimic the fantasy fiction that inspired the game.[44] Gygax marketed *D&D* as a wargame but also positioned it from the start as a means to let players participate in and generate stories—recalling the tradition of Wells and Stevenson—as he dearly hoped this would appeal to the huge fan community surrounding fantasy and science fiction. Midgard players were certainly among the earliest adopters; Midgard II and Midgard Ltd. alike began folding *D&D* rules into their systems in 1974.

News of *D&D* spilled over from Arneson's Minneapolis gaming group to local science-fiction fans but first reached the broader fandom through accounts written by early cross-over fans such as Mark Swanson. Swanson epitomized the transitional player who devoted equal time to wargaming and science fiction as he straddled national organizations dedicated to these two cultures in addition to local ones at the university he attended, MIT. For

the benefit of Los Angeles–area science-fiction fans, in November 1974 Swanson wrote up a short narrative concerning his character Helmuth, who is betrayed by his companions, including a certain "Lama Slimke," played by Kevin Slimak (*APL* 497).

Los Angeles fans long versed in Coventry and postal *Diplomacy* were no strangers to hybrid story/game entertainments, but even they puzzled over *D&D*. Swanson's story provoked an intense curiosity in Los Angeles science-fiction fandom, which demonstrates how unfamiliar *D&D*'s intersection of stories and games was. Hearing of it for that first time, Ted Johnstone remarked that "the game sounds fascinating" (*APL* 499). The game's rules, when imported by fans from San Francisco, would find fertile ground in Los Angeles, prompting Lee Gold to write up an account of her introduction to the game in the local fanzine *APA-L* 508. Fred Patton, a longtime community member, reacted with bafflement: "The *Dungeons & Dragons* description is fascinating, but I can't visualize the rules of the game that could result in such moves"; and another fan, June Moffatt, inferred from the expedition reports that "any one of the games makes a good adventure story" (*APL* 509).

D&D combined the plasticity of miniature wargames with the boundless creativity of authorship, which unsurprisingly meant that its experience depended crucially on its implementation—that is, on how referees and players chose to play within its "guidelines." Early adopters in different communities approached play with conflicting expectations about the function of the referee: some projected onto the game the omnipotent, ostensibly impartial referee of wargaming; others saw the almost editorial referee of postal *Diplomacy* and science-fiction fandom games in the tradition of Coventry. Although these communities were not completely isolated from one another, the lack of any early consensus about the referee's duties and authority proved a key catalyst for the disputes that would soon develop.

We can discern in the early literature a fundamental disagreement about the relationship between players, referees, and designers in *D&D*. If the referee is "playing with/against the adventurers," which is it—does the referee have to pick sides? Initially, this debate was about the interpretation of the original design, about identifying and weighing the different ways referees and players preferred to approach such games in practice, but it

quickly began to develop into a more fundamental discussion of what kind of game *D&D* should ideally be.

Early Perceptions of Difference

We might observe that the initial players of *Dungeons & Dragons* divided into two camps—with due caveats about overlapping membership and interests—that reflected the two cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom: there were games people and story people. Although both cultures had experimented with referees operating game worlds for players in various ways, it would not be grossly inaccurate to say that the games culture brought with it some assumptions about adversarial interactions, whereas the story culture focused more on collaboration toward some mutual creative goal. Maybe a science-fiction fan would expect a referee to act as a facilitator, but a wargamer would be unsurprised to find a referee enforcing discipline like a martinet. Early adopters would quickly sense this division, and they became very concerned about which way was the right way.

So, was *D&D* meant to be adversarial or collaborative? We might be tempted to consult the cover of the game and resolve the matter by pointing to the word *wargame* there. It is, however, easy to dismiss this verbiage as the closest approximation the authors could themselves muster, being so steeped in that culture, though they tacitly meant something more expansive. In one of Arneson's first communications to Gygax about the Blackmoor campaign, he stressed how vital a "sadistic referee" was to the experience of the game, and there is no shortage of adversarial accounts of the play of Blackmoor.[45] But for a game that is so plastic, so insistent on being merely "guidelines to follow in designing your own fantastic-medieval campaign," how much weight can authorial intention really carry? *D&D* as a phenomenon was realized largely by its practitioners, the people who sat down to play it. The implementation of *D&D* depended hugely on the backgrounds and interpretations of its players and most of all of its referee.

During the first year of its existence, *D&D* reached only a few thousand players, and those pioneers needed time to develop local norms within their own gaming groups. Because *D&D* is above all a social game, no one

reached an understanding of it in isolation, and players constantly searched for like-minded enthusiasts to recruit for adventures. The outreach of gaming groups and the mingling that happened through conventions and fanzines began to bring groups of players into dialogue with each other— only to discover that they had independently settled on very different practices. "Part of the fun," Los Angeles fan Jack Harness wrote in 1975, "is in discovering some new enclave of players and seeing what they decided to do with the rules, telling them how you interpreted them," and so on (*EM* 21). Many early adopters encountered the game at college, and when they returned to their hometowns for vacation, they might uncover surprisingly different playstyles entrenched there. The controversy initially centered on symptoms rather than root causes: early adopters accused one another of playing games that were either too lenient or too dangerous. Generalizing from these initial reactions to differences in the community, a few trailblazing fans would soon start to position these disagreements as theoretical in nature, assembling a hasty framework for resolving conflicts about the proper approach to play.

In four large cities with communities of early *D&D* adopters—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Boston—cross-pollination proceeded quite rapidly. Each of these major cities boasted lengthy pedigrees in both science-fiction fandom and wargames, and each supported several independent clusters of dedicated players. None, however, was very close to the midwestern roots of *D&D*, where the influence of the game's creators might hold greater sway. In keeping with hobby best practices, these coastal groups began publicly recording the state of their campaigns and hosting visitors unfamiliar with their ways. Many prominent Boston fans experienced *D&D* through the MIT Strategic Games Society, a wargaming club dating back to the mid-1960s; many Los Angeles *D&D* fans organized around the legendary Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, which housed the rules at its clubhouse and spread play reports through its weekly fanzine *APA-L*. Los Angeles science-fiction fan Lee Gold founded the early hobby's most influential monthly journal, *Alarums & Excursions*, in June 1975; about sixth months later, interest was sufficient to warrant MIT veterans Mark Swanson and Glenn Blacow's publishing a similar Boston-area venture, the *Wild Hunt*, which nominally focused on advice for referees.

Through these fanzines, early adopters aspired "to arrive at a truly intelligent version" of the game, in the words of Ted Johnstone (*APL* 523). Although TSR had in 1975 augmented and clarified the *D&D* rules with a first supplement, *Greyhawk*, many players rejected the changes it introduced and began to push back against the authority of its publisher, as immortalized by Mark Swanson's rallying cry from the East Coast in *APA-L* 523: "D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax." Owen Hannifen echoed in mid-1975 from the West Coast that "by now, Gygax is just another dungeon-master" (*AE* 2). So much for authorial intention, but this left authority in short supply, as players who roamed between isolated pockets of gamers soon discovered.
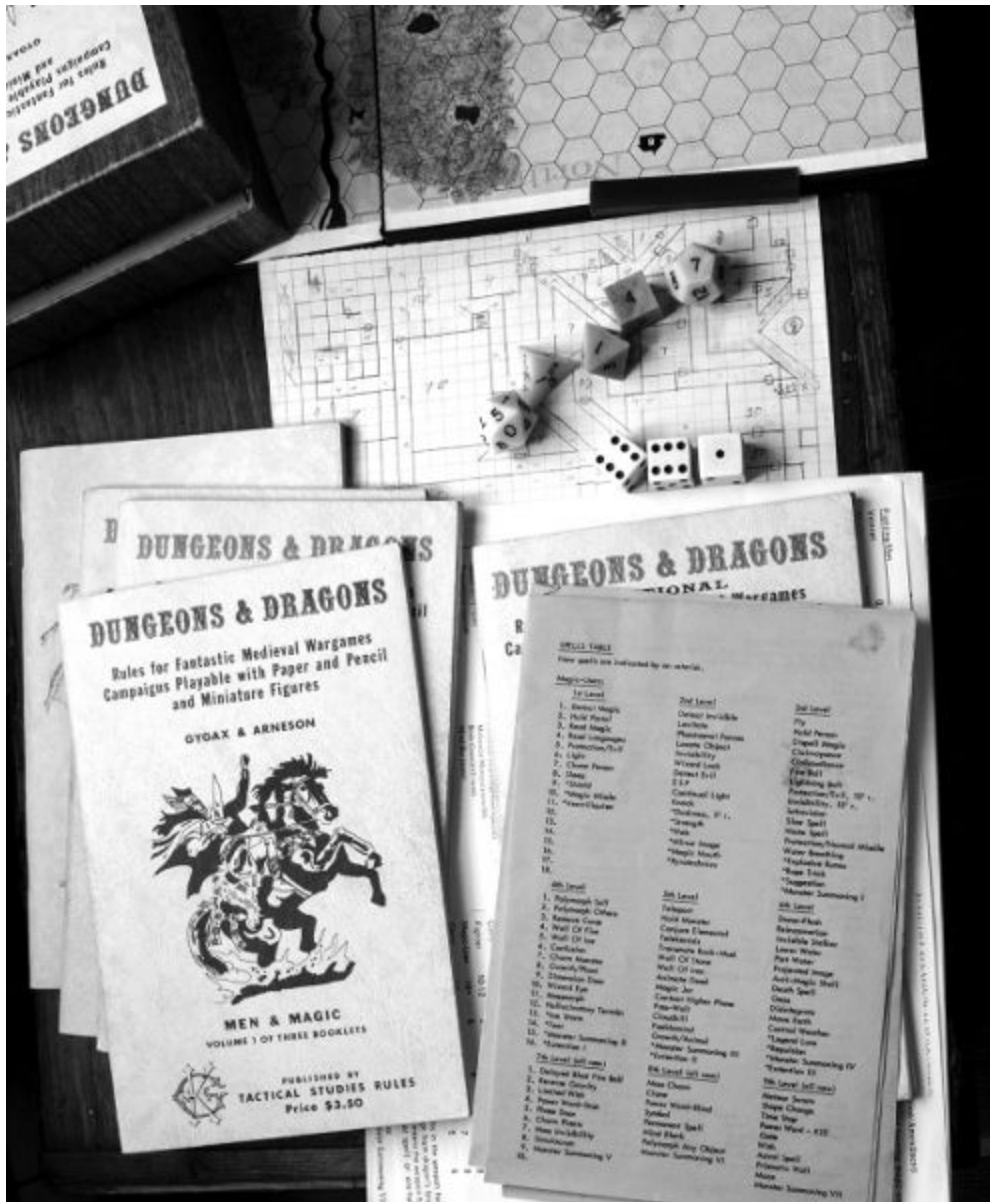
Figure 1.1
Materials for the playing of *Dungeons & Dragons*, circa 1975, including game manuals, dice, maps, and charts.

In the first issue of her fanzine, Gold reported on visiting a nearby *D&D* group at Caltech. This group belonged to the Spartan wargames club, which would soon publish its early *D&D* variant "Warlock" (1975). We might say that Gold came more from the story culture and that she visited a group more invested in the games culture. In their midst, Gold found that, compared to her own group, "the Dungeonmaster is playing much more *against* the characters."[46] Her assessment corroborated Kevin Slimak's

concerns about the problems of antagonism incumbent on the power imbalance between the referee and the players.

The shock of encountering unexpectedly adversarial dungeons and referees echoes throughout the early literature of conventions and the trip reports of itinerant gamers. After Wayne Shaw visited Nicolai Shapero's Bay Area dungeon Stormgate at the North American Science Fiction Convention in 1975, his write-up in *A&E* 5 described a very deadly dungeon, the sort of place where the party went through eight expendable "Button Pusher" nonplayer characters to deal with traps. If you visit Stormgate, Shaw promised, "my Cleric will read your characters' epitaphs." A few issues later, in *A&E* 8, Shapero countered, "Whoever said this business was supposed to be easy? And as I recall your group had less than 40% casualties—which for Stormgate is fairly light. Usually, only about 40% of the original party gets back to the surface from the 7th level." This elicited pushback from Glenn Blacow in Boston, who called that number "unreasonable" (*AE* 10). Blacow would later clarify that a particularly deadly dungeon in Boston belonging to Kevin Slimak killed around half of its experienced visitors—though it conveniently provided easy access to resurrection services (*AE* 14).

The most famous example of early players encountering a surprisingly deadly dungeon is the collective experience at the first Origins convention in 1975, in Gygax's infamous "Tomb of Horrors" tournament, which inspired a later *D&D* module. Designed as a sieve to winnow down large parties of fifteen adventurers to hardy survivors, the Tomb is a gauntlet of arbitrary death traps: collapsing ceilings, spiked pits, poison clouds, merciless ambushes, and unforeseeable disintegrations. Mark Swanson emerged from a botched run disillusioned with Gygax's style as a referee: "Play a Gygax game if you like pits, secret doors, and Dungeon Roulette. Play a game such as in *A&E* if you prefer monsters, talking/arguing/fighting with the chance met characters and a more exciting game" (*AE* 4). Reports like this further eroded confidence in the authority of the game's publisher.

This communal disapprobation of lethality inevitably inspired an equal and opposite form of censure: condemnation of overgenerous referees by hardened players who found some of the dungeons they visited too gentle. For example, the Caltech group, which seemed "brutal" to outsiders, reportedly did not permit players to bring characters from other groups to

their sessions because they refused to accept the experience points awarded by more lenient referees. This may sound draconian, but consider a report in February 1976 from Long Beach in *A&E* 8 by Steve McIntosh, which casually mentioned that he ran a 250th-level Magic-user and that another player in his group ran a 1,000th-level character—just two dozen months after *D&D* was first published. Blacow helpfully estimated that a 1,000th-level character would require on the order of 100 million experience points and that even making 20,000 experience points per week in dungeon crawls (no trivial feat) would only yield the necessary sum after a century (*AE* 10). He added that the highest-level Magic-user playing in his own Edwyr dungeon was 9th level, and this after nearly two years of play.

Thus, a good amount of early commentary in *A&E* that did not bemoan the lethality of visited dungeons instead lashed out at the "grossness" of foreign gaming groups in which characters seemingly amassed unchecked power. Tales of outlandish rewards trivialized the accomplishments of more modest gamers, and so for many fans they struck a personal chord that could trigger personal attacks. But for the publishers of *D&D*, this augured poorly in more fundamental ways. As alarming as it was to see disputes among players threatening the social networks necessary to spread and enjoy their product, TSR's owners had a more practical challenge: they hoped to sell future supplements, but they had to tailor those rules to specific levels of adventurers. Their *Greyhawk* supplement provided spells and systems to accommodate Magic-users of the 22nd level, up from the 16th in their original game, but what was the prospect of marketing to a fragmented community where some characters never rose to even to 10th level, but others skyrocketed to the 250th level?

In a vein similar to Slimak's maxim that "different people prefer different types of games," Gygax himself urged a collaborative approach in his essay "*D&D* Is Only as Good as the DM" in 1976: "While adventurers in a D&D campaign must grade their play to their referee, it is also incumbent upon the Dungeonmaster to suit his campaign to the participants" (*SR* 2 (2)). But from there he pivoted to censure those referees who succumbed to the temptation to turn "dungeons into a veritable gift shoppe of magical goodies," where "experience points are heaped upon the undeserving heads of players" who quickly rise scores of levels. Casting the referee as solely responsible is in keeping with Gygax's public statements about the intended role of the referee, who "will act as arbiter of all fortune from

henceforward, and his word will be absolute law" (*EU* 4/5). Gygax now inverted the concern that Slimak expressed about abusing the power of the referee: rather than taking an overly antagonistic stance toward the players, the referee can be too eager to make the game satisfying by doling out excessive rewards.

Gygax encouraged referees to fall back on the impartiality of dice: "If a favorite player stupidly puts himself into a situation where he is about to be killed, let the dice tell the story and KILL him" (*SR* 2 (2)). This encouragement to "let the dice tell the story" might serve well as a wargamer's motto, though Gygax backpedaled from this lethality slightly, conceding that at times "Divine Intervention" on the referee's part should preserve worthy adventurers—but only those who have earned it. How that karmic justice should be allotted, Gygax left to the referee's discretion, like much else in the game.[47]

Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes (1976), an official supplement assigning classes, levels, abilities, and hit points to deities in the same manner as *D&D* characters, declared in its foreword an explicit purpose of trying "to reach the 'Monty Hall' DMs" who run "'giveaway' campaigns" in order shame them into rewarding characters more parsimoniously.[48] Players quickly countered that the blame for level inflation rested solely on TSR; Caltech referee Nick Smith retorted, "The original *D&D* rules provide a system whereby characters can advance indefinitely (as it says in Book I itself), and *Greyhawk* does its best to make it easy" (*AE* 14). Indeed, the presence of a system in which characters were able to increase in power necessarily steered players toward progression as the goal of play. But Glenn Blacow concurred with TSR that there was a problem when "a lot of games are so magic-rich that your ultra-level characters are so well-equipped that they outclass the gods in special abilities" (*AE* 16).

Perceptive readers may have observed that Blacow, an unusually prolific early commentator, railed against lethality in one breath but then against generosity in the next. This provoked a sharp rejoinder from Shapero: "Look, man, you can't have it both ways. On the one hand, you say you want to avoid having the game turn into a more or less automatic moving players upwards, and on the other hand, you scream in agony over 60% causality figures" (*AE* 11). But Blacow defended his position as one that avoids extremes and seeks the proper middle ground—as his views

developed further, we shall find Blacow's search for this balance looming large in early role-playing game theory. By the beginning of 1976, Blacow already had enough perspective on the matter to include in the first issue of *Wild Hunt* a "Philosophy Note: some Dungeon Masters take the position that they are trying to help the characters gain wealth, rank, etc., while others brag about the kill ratio in their games. I've had some people tell me Edwyr was far too dangerous, while some others have griped that it's too soft." Notably, this was also the subject of Blacow's three-page essay "Balance in D&D," which he circulated through *A&E* 12. Without balance, Blacow argued, "a campaign can deteriorate into either a gigantic giveaway or into a continual slaughter of player characters." The essay struck a chord among early readers: it would be quickly reprinted in issue 20 of the British zine *News from Bree*, the first evidence that there was an audience for critical literature about this intriguing new game.

Blacow's essay "Balance in D&D" refocused discussion in *A&E* onto the fundamental questions of the degree to which players and referees should compete or collaborate—but the division would persist. Sherna Burley responded in the next issue that "playing D&D as a competition between DM and player can result in some ugly scenes. The DM holds too many of the high cards. When I DM, I'm out to give the players a good adventure, with rewards or penalties fairly meted out. I don't have anything to win or lose myself except for the satisfaction of having been a fair and just Deity." She then echoed Ted Johnstone's maxim "D&D is not a zero-sum game." But Lew Wolkoff replied that "D&D is a mental challenge, the DM vs. the players. There's more of them, but he gets to set things up in advance" (*AE* 14). He clarified that "the DM's challenge, though, isn't to wipe out the expedition. He/she is supposed to prepare the field so the players know they've been in a fight, but where the challenge was in using their own abilities—not dice or gross treasure—to survive." Fervor for one approach or the other made it hard to gain the perspective to see matters from both sides: Charlie Luce summarized the situation in 1976 with "I have seen in *A&E* quite a bit of what I call the 'One True Way' syndrome" (*AE* 13).

The nascent *D&D* community faced a significant crisis over these perceived differences in play style, but the intuition that a particular game was either too competitive or too cooperative was only a symptom of a deeper divide among practitioners—a divide we might say that resulted from an ambiguity fundamental to the design of the game, which the hobby

then still struggled to articulate. But as Thornton's player typology suggested, the wargaming community was long aware of such divisions in the community, that outside the mainstream of "fun" wargamers there were people who wanted to steer games toward excesses of aggressive competition or dispassionate simulation. Determining the root causes of these differences would become the first and most urgent task of role-playing game theory, and the early exploration of these differences exposed tensions built in to the most basic structure of the game.

2

How to Play

Fundamentally, how were you supposed to play the original *Dungeons & Dragons*? What form did the participation of players take? The text published in 1974 gives us no shortage of rules. With imposing pages of charts and exposition, the books illustrate how to generate characters and underworlds and how to dice against tables to derive random encounters, decide combat results, and disburse hard-won plunder—but they provide strikingly little instruction on how to integrate those activities into the moment-to-moment play of a game.

In a traditional board wargame, say, players take turns. A rulebook for the game would explain how turns break down into phases of unit movement and combat. Some games specify that a turn represents a specific interval of game time, which in strategic wargames might be months—each *Diplomacy* turn represents half a year—but in tactical wargames can equate to minutes or, as in Korns, even just a few seconds. But the *D&D* rules do not instruct players to take turns; the game retains the word *turn*, but defines it solely as a measure of time for deriving movement rates and similar calculations salient to a tactical situation. In the absence of turn sequences and without the familiar constraints of boards or pieces, it was not at all obvious from poring through the books what the participants in a *D&D* game actually were supposed to do. As Ted Johnstone put it at the dawn of the hobby, "It requires comprehension of lots of scattered elements throughout the rules to begin to get even a vague idea of how the D&D game is structured" (*APL* 511).

At the most basic level, players participate in the game of *D&D* by talking to the referee. In lieu of any overview of its operation, *D&D* tries to teach by example, through a sample transcript of a dungeon adventure that records a spoken exchange between a referee and a "caller"—albeit without anywhere defining what a "caller" is. The two hold a conversation in which they might be said to take turns making statements: the caller proposes the actions of a party comprising several characters, and then the referee describes the results of attempting those actions. This structure has obvious

precedents in both of the two cultures—free *Kriegsspiel* and collaborative authorship—but the presentation of a transcript in lieu of a turn sequence borrows most directly from Korns's *Modern War in Miniature*, which indeed opens with just such a transcript rather than stashing it toward the back of the rules, as *D&D* does.

When daily newspapers breathlessly transcribed the Fischer–Spassky chess matches in 1972, each reported move took up the same amount of chess notation. But unlike the turns taken by traditional game adversaries, there is little consistency or parity in the length or composition of the spoken "moves" in *D&D*: as in any conversation, the utterances of each side are as long and complex as necessary to serve the speaker's purpose. During a period of exploration, the referee in the transcript rattles off movement over time in staccato 10-foot increments and enumerates potential directions the party might explore, while the caller navigates with curt and direct instructions such as "Go south." Both speakers phrase their statements as contributions to a common story, as if they are taking turns adding sentences to a fictional work in progress—in the course of the transcript, neither challenges the other's authority to make any utterance. The most obvious difference in the nature of their statements is the pronouns: the referee throughout addresses the party in the second-person, while the caller generally describes the actions of the party in the first-person plural. For example, after the referee informs the caller that "there is a door to your left across the passage on a northwest wall," the caller submits the action: "Listen at the door—three of us."[1]

The conversation transcript in *D&D* is punctuated by die rolls, which seem to regulate both the information the referee shares with the party and the flow of events. When the party listens at a door, the dice induce the referee to deliver terse reports such as "You hear nothing" or "You hear shuffling." At certain intervals, die rolls also determine if "wandering monsters" in the underworld confront the party. When the party bursts in on a group of gnolls, the transcript glosses over the die rolls of combat with the simple placeholder "melee conducted" in order to focus on the victorious party's subsequent efforts to collect the vanquished foes' treasure—and it is here that the true power of a dialogue becomes apparent. By way of ascertaining what the room looks like, the caller sets the party to work with statements such as "We're examining the walls, ceiling, floor, and contents of the room itself." The referee then provides a detailed description of the

gnolls' lair, and through a process of steady inquiry into the details of the space, all phrased as specific actions such as "Each trunk will be opened by one of us" and then "Check the trunk for secret drawers or a false bottom," the intrepid caller uncovers hidden plunder.

This example of *D&D* play illustrates something that its designers apparently found so obvious that it went without saying—that the game takes place in a dialogue. This was no doubt novel to many who chanced on the rules. But the roots of these practices in the legacy of wargaming meant that some would recognize their source: Jack Harness, one of the early adopters in science-fiction fandom in Los Angeles, noted that "the Dungeonmaster is sort of a cross between a Kriegspiel referee . . . and God and His Chosen People." Watching Lee Gold run *D&D*, he was perhaps reminded of *Kriegsspiel* because "Lee rolled a die repeatedly and observed it before answering questions sometimes."[2] Twin Cities gamers in Arneson's circle had exhumed the *Kriegsspiel* principles of the nineteenth century from Totten's *Strategos*; in 1880, Totten knew well that that the fundamental structure of play would not be obvious without an explicit description of the interaction between player and referee:

> The Referee, therefore, should generally require a positive statement of intention, as the basis of his decision; the attempt must be willed into operation by the player. It is not until then that the Referee may properly exercise his functions. He may then duly consider all the pros and cons. Losses, Tactical, Strategical, Topographical, and Accidental Difficulties etc. must be calculated and examined, and, the crucial moment having in due time arrived, as indicated by the circumstances of the particular case, he should make his decision, and, if desirable, state his reason, which, however, etiquette must protect from dispute.[3]

In this *Strategos* passage, we find something of an informal sequence for each effective "turn" in a *Kriegsspiel* dialogue: a direct account of how play is structured, something that *D&D* sorely lacked. A *Strategos* player must first furnish to the referee "a positive statement of intention" through which an attempted action is "willed into operation by the player." With this

statement of intention, the referee can proceed to the second phase of the turn by consulting the system, including any necessary calculations and die rolls. Finally, in the third phase, the referee decides and reports the result of the intended action, which the referee may justify with a rationale that the rules "protect from dispute"—the referee's decision may not be contested. Based on the resulting circumstances, the player must then at the start of the next turn formulate a new "statement of intention" for the referee, and so the cycle continues for the duration of play.

Games in the *Kriegsspiel* tradition allow players a qualitatively different sort of agency than they enjoy in a traditional board wargame or a game like chess.[4] A chess player who lifts pieces and moves them across a board exercises direct and highly conspicuous control over game events—even if the consequences of a given move may not be easily predictable. But when Reiswitz transposed moves into written orders and then Verdy du Vernois further adapted them into conversational snippets, a layer of mediation formed between players and their actions. Now a referee must parse and interpret the verbalized intentions of the player, reporting results that may be surprising in a different way than a simple chess blunder. For the *Kriegsspiel* referee, this power of interpretation brings the opportunity to construe vague orders in ways the commander never intended, which may lead to disastrous consequences on the imagined battlefield and a lesson hopefully learned.

But this combination of dialogue and interpretation also brought the opportunity for tremendous versatility: when compared to the rigidity of a traditional move–countermove board game like chess, it can hardly be overstated. Anything the referee can describe verbally can become an element of the game, and anything a player can articulate as a statement of intention can potentially translate into an action. This innovation proved useful enough that it influenced many later works with little connection to the original *Kriegsspiel* tradition. We hear an echo of it even in the way Patterson described his postal Midgard game in January 1971, in describing the responsibility of the "umpire or gamesmaster, to whom the players send their moves and from whom by return they learn the results of their actions."

Hobby wargamers of the 1970s not directly acquainted with Prussian *Kriegsspiel* literature might still have recognized gameplay with this

structure thanks to Korns. In an early wargaming fanzine review of *D&D*, Arnold Hendrick could in 1974 read the turn structure between the lines, describing the play of the game as follows: "The referee is informed of each action, and after consulting the maps he has made, the basic tables and information in the booklets, and his own imagination, gives the player a response" (*CO* 6 (6)). Hendrick predicted that "those who remember Korns's *Modern War in Miniature* will see the parallel" to *D&D*. Korns's referees served to isolate players in the situation of the game, as his referees were "the only ones who need to be familiar with the rules," and so too can a *D&D* referee let players state intentions without any insight into how the system would be executed.

The Cambridge University student Sandy Eisen described in the beginning of 1975 his own introduction to *D&D*: "I found the first few games intensely enjoyable and exciting; I really lived the part and my 'willing suspension of disbelief' found myself there—in the dungeon. My actions (and of course my thoughts about these actions) were dictated by real-life considerations and no thought of wargame mechanics entered my head to distract me from the 'events' going on" (*EU* 6–8). But, for Eisen, eventually learning the game system was a source of acute disappointment. "Inevitably when you are aware of the rules, you play out each situation with an eye to obtaining best odds/chances for survival, etc., considering the rules rather than the situation you are in." In fact, Eisen felt that it impaired his experience of the game so much that he vowed, "To avoid this I have decided that when I design and run my own dungeon I will not permit the players (people who do not know about D&D yet) to discover the rules. Of course this will put them at a great disadvantage, and I feel I may have to put over quite a bit of information in the form of legend/folklore/tales so that they will have some idea of what they are up against and what to try, but all without disclosing the game mechanics."

In some respects, Eisen's vow falls in line with Korns's thinking about "isolating" players from the rules; that Eisen recognized this isolation put players at a disadvantage is perhaps a clue to how players could find certain referee styles adversarial. But where Eisen departed from wargame precedents was in the purpose of this deprivation, the property that he hoped to recover: his feeling as a novice player that he "lived the part" and, in some sense, that he found himself through suspension of disbelief "in the dungeon." It was the power of the dialogue with the referee that made it

possible for Eisen's actions to be solely "dictated by real-life considerations" with "no thought of wargame mechanics." Nor was Eisen the only one in 1975 who valued "living the part," a sort of theatrical understanding of *D&D*, as Jack Harness could already attest: "The play's the thing, not the winning of the battle. It's impromptu improvisational theater, where all the audience are players, including the Dungeonmaster" (*EM* 21). To understand how a game can deliver this feeling, we need to explore the sort of agency that players have when they play *D&D*.

Wishful Thinking

It took a little time for games in the *D&D* tradition to incorporate rule language explaining how the dialogue worked. In TSR games, teaching by example remained for some time the preferred method of introducing the fundamental structure of the game: the company's follow-up, *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), also furnishes a sample dialogue, one that gives more detail on combat and event resolution. *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976) provides its own "Example of a Referee Moderating an Adventure," which further clarifies some of the fundamentals of the process. It gives a long-overdue definition of the "caller" as "the player representing the group." Although callers pronounce the statements of intention, we learn from *Metamorphosis Alpha* that these calls are informed by group discussion; in a few cases, "the caller momentarily consults with the other players on what the group should do" until "the group has reached a consensus." When the system so requires, the referee consults the dice: "after he finished the rolls, he announces the results—or the results discernible to the players."[5] That final caveat recalls how Korns envisioned the role of the referee in 1966, where players "know only what the judge tells them that their [characters] can see or hear" instead of the imperceptible causes of those ostensions.

Outside of TSR, published games building on *D&D* incorporated the dialogue more explicitly into the rules. *Monsters! Monsters!* (1976) gives something like a formal turn sequence, and in the first phase of it "the characters tell the game master what direction they go, what actions they take, etc. As they progress, the GM tells them what they see, hear, or otherwise sense." In this phase "the characters may question the GM if they want more detail."[6] The participants may exchange several such statements

before actions that constitute a full turn of time have been taken; at the end of that interval, the referee executes a number of system functions that round out the rest of the phases, such as checking for wandering enemies and applying any healing effects. *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976) simply and succinctly instructs the referee to start a game session by kicking off the dialogue: "Tell them where they are to begin with. From then on, the players tell you what they want to do and you tell them the results of their action."[7]

Sometimes, for various reasons, players do not get to do what they want. Although Totten famously promised in *Strategos* that "anything can be attempted," he did not mean everything should be. He qualified that dictum in the same paragraph with the principle that "the advisability of an attempt is another thing, and one that it is the object of the War Game to make evident to all concerned by the results."[8] Any statement of intention might turn out to have been ill advised, and Totten stressed that the referee must make players experience the consequences of misguided or misstated intentions. His wargame first and foremost served as a training tool for soldiers, and as such its referee had a corrective responsibility, one that might sometimes prove difficult to distinguish from a game opponent's antagonism. The referee of *Strategos* is perhaps best thought of as a teacher: although a teacher can adopt an adversarial posture toward students—and vice versa—both are nominally participating in a collaborative process. The referee, by establishing the general situation of a wargame, constructs a sort of test and then judges players' performance on a moment-to-moment basis through their statements of intention.

D&D inherited something of this didactic responsibility from the wargames it imitated. Designing a dungeon has a certain kinship to designing a classroom test, in the sense that Kevin Slimak surely meant when he said that a "dungeon designer sets the problems for his adventurers and they try to solve them." An adversarial teacher can always devise an unfair test that students will surely fail, and, similarly, some referees take pride in devising tests they know more than half of players will flunk. The *D&D* guidance on dungeon design cautions, "There is no question that a player's character could easily be killed by falling into a pit thirty feet deep or into a shallow pit filled with poisonous spikes, and this is quite undesirable in most instances," advice that the designer of the "Tomb of Horrors" might well have heeded. The rules instead recommend specifying

"as many mystifying and dangerous areas as is consistent with a reasonable chance for survival,"[9] just as a teacher amenable to the edification of students will design tests that challenge pupils yet still provide opportunities for the worthy to excel.

Because *D&D* transpires in a conversation, assessing a player's worthiness hinges on statements of intention. Figuring out what to say and how to say it is fundamentally the measure of a player's skill: a canny referee handles a statement of intention based on what a player states rather than on what a player might have tacitly intended. Nothing better exemplifies this adversarial fidelity to player statements in *D&D* than the treatment of wishes. A magical wish presents players with a rare opportunity to share in the referee's world-shaping authority, but wishes also have a proverbial tendency to backfire. The wish rules in *D&D* place the entire burden for articulating the intended outcome on the player, clearly directing the referee to exploit ambiguities in a wish's wording so that "a wish . . . could be fulfilled without benefit to the one wishing."[10]

In practice, a wish becomes something of a contest between players and referees, where referees punish careless players for lax phrasing. In the original game, wishes could be granted only by magic rings and swords, but the publication of the *Greyhawk* supplement in 1975 brought with it the "Limited Wish" and "Wish" Magic-user spells as well as items such as the "Deck of Many Things," which could dispense wishes to lucky players. Play reports from 1975 demonstrate a particular consternation regarding wishes and the way referees managed them, one that is emblematic of the broader nature of the dialogue itself.

John Brennick related an early example of the adversarial resolution of wishes in *A&E* 8 at the end of 1975. Brennick described how two of the three wishes bound to a particular ring were interpreted by a referee who clearly disapproved of the party's acquisitiveness: "We went outside the town walls and wished for a Vorpal Blade. This wouldn't come, so I wished for a pair of mated young adult Pegasi. Soon a great fog came out of a nearby forest. When it was about ten yards away, a man came out, riding a Pegasus with another following, swinging a Vorpal Blade. He attacked Hrothgar and cut off his head before Hrothgar even had a chance to swing back with his Holy Sword!" Fortunately, the decapitator was swiftly dispatched by the remainder of the party, and Hrothgar was made whole by

an obliging Cleric. Similar accounts of referees interpreting a wish for material gain as an invitation to manifest the sort of powerful foe likely to possess such extravagant goods filled the fanzines of the day. Wishes were made to be spoiled, the conventional wisdom went. "You're supposed to crock wishes," Blacow summarized bluntly in *A&E* 11. "Not only is it traditional," a fact corroborated by numerous fairy-tale protagonists insufficiently careful what they wished for, but "it's the universe's way of easing strain on itself. You give them exactly what they ask for, not what they want but can't figure out how to say."

Ultimately, every "positive statement of intention" that is "willed into operation by the player" in the course of the *D&D* dialogue is a sort of disenchanted wish, which the referee must interpret and weigh before deciding its impact on the game world. Sometimes the referee must simply disallow the stated intention: in the course of navigating a dungeon, a caller could always propose that the party "go south" when that is impossible, and the referee would then be obligated to report something like "you can't go that way." But the versatility of the dialogue introduces the possibility of far more verbose and ambiguous statements of intention, which in stressful situations players might struggle to articulate clearly—it might not be obvious how to say what they want. That makes it inevitable that the referee will sometimes misinterpret or correct or reject the intentions of the player.

In 1977, a new game in the tradition of *D&D* called *Space Patrol* set the statement of intention on a pedestal as the fundamental operation in the game: "The basic rule of play is that of statement" by the players. But reflecting a few years of experience in the hobby, *Space Patrol* has to provide some caveats around what qualifies as a viable statement of intention. "It is not enough for the player to draw his pistol and then say, 'I should fire at it.'" The player must instead make a more affirmative statement; the referee should reject vague statements that express no clear direction. Correspondingly, *Space Patrol* must also admonish the referee to "never assume anything about the actions of the players. Nothing happens unless the players declare it."[11] This careful language surely reacted against problems already witnessed around the table, such as referees inferring unstated player intentions.

But statements of intention once uttered become irrevocable: "Once a player declares an action, that decision is beyond recall and the player must

suffer the consequences," *Space Patrol* ominously warns.[12] *Sir Pellinore's Game* (1979) similarly insists that a declared action cannot be undone: "Once a character says he is going to try to do something he must go through with it. If he says, 'I'm going to shoot an arrow,' and he misses and hits a friend he can't take it back."[13] Even actions with the best intentions can have unforeseen consequences, and as players will these attempts into operation, they must be careful what they wish for. Totten stressed that the educational value in playing his game is to reveal such blunders—sometimes the teacher should fail the student. Game designers thus understood the role of the referee, following the wargame referee of old, to encompass tutoring players in judicious fantasy dungeon exploration. Reiswitz hoped to teach officers to write clear orders; a *D&D* referee grades players on the circumspect dictation of wishes, whether they have the backing of magic or not.

In this light, it is plain how players might perceive a referee as a sort of opponent and indeed how referees might surmise that their own mandate included strictly—sometimes even uncharitably—interpreting statements of intention put forward by players. Much of the competition that early players perceived between referees and players has its roots in this instructional legacy of wargaming, the test grading inherent in the dialogue. But referees enjoyed the latitude to fulfill this responsibility with either lenity or cruelty, and although the more draconian referees surely alienated gentler gamesters, virtually all gamesmasters reported that they strove to achieve balance as they saw it.

How close did these practices come to what the game's authors intended? Gary Gygax would write in *SF&F Journal* 87 in 1976 that he saw *D&D* as a game of "interaction between the players and Dungeonmaster, and it is as challenging and varied as they are. The two factions alternately act as sounding boards." That neutral term *interaction* locates the game as neither a collaboration nor a competition; it is simply a discussion in which the two sides take turns acting as "sounding boards" for one another. Although the referee effectively makes the first move because "the referee creates the basic area in which the players act," Gygax stressed that an alert referee "will temper his own particular wishes with the tastes of the playing group," a gesture of accommodation rather than aggression. But Gygax did see something like a competition in how the referee must continually refine the game world in order to test players: "As they learn of this creation, and seek

to outwit and out-imagine him, the Dungeonmaster must make further efforts to challenge the participants."

Although we should hesitate to represent Gygax's view of the referee's relationship to the player as an entirely adversarial one, the game was for him a battle of wits. The differences in approaches to *D&D* perceived by early adopters call into question how fair a referee—the "arbiter of all fortune," as Gygax put it—would allow that battle to be. The play of the game exposed a tension at its core, perhaps a flaw, relating to how much influence the players' statements of intention truly have over the course of events.

Deciding for You

The dialogue at the core of *Dungeons & Dragons* would hardly serve as fair grounds for a contest were players unable to craft their own statements of intention. But due to a variety of factors, including the nebulous role of the "caller," some players might not always enjoy that privilege. The exact degree of participation players really enjoy in the game is largely a matter of referee discretion.

The play transcript in the *D&D* rules takes place entirely between the referee and a single caller, so we might fairly say that responsibility for crafting a statement of intention in that example resides solely with one player rather than with any other members of the party. Players would offer any necessary input to the caller during the course of each effective turn in the dialogue, and the caller would translate these into a proposed action. Playing with a caller meant that novices could ease into the game through something close to spectatorship: Barry Gold suggested to a prospective player that in practice "you will find your character being played by the party leader until you get enough understanding to call for yourself. Like many other games, D&D is easier to learn if you first watch a few games" (*APL* 513).

So the presence of a caller meant that players might have little practical agency in a *D&D* game: they might never formulate statements of intention for themselves. For experienced players, this caused predictable frustration. George Phillies noted at the beginning of 1976 that when it came to appointing a caller to run a party, "'run' of course means different things to

different people. My own taste is that each person says what he is actually doing" (*WH* 1). He recalled playing in a party where the caller ordered that Phillies's Magic-user and a fellow spellcaster move into melee with a wounded orc: "I objected, and moved back, but the other MU accepted that the leader of the party could do this. How one does things depends somewhat on the amount of initiative that people have."

When Mark Swanson participated in the famous "Tomb of Horrors" tournament at Origins I in 1975, he seized the position of the caller of his fifteen-person party because only "four of the fifteen had any previous experience" with *D&D* (*AE* 4). Although Swanson promptly "announced the imposition of military discipline," in practice he found that even novice players sometimes discovered hidden reserves of initiative. At one point during the adventure, when he had decided for the party "it was time to charge through all together" into another room, he noted that "our Patriarch and the 7th level Dwarf decide to stay put" in defiance of his instructions as a caller. After other players had spectated long enough, Swanson reported that "the rest of the party had now gotten the idea and ordered their characters around to a limited degree."

In very large parties, even ones made up of experienced players, callers could bring welcome order to groups that might otherwise become bogged down with chatter and mutual recrimination. Virginia Bauer gave an account in the spring of 1975 of how she "found if you have more than five or six players—not characters—players, there is too much nattering, bickering, and confusion! A Lawful party of ten or eleven becomes Chaotic!" (*APL* 520). However, she still insisted on polling individual party members for their actions; the "leader of the expedition should state at the beginning of the expedition that we should talk in turn, when asked by the leader what our character(s) will do at a given moment." Some referees had only a limited tolerance for intraparty discussions and disputes; many recommended, as Robert Hollander did in *A&E* 3, that "too much standing around in one place and chattering should double the chances for a wandering monster."

Referees could shock dawdling players into action with a surprise incursion of monsters, but the referee's dominance over game events also meant that the referee could simply advance an encounter without any player's input. In *A&E* 12, Charles McGrew sadly observed of his

hometown, that "in Raleigh, most DMs allow a basically infinite time of decision (the players always decide in under two seconds or so, but that's not the point) during which time one assumes the monsters freeze in mid-charge or mid-breath and wait for the group to bring forth their best weapons and fighters to ward off the threat." McGrew found such leniency unrealistic, so he recommended that referees "give the players a time limit for their decision." He then gave an example dialogue transcript in which a bumbling caller proposes a succession of unworkable actions, only to finally vacillate, "Well . . . uh," at which point the referee interjects, "Well here are the orcs." We can infer a similar instruction to referees of *Metamorphosis Alpha*, where in its sample transcript of a stressful situation "the referee pauses, awaiting the responses of the players and noting their quickness in acting in the face of this sudden danger."[14]

Early reports suggest that many referees who strictly managed the clock treated the lack of a timely statement of intention as a sort of forfeiture: they wanted to force players to make decisions as quickly as characters would. Sheldon Linker from UCLA reported, "Something I have tried recently that seems to work well is to give players six seconds per melee-round decisions. This approximates actual timing, necessitating the player to think as fast as he would have to in the actual situation. If, by the end of the melee-round, the player has not yet decided on a move, then that melee-round is defaulted" (*AE* 12). A key property of this real-time requirement for statements of intention is that it fixes an interval of time that any statement should cover: it must describe what the character proposes to do over the next six seconds, and any action that would take longer to accomplish may be rejected by the referee or at best be split into segments and completed on an installment plan. Just as a wargame approximates the experience of command in war, so this approach to the dialogue strives to approximate the need for snap decisions that an adventurer would encounter in the underworld.

Linker extended this principle to players who voiced challenges to the authority of the referee instead of statements of intention. He ran a sample dialogue in that same article: "Ref: 'Four more archers come through the doors. What are your actions?'. Player: 'Wait a minute, I still think that back around that last corner there should have only been . . .' Ref: 'You have taken no action this melee round. The following people have been hit . . .'" (*AE* 12).

Nicolai Shapero in the next issue of *A&E* spoke from similar experience: "The DMs I tend to get involved with require quick action. It tends to be, 'Alright this is what you see, you have ten seconds to consider—what do you do?" Sean Cleary reported in *A&E* 14 that the rule that "the players have ten seconds to think of something" also prevailed in Boston, where he, Mark Swanson, Glenn Blacow, and Kevin Slimak, among others, had adopted it. In these games, the dialogue became something more like an interrogation conducted by the referee, with its urgent refrains of "What are your actions?" and "What do you do?," which must be met in timely fashion by a thoughtful statement of intention, or else the players would be reduced to nonparticipants, mere spectators to the unfortunate events that follow.

Sometimes no player had any say in what characters would do, such as when the system dictated that characters had to take certain actions or when players proposed statements of intention that contradicted the rules. As early as 1975, Lee Gold had already grasped that "there are some times that a dungeonmaster should legitimately overrule a person's call for his character" (*APL* 520). Gold gave two prominent examples: one where the character wields a magic sword with a high ego, in which case it is the sword, as directed by the referee, rather than the player that will decide certain courses of action for the character. The second is when a "character has been charmed/held by a spellcaster and the player refuses to obey the spellcaster's commands," a case where Gold insisted the referee should intervene—she considered this an instance of "general pigheadedness" on the player's part. Along these lines, she related an anecdote from play about a Fighting-man subject to a Confusion spell who, according to a system die roll, should have attacked his own party. His player instead proposed that his left hand was fighting his own right hand, hoping to persuade the referee that this fulfilled the letter of the law—wishful thinking, it turned out. Here, Gold commented, "the dungeonmaster simply stated that Frank's character was attacking and chose who, since Frank wasn't up to confronting the fact he had been spellbound."

Outside of open insubordination, players might also provide statements of intention that are not actionable, along the lines of the example "I should fire at it" from *Space Patrol*. Flexible as the dialogue is, a player could phrase statements in any number of ways that no referee could translate into a result. The game *What Price Glory?!* (1978) illustrates the problem

explicitly: "Although a player is free to attempt anything, this doesn't give him a license to be vague in describing how he will attempt it. If a player merely says, 'I'm going to try to become king,' and doesn't tell how he will try to accomplish it, his statement is meaningless."[15]

In part, the difficulty with a statement of intention such as "I'm going to try to become king" is that it is misaligned with the time interval that the dialogue assumes for the adjudication of actions. The refrain "What do you do?" is seeking a proposal for how the player or party will occupy some vaguely scoped but short period of time. In combat, that might mean just six seconds, as Linker recommended, but *D&D* established a widely followed precedent for supporting different time scales that apply to different modes of the game. In the overworld travel mode, each turn lasts a day, whereas in the underworld exploration mode a turn is just ten minutes, but during combat time compresses into mere rounds. Korns, for example, tuned statements in his dialogue to represent just two seconds of character actions. A statement of intention had to represent something achievable in the implicit timeframe of the dialogue. But, more significantly, "I'm going to try to become king" is a statement that the system of a game like *D&D* simply has no means to adjudicate.

Resolution

In a section called "How to Referee an Expedition," *Sir Pellinore's Game* offers a sample diagnosis of failures that can arise when translating statements of intention into actions. Although it stresses that a referee must "let the players have freedom of decision," it furthermore instructs, "Make the player tell you exactly what his character does. 'I'm going to escape,' isn't good enough. How is he going to escape? Is he going to dig a tunnel? Ambush a guard? How does he hit the guard?"[16] *Pellinore* directs the referee to challenge an impracticable statement of intention and to compel the player to refine it into actionable steps or events that the system can adjudicate. This process might, as the example shows, require multiple exchanges, but once a player identifies how he or she intends to do something—say, to hit the guard—that action should be resolvable by the system.

The question of whether a statement of intention requires or even admits of resolution by the system—which here means recourse to a quantified model and usually to a die roll—must depend on both the sorts of actions that the system covers and the referee's interpretive powers. Sometimes it is obvious that the baseline rules can resolve an action. The sample play transcript in *D&D* incorporates die-roll checks that result from various intentions expressed by the caller, such as listening at doors or attempting to force doors open. A die roll to determine the success of both of those activities is stipulated in the baseline *D&D* rules; for example, "doors must be forced open by strength, a roll of a 1 or 2 indicating the door opens."[17] But affirmative rules of this form are rare in the original books, and they cover only a limited set of actions, mostly ones specific to dungeon exploration. Thus, most of the statements of intention that the referee processes in the sample transcript are resolved not by recourse to a die roll but by simple referee fiat: when a party member scours a pile of refuse for any concealed treasure, the referee makes no system check because the original *D&D* rules offer no quantification for determining the success or failure of search attempts, so the referee just relays the result.

Supplements to the *D&D* rules gradually expanded the set of resolvable actions in the baseline system. The first-draft Thief rules, which Gygax circulated around the summer of 1974, introduced percentile skill checks for opening locks, removing traps, moving silently, and hiding in shadows. Shortly after the official publication of the Thief rules in *Greyhawk*, the Ranger class introduced a similar percentile skill check for tracking monsters. *Empire of the Petal Throne* around the same time pioneered a professional background skill system, which could enable a character to attempt useful tasks common to a vocation. In *Empire of the Petal Throne*, all spells have a chance of failure based on the caster's level, and the skill system reuses that percentile check system to determine the chances of success for actions that include creating alchemical potions, recognizing salubrious or poisonous herbs, and persuading with the power of speech. There is no mention of similar chances of success or failure for other professions, such as building ships, so the results of related statements of intention once again devolve to the discretion of the referee. The community quickly adapted the *Petal Throne* profession system for *D&D*; Hendrik Pfeiffer gave his own version in *A&E* 8, which included a new percentage chance for characters with the proper disguise skills to

impersonate someone else, for example. A set of "Birth Tables for *D&D*" in *The Dragon* 3 determined, in addition to background descriptions of parentage and social status, what skills or crafts a starting character might know.

As the actions resolvable by the system proliferated, this naturally encouraged design experiments to consolidate action resolution into a single universal rule. In 1976, Richard J. Schwall observed, "It should be possible to replace the plethora of charts in D&D for combat, saving throws, opening doors, thief skills, etc., with a single unified system for calculating the chance of success for any action" (*AE* 13). From his experience developing his own *D&D* variant, the "Realm Fantastic," Schwall then confirmed, "it is possible, for I have done it." However, Schwall hastily raised some qualms about his own solution. First, he worried that his universal action-resolution mechanism could introduce delays: "D&D mechanics work fast . . . because they are mindlessly simple." This point recalls the familiar distinction between realism and playability in wargame design, where an exhaustive and thoughtful system for simulating events might prove tedious and impracticable in implementation.

More significantly, Schwall intuited that the realism of his universal resolution system was misaligned with the practical needs of play: "D&D is basically a game of such crude approximations in its very nature that it doesn't warrant mechanics accurate enough to be used in a wargame," he suggested. This curious aside makes an important general observation about the purpose of simulating reality in a referee-driven game and about the practical impact of simulation on play. When the referee, in the model of Sandy Eisen, is the only party to the execution of the system—and is thus free to alter the rules at will—players have precious little insight into the factors that determine the resolution of a statement of intention: a referee might have studiously consulted well-considered simulation models or simply blurted out a shrug of an answer. If most actions have at least a chance of failure, and the success or failure of the action is the only feedback on the exercise of the system that the player receives, then the player's experience of the game is unlikely to demonstrably improve with any strenuous labor on the referee's part to calculate action resolutions precisely. The dialogue conceals all this from view: before any physical product was sold as a referee's screen, for hiding maps and paperwork from prying eyes, the reductive power of selective reporting served as the first

and most powerful shield for the referee. Without the precision incumbent on the public use of a board and miniatures, as in wargames, and with only a few unrehearsed words to cement the state of a world, Schwall's misgivings about superfluous accuracy seem well founded.

It is no accident that the concept of a referee guiding the players through a conversation as the "moves" of a game and the concept of a referee exercising discretionary power over the system arose simultaneously in the history of wargaming. The two properties are difficult to decouple. When anything can be attempted and anything can be proposed as a statement of intention, the referee necessarily takes responsibility for improvising new rules to account for unanticipated intentions. Although the *D&D* transcript does not show the referee making up rules on the spot, the *Petal Throne* transcript does, in a parenthetical aside, with the referee "mentally giving the warrior a 20 percent chance of being hit by the tiny poisoned projectiles hidden in the hasp, rolling a die and finding that the spines missed the man."[18] People immediately grasped that this was a tacit rule of *D&D*: in 1976, Howard Mahler would list among the responsibilities of the referee "deciding the chances of success for actions not strictly covered by the rules" (*QQG* 1). The rules could not anticipate every possible statement of intention players might propose, and when faced with a request that the system lacked the means to adjudicate, a referee had to make a stark choice: either decide the results by fiat or invent some rule on the spot, estimating an appropriate probability of success via some "crude approximation" and then rolling the dice for it.[19]

In the legacy of wargaming, almost as soon as Verdy du Vernois popularized wargame designs where a referee could "make up" the rules and apply them as he went along, this raised the question of whether events in the game were being decided arbitrarily or, worse, with partiality. Any hobby wargamer could know from that *Strategy & Tactics* article back in 1972 that "Verdy [du Vernois] advised that most of the rules and the dice be thrown out" of wargaming and that instead "an umpire experienced in actual warfare" would simply decide what should happen under a given game circumstance (*ST* 33). But the article went on to relate how, when free *Kriegsspiel* based on Verdy du Vernois was introduced to the United States, it "was itself criticized. Several officers argued that free *Kriegsspiel* replaced arbitrary written rules with even more arbitrary unwritten rules." Rather than resulting in a lasting schism between "free" and "rigid"

Kriegsspiel, instead, by the twentieth century "there seemed to be a tendency for the two systems to coalesce into one, becoming semi-rigid (or semi-free) *Kriegsspiel*." Under this murky compromise, devotees of Verdy du Vernois "were found on occasion to be consulting charts and rules," and William Livermore, a referee of the opposing philosophy, "was reported to disregard his own tables and charts as often as he consulted them." Although this gloss on the state of wargaming at the end of the nineteenth century is a bit of an oversimplification, its presence in the pages of the flagship magazine of the wargaming hobby provided ample warning of the ambiguity that could surround event resolution in a referee-driven game. Two years before *D&D* was published, it put the wargaming community on notice about the perils of these philosophical extremes and the possibility of a compromise. Not everyone may have gotten the memo then, but, as we will see, this history lesson would be periodically reshared with the community into the 1980s.

Crucially, players would never know how the referee approached resolution—or, indeed, even if a given situation falls outside the coverage of existing rules—unless they have some visibility into the execution of the system. If the referee does decide that dicing against a chart or table should determine the consequences of a player's stated intentions, a further question is to what degree the player gets to participate in that resolution process. The most prominent staging area for this question in the early literature was disputes over whether the player should roll his or her own dice for saving throws, to-hit rolls, damage rolls, and similar checks—or if not, whether a referee should even permit players to witness those rolls and thus to understand how actions and events come to a resolution. The latter philosophy must recall Korns's principle that players should "only know what the judge tells them that their troops can see or hear" and that, indeed, it is the function of dialogue with the referee "to isolate the players within the confines of the knowledge of their troops" or, as the case may be, their characters.

It is not obvious how involved in system resolution *D&D* intended its players to be. The play transcript does not clarify who rolls dice: passive constructions such as "a check is made" sometimes mask the dicer's identity. This ambiguity is especially interesting for one case in particular: the roll for listening at doors. A character listens successfully, according to the rules, only on "a roll of 1 for humans."[20] When a character listens at a

door, should a player get to observe the die roll? Presumably the referee should roll secretly, so that the report "you hear nothing" might mean either that the roll has succeeded and the room is empty or that the roll has failed. The *D&D* rules offer little direct clarity on the subject, but there are other places where the system encourages the referee to roll secretly for some result: the "Fly" spell, for example, will last for a "number of turns equal to the level of the Magic-user plus the number of pips on a six-sided die which is secretly determined by the referee."[21] These rules entice a Magic-user to take a calculated risk, one that may prove fatal depending on an unseen die roll. We have some indication that Gygax reserved checks for game events such as damage rolls for the referee: in a July 1974 letter explicating the adjudication of combat, he recommended that "the referee secretly rolls a die (or dice if the hit warrants) and removes the number shown from the total of possible damage for who or what was hit" (*GPGPN* 10). Why keep it a secret? We might presume that it is for the sake of isolating players into the situation of their characters: Gygax did not want them to participate in the quantified determination of how successful their hits are and thus how close to defeat an adversary might be. Or perhaps keeping the die roll secret let Gygax exercise his "Divine Intervention," saving worthy characters from doom, without alerting his players.

The *Petal Throne* play transcript states more clearly who does the rolling: it shows the referee casting a die when players listen at a door or attempt to break one down. The referee also does some last-minute dicing to determine things such as how many hit points a monster might have. But the transcript goes on to show a player rolling to hit monsters and then rolling for damage and even rolling to see if a creature is surprised. Indeed, the player takes control of events in the sample combat in a way that goes beyond an ordinary statement of intention, suggesting all in one breath that his character "is slashing at the one nearest him" and then, consulting a rolled die before reporting, "he hits with a 19," and then after rolling again, "he does six points of damage."[22] Although the referee could overrule any of those steps, this example shows a certain awareness of system execution on the player's part, such as knowledge that a roll of 19 will hit a Biridlú, which runs contrary to Korns's principle. So already at the dawn of this new genre of game, there were divergent practices for allowing players access to the resolution of events.

Early adopters of *D&D* treated player participation in die rolls as a matter of referee discretion. "Some dungeon master types prefer to do all the die rolling, providing a narrative for the players," George Phillies observed early in 1976 (*WH* 2). When Sherna Burley first played with Lee Gold around that time, she informed Gold afterward that her own dungeon was "going to adopt your practice of letting the players roll their own attack, etc. dice. It was fun, for me as a player, to do it, and I'll bet it will be more fun for me as a DM not to have to do it" (*AE* 10). Burley had previously played with groups that did not permit players to roll dice for themselves: she explained that in the New York area there were referees who insisted that "if the characters are attacking with weapons that can't harm the monster, they shouldn't know that even a 20 won't hit" (*AE* 13). These referees clearly believed that players should not have the same participation in the execution of the system that the *Petal Throne* transcript demonstrates. John Boardman, another New Yorker, elaborated that some local referees forbid "the players to lay hands on dice once they have set up their characters" in order to keep players in suspense about why attacks might fail (*AE* 14). But Boardman disapproved, and he stated a weighty consideration as a counterargument: players might lose "the sense of immediate involvement that . . . players have as they roll the dice."

Even if the players possessed only limited insight into the execution of the system, placing the dice into their hands could transform their attitude toward play. It created a sense of personal responsibility for the outcome so powerful that it sometimes overwhelmed them. Mark Swanson attested that "while I agree that characters should roll their own attacks, some players find it impossible to do this quickly. At least one was reminding me of the *Guys & Dolls* scene, complete with impatient chorus" (*AE* 14). That iconic scene, in which Sky Masterson sings the entire song "Luck Be a Lady" while clutching a pair of dice he hesitates to throw for a life-altering bet, aptly characterizes the trepidation a player can project onto a die roll in *D&D*. Players can feel as if they they are gambling their character's fortune when they cast the dice.[23]

But, of course, Swanson did not literally mean that "characters should roll for their own attacks"; he meant that players instead of the referee should roll for their own characters' attacks. This distinction between players and characters lies at the heart of how statements of intention are formed and the privilege that rolling dice confers. How much players know

about the resolution of the system can have a profound effect on which intentions they voice, and thus what kinds of actions characters can attempt in a game. Delivering a statement of intention in the first person, as we see in the sample transcript of *D&D*, blurs this distinction—and when the referee addresses the party or the caller in the second person, is it to give information to the player or to the character? Attuned to this confusion, Mahler in 1976 carefully worded one of the referee's responsibilities as "rolling the dice and telling the players what their characters can sense of what is going on," but by the following year he needed to illustrate a starker distinction between ways the dialogue might be conducted either to include players in the execution of the system or to bar them from it (*QQG* 1).

In *A&E* 22, Mahler articulated two "extreme" positions by showing a pair of hypothetical dialogue transcripts that describe the same basic encounter. A party runs across a group of weretigers, one of whom wears a collar granting a defense bonus. In the first dialogue example, the referee explicitly identifies the creatures as weretigers, which can be damaged only with magic weapons, and so the party's caller directs that only characters with magic weapons bother to attack. Because the referee is obliging enough to give hit point totals for the creatures, the caller's statement of intention focuses attacks on the weakest one: "we'll go for the one with 21 hits." The referee allows the players to roll their own dice: since the armor class of weretigers is a matter of record in the rules, the players will know whether their blows should land, so the referee must further explain that one swing missed "because the weretiger has a collar which increases his A.C. by one." But after showing that approach to the dialogue, Mahler switched to his second hypothetical transcript, in which a more parsimonious incarnation of the referee tells the party at the start only that "you see what appears to be tigers," and the caller replies with the statement of intention, "All our front line fighters attack." After rolling for attacks in secret, the referee this time reports that several attempts missed and that in one case "Joe's sword seems to have been blocked by a collar around his tiger's neck," with no further mention of the collar's properties. The players here know no better than their characters and must discover for themselves the nature of their adversaries.

Mahler argued that this difference in approach can help to explain the relative lenity and cruelty that players perceive in referees: the second group "has been faced with a much tougher situation, in spite of the fact

that the situations 'are' the same." Like Sandy Eisen, Mahler recognized that depriving players of access to the system makes it necessarily more difficult for them to succeed. When viewed side by side, his invented transcripts demonstrate a fundamental philosophical distinction. In one, the conversation refers openly to the system, to the quantified model of the game, from the player's perspective; in the other, the statements deal only with the game world as the character would perceive it. "The basic question here is the difference between what the player is told, and what the DM knows," Mahler explained. "I do not believe in withholding any information that the characters would have; however, neither do I believe in giving the players any more than this." Korns couldn't have said it better himself—nor could Eisen. Shielded by the dialogue, the referee can isolate the players from the system, which furthermore necessarily grants the referee the latitude to "mentally" calculate the rules for resolving any action without the players ever being the wiser.

Mahler acknowledged that these examples are "extreme," but questions about the degree to which players are first parties to the resolution of the system, rather than outsiders, recur throughout the early literature. *D&D* seemed compatible with either extreme, but neither was entirely satisfactory to either of the two cultures, as we shall see in the coming chapters. Without sufficient visibility into the tactical operation of the game, wargamers would feel helpless; with constant interruptions of system mechanics, the "story people" would feel their epic adventure had been reduced to number crunching. But countervailing incentives push against pigeonholing the two cultures that way: wargamers also respected Korns's principle of "isolating" the players for the sake of simulating reality; and for authorship of the game's story to be truly collaborative, all of the participants needed the authority that *Sir Pellinore's Game* calls "freedom of decision." Both cultures felt this tension, and neither came to *D&D* with an easy resolution for it. Precisely where to situate player participation on the continuum between these extremes became one of the first and most important design decisions for the games that followed *D&D*.

Eisen did not recommend withholding the system from players in order to ratchet up the difficulty, however; he believed that a unique and desirable experience was unlocked in players by shielding them from the rules. It would take a few years of experience before critics started trying to pin a name on that feeling Eisen had, that he "lived the part," but some early

systems did encourage referees to limit the information given to players to solely the sensory data that their characters could gather. *Monsters! Monsters!* makes this distinction clear by instructing referees, "As the players' characters enter a given locale, you, as GM, will describe to them what they see, hear, smell, or otherwise sense about the area."[24] Of course, as the sample transcript in *D&D* illustrates, players can always pick up cues from that description and explore further; *Monsters! Monsters!* allows that "the players may ask questions for any fine details if they wish," though presumably only those fine details visible to characters.

But then if we look at *High Fantasy* (1978), we see a very different approach to play, one with a combat situation not far removed from Mahler's first hypothetical example. In it, there is no caller: a Fighter and Wizard speak directly to the referee. When the Wizard casts a binding spell at an animated jade statue, he announces, "I have a 58 percent chance," only to be told by the referee, "This creature has a 20 magic resistance, therefore the chance of success is 38. Roll."[25] The Wizard's player duly casts the dice, rolling an unsuccessful 82. As the Fighter engages with the statue, the referee obligingly reveals its hit points—its "defensive total" in the *High Fantasy* system—though the overmatched Fighter has little opportunity to apply this rich information to the tactical situation. We might say, when we read this dialogue, that it is not really an exchange of statements of intention and results; affirmations such as "I have a 58 percent chance" have a different status, and they point to a different mode of participation.

It is again hard to say how well the authors of *D&D* understood the potential trade-offs here. The rulebooks do imply that referees might inform players of changes to the "basic rules" and that players are to "note them in pencil (for who knows when some flux of the cosmos will make things shift once again),"[26] and surviving copies from the era do bear such telltale marks. Early in 1976, Gygax explained how "I am generally uncertain of what 'laws' govern things when I play in 'Blackmoor,' Dave Arneson's campaign" (*EU* 12–13). He accepted this uncertainty without complaint but made it clear that "this is not to say that the players should be denied rules," in the sense of keeping them ignorant of "the general laws which govern their world." However, that does not extend to sharing with players information that characters would not know: "As a referee I never tell players what they have found, I simply describe an object, and it is up to

them to determine what it actually is and what it does." Preserving that level of uncertainty about the world is one reason Gygax aspired to "to keep the rules for D&D as amorphous as possible," permitting vast differences between campaign systems and ultimately greater referee discretion in the moment.

Dungeons & Dragons and the games that closely imitate it take place in a conversation as referees and players discuss game events. But that dialogue can cover radically disparate subjects: it can be a conversation restricted solely to what the characters themselves would know of the game situation, or it can incorporate the execution of the system that resolves game events, or it can fall somewhere in the middle. Where it falls is crucial to determining what it is that people do when they play a character, how lenient or cruel a referee might appear, and to what degree statements of intention should reflect an awareness of the system. Eisen's vow would steer players toward statements of intention that make no reference to system, and indeed, in retrospect, we should understand it as one of the earliest theoretical stances expressed toward *D&D*.

It is of paramount importance to recognize that the roots of this design question stretch back throughout the legacy of wargaming, into the extremes of "free" *Kriegsspiel*, where only the referee understands how game events are resolved, versus "rigid" *Kriegsspiel*, where the referee executes established rules with little latitude, or the "semirigid" compromise position between them—and that, moreover, the historical disputes around this choice were reviewed in hobby wargaming literature in the years leading up to the publication of *D&D*. Parsing a dialogue transcript, it is easy to see the players and referee as equal parties to the game, each taking turns adding statements to a narrative work in progress, but this impression rapidly admits of all manner of qualms and caveats. How much control over the game world—or even their own characters— does a statement of intention entitle players to? To what degree are the contents of both parties' "moves" influenced or even determined by the rules? These questions are intimately bound up in what it means to play a role and what it means for something to be a role-playing game.

3

Designing for Role Play

Dungeons & Dragons as first published did not employ the construction *role-playing game* or even *role playing* at all: the closest it comes is an offhand mention that "players must decide what role they will play in the campaign, human or otherwise, fighter, cleric, or magic-user."[1] But that usage would have broken no new ground in 1974, as the exact term *role-playing game* had been used to describe political wargames conducted by the military since at least a decade earlier.[2] As a cluster of games exhibiting qualities similar to *D&D* entered the market, reviewers and fans inevitably began informally negotiating a name for this new genre that was "not strictly a 'war' game" anymore, the legend on the *D&D* box notwithstanding.

In 1975, George Phillies wrote an article that described *D&D* as adding a "fourth dimension to the wargaming scene," beyond the existing ones of board wargames, miniature wargames, and *Diplomacy*, which he linked to a recognized wargaming phenomenon: "The popularity of D&D arises from its ability to appeal to the 'Rommel Syndrome'—the feeling that one actually is the character represented in the game" (*AW* 2 (8–9)). Gary Gygax replied in July 1975 that "Phillies finds that the appeal of D&D might rest in its fulfillment of role playing, i.e., allowing participants to imagine themselves as some super-powerful (or just plain extraordinary) character in a fantasy world" (*EU* 9). Gygax did not share Phillies's view, arguing instead that the game's appeal lay in its "constant challenge," furnishing a "never-ending exercise in problem solving."[3] But after Gygax's casual use of *role playing*, it began to creep into reviews of titles such as *Empire of the Petal Throne* and *En Garde* in the fall of 1975 as a shorthand way of expressing their similarity to *D&D*. The review of *En Garde* in *Strategy & Tactics* 52, for example, called it three things: a "boardless, role-playing, free-form system."

So, what did people think that *role playing* meant at the time? Its everyday connotation of assuming a character during play would not clearly delineate it from existing ways the two cultures had gamed or, indeed, as

people would soon point out, from games such as *Monopoly*. Gygax seemed to dismiss it in 1975 as an identification with character bordering on wish fulfillment. But there was no standing consensus on the meaning or implications of the term: it was born adrift and towed around by a discordant pluralism of voices spanning the two cultures. Because even the genre's founding game remained silent on this matter, no authority could summarily settle this dispute. Reviewers could recklessly accuse any work of being a role-playing game, and designers could similarly slap that label onto their products with little fear of contradiction. To learn what early adopters meant by *role playing*, we must survey the furious period of design innovation that immediately followed the release of *D&D*, listen to how commentators handled the term, and examine how the community tried to encourage players to adopt roles.

As TSR faced increasing competition in the games market and became more protective of its trademarks, rival firms embraced the term *role-playing game* as a euphemistic way of claiming kinship to *D&D* without running afoul of any legal concerns. The publisher of *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975) first paved that path in its advertisements in 1976, and the follow-up title *Monsters! Monsters!* explicitly referenced *role playing* in its text. This may have initially prejudiced TSR against the term, but it quickly swept the community; before the year's end, TSR itself put *role-playing game* on the cover of one of its new games, *Metamorphosis Alpha*, and in 1977 the Holmes Basic version of *D&D* would now identify itself as "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Role Playing Adventure Game Campaigns," with no *wargames* in sight.

Once the first commercial products began to identify themselves as role-playing games, the community struggled to isolate the role-playing element in this family of games. But the market did not settle quickly or exclusively on the label *role-playing game*, and alternative terms in use shed light on the way people positioned this new phenomenon. For example, Mark Swanson floated the term *Ego Involvement* for the genre early in 1976, though it saw little uptake (*WH* 2). Later, the descriptor *adventure game* nearly overtook *role-playing game* as a designation for this commercial category in the hobby industry, as it encompassed board games distributed by many of the same companies and implied nothing about playing roles. Some games distanced themselves from frivolity by expelling the *play* from *role playing* to yield the longer and more academic term *role assumption*

game.[4] An obstinate few would even defend *wargame* as the proper name for these games in the face of widespread belief in a transition to a new category. But, most importantly, through the end of the 1970s, the three-letter acronym FRP for *fantasy role playing* remained more common in fan literature than RPG for *role-playing game*. As play increasingly encompassed system elements not published in *D&D*, FRP became a descriptor for the entire hobby, a set of common and essential practices that transcended any particular published design—albeit the acronym was often found in the mouths of designers promoting some upstart commercial offering. That it was a "game" was something to downplay, emphasizing instead the roots of these practices in fantasy literature; only when grammatically necessary would anyone call something an "FRP game." This choice of terminology became one more front in the battle to champion a proper orientation of *D&D* toward games, stories, and roles.
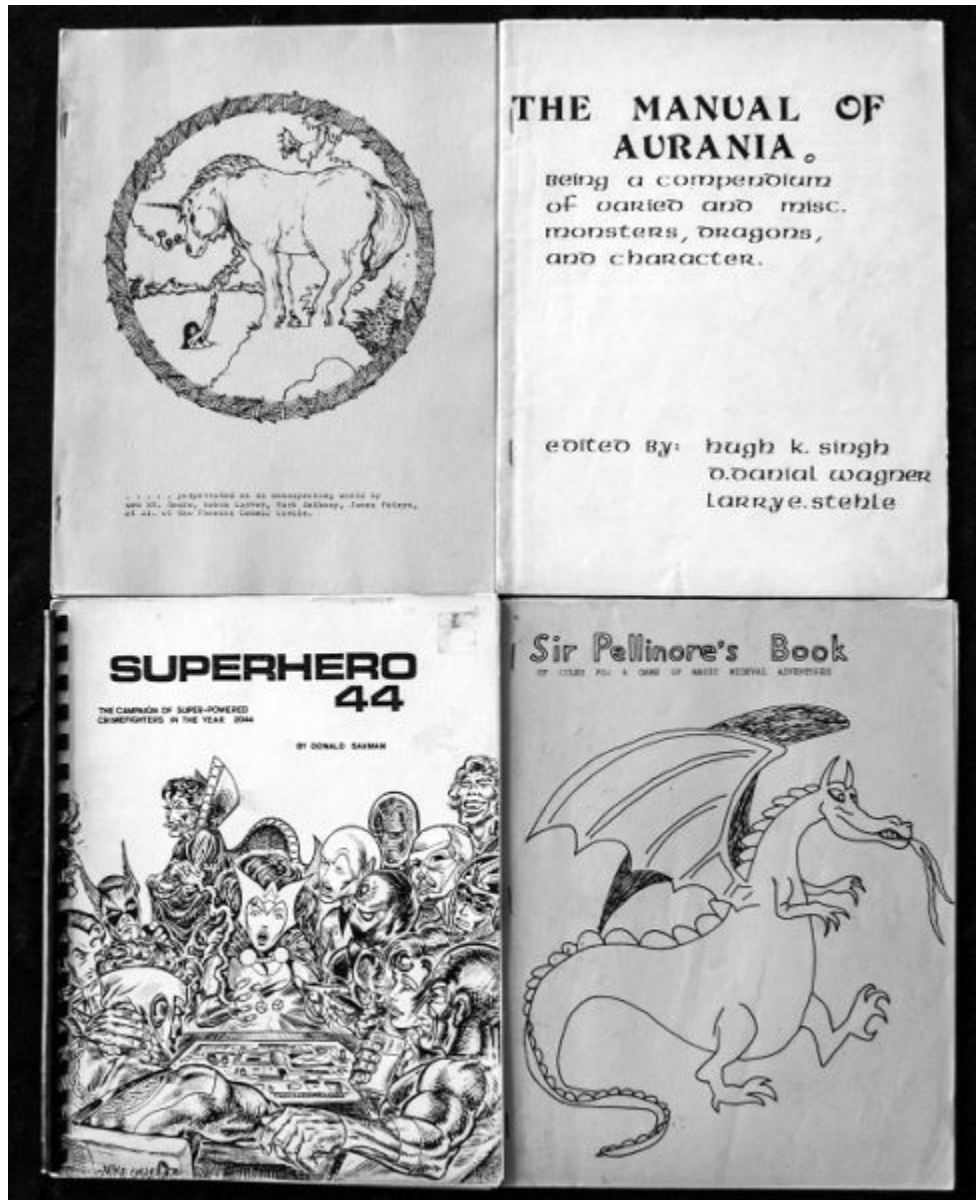
Figure 3.1
Early self-published role-playing game products could be produced by fan clubs or university print shops with an effort commensurate to publishing a fanzine. Shown: *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), *The Manual of Aurania* (1976), *Superhero '44* (1977), and *Sir Pellinore's Book* (1978).

So perhaps a better question is, what did it mean to early adopters to play a role? For practitioners who came into the hobby from wargaming, it had to imply a different relationship with a character than the one they would ordinarily establish with a given unit counter or miniature figure representing forces on a battlefield. Many early commentators argued that the connection of a player to a character in *D&D* was fundamental to its

experience and popularity. For example, Steve McIntosh observed in *A&E* 18, "Most D&D players identify with some of their characters so much that the character becomes an extension of themselves into a fantasy world, and the statement 'my character killed a dragon' becomes 'I killed a Nasty Ferocious Dragon!!'" The character's adventures and advancement became the player's personal accomplishment. This visceral feeling of protagonism cut both ways, however: "In the same manner," McIntosh continued, "defeat can really hit where it hurts."

No doubt that identification was strengthened by one particular form of statement of intention: speaking in the voice of a character. A player's intention that a character say some specific phrase to a fellow party member or nonplayer character often took the form of a first-person statement, as at the end of the sample transcript in *D&D* the caller addresses his compatriots with the aside, "Onward, friends, to more and bigger loot!" The resulting bond between player and character could become so intense that some referees found this sort of statement an impediment to play: Lee Gold wrote in *A&E* 14, "I've found it helpful to forbid people to speak in their own persona while playing D&D. All remarks must be made about their character—in the third person. This keeps them focused on the character—and prevents them from identifying too heavily with the character." This restriction would puzzle Mark Chilenskas, however: "How does one play a character in third person? This seems impossible to me, and would interfere with the role playing for the players even if it is possible, so it must be a bad idea" (*WH* 9). For Chilenskas, playing a role entailed that sort of first-person protagonism, understanding the nature of characters well enough to speak in their voice.

To play a role meant playing a specific character, one with distinguishing qualities. In order to model characters in system terms, the earliest role-playing games assigned values to various attributes that defined not just characters' abilities but also their nature. This quantification of character triggered a new dimension of play that began to manifest as wargames shifted into role-playing games: weighing a character's nature and incentives before proposing statements of intention in game. Players would let these attributes influence what their characters would do, much as early players of *Fight in the Skies* might base game decisions on some qualitative sketch of a pilot's proclivities. The way players relied on those attributes as a guide to character conduct was perhaps the most obvious way that players

participated in the execution of the system of role-playing games: they had to know these statistics to abide by them. It was thus not an aspect of the system that the referee should or could shield from the player.

Efforts to steer decisions based on a character's nature—or, as Simbalist would soon put it, to let the character play itself—are one of the clearer markers of a shift from traditional wargames to something new. Acting in accordance with character stood at odds with the long-standing wargaming approach to the role of a commander: wargamers traditionally did not revisit Napoleon's historical battles to pose the question "What would Napoleon have done in this situation?" because Napoleon's choices are a matter of public record. The wargamer instead would explore the question, as McIntosh put it, "How would the battle have gone if Napoleon had fought it my way?" (*AE* 18). Acting as a commander, the wargamer attempts to prevail in the strategic or tactical situation by exercising personal ingenuity. Some would approach *D&D* in this traditional wargaming fashion: when taking on the persona of an adventurer in a dungeon, a player could exercise personal ingenuity to succeed in the goal of defeating adversaries and gaining in power—a goal that the player and the character could usually be said to share. McIntosh explained that this is one of the reasons why "this identification is not a bad thing" because "it can get people to think and use their imagination to save a favored character." But this philosophy competed in early *D&D* play with a more character-centric one: for some players, the goal shifted away from securing success toward faithfully portraying a rich character. Their behavior might seem baffling to wargamers who pursued success in adventure without a second thought to their characters' natures. The degree to which a system might encourage one or the other of these approaches became the focal point of a heated dispute among designers and practitioners alike.

The community immediately recognized this division in its ranks and explored the consequences of these opposing philosophies. Game designs hinted at restricting character behavior based on properties like abilities or alignment—but above all else it was perhaps the goal of becoming more powerful that dictated how characters behaved. Design decisions heavily depended, unsurprisingly, on the degree to which players understood and participated in the execution of the system and the degree of control players had over how those key character statistics were determined. Access to this model of human nature ultimately enabled interested players to adopt

characters defined by their shortcomings rather than by their triumphs, which became central to understanding what responsibilities and opportunities role playing created for players.

Self-Determination

When you generate a character, "your dice throws create Blanks, not people —same thing the Primordial Dungeonmaster did when he was messing around with the clay," Dick Eney explained in 1975, at the dawn of the hobby (*AE* 5). "They are not Characters until you Characterize them with the Breath of Life." Every *Dungeons & Dragons* character begins with throwing dice for abilities such as Intelligence or Wisdom, but it is up to the player to formulate statements of intention for that character, to decide what the character says and does, and through that process potentially to turn those characteristics into some semblance of a person. But how "blank" is a character, really, once the dice have been cast? Less than a year later, Nicolai Shapero wrote, "If I have a character with an intelligence of 6, and a wisdom of eight, I refuse to run him the same as an 18 intelligence 18 wisdom character" (*AE* 13). He noted that this could be a career-limiting decision: "This has cost me characters . . . it hurts, every now and then." However, he insisted that "it is a far more honest way of playing."

This question of the degree to which the system, as opposed to the personal ingenuity of the player, determines characters' actions became a key early battleground in the struggle to define and explain role-playing games. In *A&E* 17 at the end of 1976, we find Richard J. Schwall setting the problem as follows. "Consider two extreme ways of playing D&D: the first is a puzzle-solving game where each player must always have his wits about him in order to find the treasure and to work his way out of potentially lethal situations. . . . The second way is the role-playing game, where each player endeavors to run his character with a personality consistent with his rolled abilities." In the first, the player's insight and experience decides the actions of characters; in the second, players attempt to constrain their characters' actions to their likely ideas and capabilities. Crucially, only the second is what role playing meant to Schwall. We might suggest that in the first case the player strives for success in the game's endeavors, but in the second the player instead strives to portray a faithful

version of the character, warts and all. Schwall argued that these two styles are incommensurable and, indeed, concluded, "I have seen no evidence that there is a good middle ground between the two."

Glenn Blacow rebutted Schwall by confirming that, "yes, there are two extremes of D&D playing," but he flatly avowed that "they are not 'skilled' and 'role-playing,' however" (*AE* 19). He conceded that in some games, such as Kevin Slimak's dungeon in Boston, "rolled intelligence must be ignored to survive," and players must instead use their own knowledge and experience to select successful actions for their characters. But he took that as one pole and contrasted it with his own "other extreme," which is "the role-playing game where no real danger exists; to wit, where characters either never get killed, or have a vast supply of wishes, etc., so that they can butcher cardboard monsters, bully the far less impressive non-player characters, and collect vast amounts of riches, magic, etc." Ever advocating for balance, Blacow furthermore objected that "there are—contrary to your assertion—vast numbers of variations between the two extremes."

In this 1976 dispute, we can discern slightly different early connotations of the newborn term *role-playing game* in use by the two sides. Blacow seemed to correlate the term with the overgenerous games, where self-indulgent characters face little prospect of death, as opposed to games of significant lethality, where players must think and act competitively to prevail. Schwall, in contrast, did not link role playing to generosity per se but instead to a game where, as he stated, a player will "run his character with a personality consistent with his rolled abilities." Slimak drew a similar distinction at the beginning of 1977 in *Wild Hunt* 12, wherein there are "2 styles of playing a character: you can put a bit of yourself into the character," which Slimak understood as a situation where "the player is the supplier of all the non-physical attributes" such as Intelligence, "or you can put yourself into his place, submerging yourself to the extent which you are able" into that role.[5] By "put yourself in his place," perhaps Slimak meant something similar to what Sandy Eisen wanted at the beginning of 1975, when through willing suspension of disbelief he "lived the part" of his character.

Designers and practitioners began to use the phrase *in character* very early on to describe this way of "submerging yourself," where a player directs a character in accordance with the character's nature rather than with

the player's better judgment. A passage in *Bunnies & Burrows* instructs players: "Once your rabbit acquires some traits, you should try to keep his behavior in character during future play, even when it is not in your best interest to do so! Believe it or not, this makes the game more fun in the long run."[6] The phrase *in character* had already entered *D&D* fan vocabulary the previous year: Sherna Burley praised another referee, "Bravo also on keeping Characters in character" in *A&E* 6. We can also find early uses of the term applied specifically to playing to Intelligence levels: in *A&E* 18, Bill Paley explained, "I kill characters of IQ 15+ for stupidity. On the other hand, characters who (in character) have 7− IQs often survive." That is to say, as a referee, Paley exercised clemency when stupid characters acted stupidly but had none for high-intelligence characters played like dolts.

The notion that players should defer to some preordained personality model for their character when deciding actions predates *D&D*: people gamed as characters in *Fight in the Skies* or *Western Gunfight*, and we see the *Western Gunfight* and Midgard designers asking players to act "in character" before *D&D* hit the shelves. But those were based more on informal sketches of character, ones written into the background of a game rather than explicitly quantified in terms of intelligence or wisdom or other traits. To find detailed statistics for characters in wargames, we need to look to Tony Bath. His book *Setting Up a Wargames Campaign* specifies a character-quantification system that includes abilities such as Intelligence and Martial Aptitude as well as aspects of integrity such as Loyalty, all of which vary from 1 to 6. As the "Controller," or referee, of his campaigns, Bath used these characteristics to determine the behavior of a vast network of nonplayer characters during the course of events. One can readily imagine how players could apply such quantified factors when deciding on their own characters' actions, as apparently Charles Grant did.

Restrictions on how personalities may behave come through only in subtle ways in the *D&D* rules: for example, the original system stipulates that character attributes such as "Intelligence will also affect referees' decisions as to whether or not certain action would be taken" and that "Wisdom rating will act much as does that for Intelligence."[7] As usual, we have only a vague guideline to parse, but the rules suggest that the referee holds a veto power over statements of intention grounded in the game's statistics. This hint was not lost on early players. In 1975, Lee Gold included among the circumstances in which "a dungeonmaster should

legitimately overrule a person's call for his character" the situation where "the character's proposed action is far too rash/dumb for his supposed wisdom/intelligence" (*APL* 520). This rule effectively directs the referee to police players' statements of intention to gauge their appropriateness for characters' Intelligence level—and by extension it implies that players should police themselves accordingly as they play their roles.

Yet with only such brief and opaque language in the original *D&D* rules, the impact of abilities on play became a matter of interpretation in local play groups: referees and players embraced the rules as guidelines, as Gygax instructed them to, and developed their own practices. Some players no doubt modeled their behavior on characters in fantasy literature such as Holger Carlsen in Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961), which imagines a twentieth-century protagonist mysteriously transposed into the story of a fantastic hero, whom he then "plays" with twentieth-century shrewdness. These players injected into their characters all of the wits and reasoning they could muster. But others found a different sort of enjoyment in "submerging" themselves into characters native to the fantastic setting, true to the simulated characteristics that defined them in the system, for good or ill.

The sprawling discourse in game fanzines soon entertained, as a defining characteristic of role-playing games, this idea of acting within the quantified constraints of characters. Early in 1977, Kevin Slimak began teasing out this distinction by leveling the following accusation at his interlocutor Pieter Roos: "You, like many others, tend to discuss D&D as a role-playing game, rather than the more encompassing fantasy game" (*WH* 15). For Slimak, considering *D&D* as a role-playing game encouraged players to make poor decisions when, in their estimation, the characterization system required it: "I've just seen too many people doing stupid things BECAUSE of the character they've rolled and are role-playing."

Roos responded by proposing a definition of a role-playing game with exactly that property: "I define a role-playing game as one in which the participants assume a character and act within that <u>role</u>" (*WH* 16). He underlined the word *role* to emphasize the constraints that acting within it would imply. Roos however, reinterpreted character abilities to avoid the excesses that frustrated Slimak. "I do not believe that the Intelligence and

Wisdom characteristics are actually intelligence or wisdom," he argued. "Magic Ability and Piety, or Talent and Godliness would be more appropriate" as names for the capacities of a character that *D&D* modeled with its Intelligence and Wisdom stats. Roos also downplayed the impact of role playing an idiot on the grounds of its associated risks: "If someone wishes to be a stupid character, fine. Like as not either the monsters or his own party will end the joke quickly enough."

Not everyone would see the humor in playing to lose. Toward the end of 1977, in *Lords of Chaos* 3, Slimak further bemoaned this consequence of role playing: "I don't object to role-players as much as I object to the use of role-playing as an excuse for not thinking, or worse, thinking of ways to do the wrong thing. Hells bells, some of the folks writing in this zine roll dice to see if their characters will say what they think up next . . . and that in some pretty dangerous situations." Given the purported lethality of Slimak's dungeon, one can readily appreciate his consternation on this point. But, more significantly, he implicitly lamented how players of *D&D* had begun to subvert the old maxim of wargaming that "anything can be attempted" in favor of a more constrained freedom of agency. Adherents to this new creed could direct characters to attempt things in the game or even say things in game only when they believed the character, as modeled by the system, would decide on those actions or utterances—even when that meant the player must defer to a die roll to direct the character, according to some interpretations of the game system.

By 1977, a few published designs explicitly encouraged players to accept just such constraints on their agency as part of the responsibility of role playing: most notably, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, published that year, recommends, "If a character is stupid, role-play and have him act stupidly. If he is a fumble-fingered boob who has the dexterity of a hobbled camel, have all the fun you can with him (these make good comic Thieves)."[8] This restates Mike Carr's promise that *Fight in the Skies* will be more "fun" if you play to the personality of pilot, even if it is not the optimal strategy. *Chivalry & Sorcery* summarizes this philosophy with the catchphrase "let the characters play themselves." In extreme cases, its system even calls for wresting control over certain decisions from the player: for example, characters with low Wisdom "will be directed by random determinations whenever faced with difficult decisions," a situation where the referee rolls

the dice and the system will dictate how the character is played instead of the player.[9]

Text encouraging players to "let the characters play themselves" became practically boilerplate in role-playing games by the late 1970s. The *Starships & Spacemen* (1978) rules plead:

> It cannot be overstressed that the player of the game should play a role as he determines his own character's actions. That is, the player should form a concept in his own mind as to what type of person his character is and then act in accordance with these ideas. The character's type should obviously be based on his abilities, as determined by the roll of the dice. Players should always try to act in character; while this may not prove advantageous in one particular set of circumstances, it leads to a much better game overall.[10]

But if the player must abide by the character's nature even when that seems disadvantageous, then it matters how a character comes to be unwise or clumsy and how involved the player was in shaping that character. *D&D* followed Bath's precedent by having players generate such characteristics randomly at the start of play. The original rules stipulate that "prior to the character selection by players it is necessary for the referee to roll three six-sided dice in order to rate each as to various abilities, and thus aid them in selecting a role."[11] The determination of the famous six characteristics of *D&D*—Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma—thus was entirely outside the control of the player, who was not even intended to cast the fateful dice, as the rules assign that privilege to the referee.

It is perhaps some consolation that the player at least gets to see the results: the player selects a character's class in consultation with the results of these rolls, so the player must be aware of roll outcomes. The choice of character class, effectively the career of a *D&D* adventurer, hinges on those dice.[12] Characters incur significant penalties to experience-point accrual if their abilities are misaligned with their chosen class: a weakling Fighting-man might earn one-fifth less experience points than an average rival, whereas a burly Fighting-man will amass experience points 10 percent

faster than normal. During character generation, characters can reallocate points into their class's "prime requisite," but only at a punishing two- or three-to-one exchange rate, and only from certain other characteristics, and even then only if it will not reduce those other characteristics below 9. This steers players to choose classes based on the dictates of the dice rather than playing to any preferences of their own. A player set on being a Cleric might, after witnessing a Wisdom roll, have a change of heart. After all, not everyone wants to play a "fumble-fingered boob," at least not all the time.

Many early play reports suggest that referees soon permitted alternative character-generation systems with more generous average outcomes—and more significantly, systems that granted to players greater flexibility in the assignment of rolls to abilities. Already in *A&E* 6 in 1975, Sherna Burley complained, "I also prefer not to spend the time and effort I put into characterizing and making miniatures on someone unplayable," and thus, instead of rolling three 6-sided dice per ability, she preferred a character-generation method in use in Los Angeles: "rolling for four and eliminating the worst one." She considered it "a happy medium between shopping for unusually high characteristics, and being forced to play duds."

Unsurprisingly, these variant systems invited controversy, especially when characters generated with these enhanced techniques tried to relocate to the game of a less-accommodating referee. Glenn Blacow singled out in *A&E* 9 in 1976 a certain campaign at MIT whose "characters were not allowed to transfer to Edwyr," in large part because their characteristics were rolled "with 3d6 + 1d4." Any transplanted character with conspicuously high abilities might face allegations of cheating. One commentator in *A&E* 18, Chris Pettus, complained, "What is most embarrassing is rolling up a character that you would think was cheated on if it was brought into your dungeon." Pettus explained how one night he rolled a character with three characteristics at 18, including a Strength of 18/00, and no characteristics lower than 12. "I don't blame people who look at me strangely when I present his character sheet. I would," Pettus confessed, yet he insisted, "He is honest and was rolled in front of a witness, even."

What counted as honest character generation necessarily depended on the discretion of the referee. In *A&E 14*, Wesley Ives explained how he implemented the following system in his local dungeon: "A player is

allowed six rolls for the four Prime Requisites: he rolls six times, takes the best four and distributes them as he wishes between Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom and Dexterity." Allowing the player to choose the placement of high rolls among the abilities effectively let players choose their character classes, a first step toward self-determination. Similarly, when the *Quick Quincey Gazette* surveyed its readership late in 1976 on the question "What system do you use for rolling up characters?" Peter Cerrato responded in issue 3 that in his own campaign he would "roll as many characteristics as are needed, and then the player puts them where he wants." In the same issue, the *Gazette* related that Edi Birsan in New York would allow "the player to place each roll after it's made in any of the six requisites that's still open," which granted the player significant leeway in assigning high values to desired abilities, but without the hindsight of knowing what the highest roll of the six would turn out to be.

Quick Quincey Gazette 3 also summarized responses on the subject of mulligans, or the cutoff for rerolling a character. It reported that "the most common method of deciding on whether you have a reroll is whether the total of the six requisites (before transfers) is below a certain figure." A roll of three 6-sided dice will on average yield a result of 10.5, so any character with less than 63 total points of statistics is by definition below average. In Howard Mahler's dungeon, 63 was the threshold for a reroll; Jim Servey permitted rerolls at the more generous figure of 65. Another documented approach from 1976 required that the character's abilities total exactly 63. Richard Schwall, to prevent cases where a player "rolls a truly inferior character, below average in all abilities," had his players "rolling only five of the abilities and choosing the last so that the total of all 6 is 63" (*AE* 14). If this would lead to a situation where the last ability "is less than 3 or greater than 18, then points must be transferred to or from one other ability so that all six abilities are between 3 and 18." This typically leads to results where characters are "average in an overall sense but still vary widely in any one ability," and it could lead to some very dramatic peaks and valleys in character competence.

The incentive to defy the will of the dice grew as new character classes placed onerous constraints on the characteristics required to play them. According to *Greyhawk*, for example, Fighting-men could become Paladins only if they had a Charisma score of 17 or higher. The Monk class defined in *Blackmoor* (1975) required a character to have a Wisdom and Dexterity

of at least 15 as well as a Strength of 12. With limitations this severe, a player might only rarely have an opportunity to experiment with these classes: a score of 15 or higher on a given die roll occurs less than 10 percent of the time on average. We therefore should not be surprised to read in *A&E* 12 that Steve Perrin devised an alternative character-generation system to apply when you are "rolling for Monks and others who need characteristics of 15+." Rather than rolling three 6-sided dice, Perrin rolled one 20-sided die to determine where the ability falls between 15 and 18: "1–10 is 15, 11–16 is 16, 17–19 is 17 and 20 is 18."

Glenn Blacow practically sputtered in outrage when responding to Perrin: "This is remarkably depressing, and I hope I'm mistaking you, but it looks like you're saying that instead of rolling 3d6 for characteristics and trying to get the character type from them, you simply decide, 'Oh, I want a monk'—and roll d20 to see how good a monk you got" (*AE* 14). Blacow summed up his feelings about this variant with a single word entirely in upper case: "VERBOTEN." Perrin confirmed that there was no misunderstanding: "There is no use in having exotic character types if it takes forever to get one. The idea, good people, is to have fun. Playing duds can have its own joys, but I prefer for them to balance out" (*AE* 16). He added icily that "no one has the right to say my way of playing with these 'guidelines' is verboten." Referees and players here openly mutinied against the system, which *D&D* itself concedes should be no more binding than "guidelines," and fixed the problem on the tabletop.

For purists such as Blacow, a method where players first select a character type and then apply alternative character-generation methods to secure any needed characteristics remained controversial in 1976. Most of the earliest role-playing games followed the character-generation precedent of *D&D*. Even Perrin's own *Runequest* (1978) had each player roll three 6-sided dice for the game's seven characteristics, albeit *Runequest* lacked classes altogether and did offer ways for characters to increase some characteristics in game. But certain in-born characteristics, such as intelligence and size, could not be augmented through any normal means in *Runequest*—players were stuck with the initial dice rolls.

Even before 1978 role-playing game systems had to acknowledge widespread practices for dealing with unwanted characters burdened with wretched attributes. *Space Patrol* casually mentions that "we have also

known people who are fond of sitting down and generating some 20 or 30 characters and then throw out all but those who are unusually good. They then claim that all the characters in their stable were, in fact, randomly generated."[13] They recommend that referees require all generated characters be played at least once. *Traveller* (1977) similarly insists that "each player should use the character as it is created" even though "it is possible for a player to generate a character with seemingly unsatisfactory values." Because some of the backgrounds in military-service careers, which characters in *Traveller* dice through before play begins, can readily prove lethal, for truly hopeless characters *Traveller* suggests "the low survival rate of the Scout Service may make it the best career choice."[14] In *Tradition of Victory* (1978), where players roll percentile dice for the six canonical character attributes—with Social Level standing in for Wisdom—the system is more lenient: it advises that "if a character is particularly unpromising, the player may roll again with the permission of the referee, but I urge referees to be fairly strict." *Tradition of Victory* also proposes "another method might be for the player to roll three characters and choose one from among them."[15]

Rather than condoning suicide or condemning players to the caprice of fortune, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* embraced the principle that its characters are exceptional. *Players Handbook* (1978) justified this decision by stipulating that "the premise of the game is that each player character is above average—at least in some respects—and has superior potential."[16] The *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1979) thus formally legitimized four alternative character-generation methods, including one that allows players to effectively roll twelve characters and choose the best one for play. It similarly allowed methods such as rolling four 6-sided dice and discarding the lowest roll, which augmented all of the characteristics. Without these measures, due to "quirks of the dice" players might be assigned "rather marginal characters" who "tend to have short life expectancy—which tends to discourage new players, as does having to make do with some character of a race and/or class which he or she really can't or won't identify with."[17] Where *Chivalry & Sorcery* saw the fun in playing a dimwitted character, *AD&D* optimized for making characters extraordinary so that players will more readily identify with them.

In both game design and play, the two cultures publicly grappled with the impact of abilities on playing roles throughout the late 1970s. Among

"games people," some welcomed the impartiality and fairness of the dice and accepted the requirement to simulate the random inequalities of people even when the dice delivered disappointment; others, however, sought to maximize their tactical advantage and found ways to ignore or circumvent any constraints imposed by abilities by exercising personal ingenuity. Among "story people," some recognized the comic potential of playing a fool or klutz and relished the challenge of improvising to the abilities that dice generated—yet others identified more with extraordinary characters or wanted to assume the role of a particular, exotic character type and so availed themselves of alternate character-generation mechanisms. Designs could insist that players and referees abide by the dice, but that insistence had no enforceable consequences—players and obliging referees who wanted an extraordinary character could justify their practices no matter which culture they came from.

At stake in this choice was the nature of character generation as a creative act of the player. Consider the character-generation system of the era proposed by Bob Frager in *A&E* 34: a process of guided meditation. He encouraged players to close their eyes, breathe, and envision a door marked "Adventurers." After opening the door and allowing a few adventurers to emerge, players should select an interesting one and speak to it, listening as it explains its history, its motivations, its strengths and weaknesses. "Now let yourself become the character. Identify with it and experience what it's like to be it. Ask this person, how do you feel? What is the world like to you? What do you want?" Returning to reality with a specific person in mind, players then roll characteristics and "assign the six rolls in whatever way best fits their character." At that point, though, rolling dice hardly seems adequate as a means of specifying the character.

A more radical design solution was to let players choose characteristics rather than leaving them to chance: to give players true self-determination. Such a system appeared as early as 1977 in the published design of *Superhero '44*. It entirely eliminated die rolls for characteristics and instead granted characters a pool of "power points" to allocate as players saw fit. The rules postpone generating these abilities until after class selection, stating that "once a hero has created a background and selected a character type, he assigns prime requisite points." Each player divides an initial sum of 140 points across the character's seven requisites, though the choice of character class offsets certain requisites by a predetermined amount.

Furthermore, "at the discretion of the referee, up to 50 bonus points may be added" for various circumstances, including "characters who accept weaknesses or disabilities (Kryptonite, for instance)."[18] This design would be among the earliest to allow characters to take on some form of flaw during character generation in exchange for more initial purchasing power. But it ultimately created a level playing field for characters, where all superheroes have the opportunity to be equally super in place of the random inequalities yielded by dicing for attributes.

This design property proved to be attractive. When Steve Jackson included it in the first published components of his *Fantasy Trip* role-playing system, *Melee* (1977) and *Wizard* (1978), he explained about attributes, "Players don't roll for these. Instead, each character starts out with 8 in each attribute, and the player gets another 8 to split between them as he likes. You can have an average fighter, a dexterous weakling, or a powerful clod. But you never start with a superman or a total oaf; all beginning fighters are equivalent" (*SG* 12).

The character-generation system of *Bushido* (1978) closely followed the point-buy precedent of *Superhero '44*. "In *Bushido*, unlike most other role-playing games, the concept is for the Player to design a Character according to his ideal vision of a Profession. Thus, Attributes and other Abilities are custom-designed by the Player after he decides on a Profession."[19] Players distribute 60 points across the six attributes of *Bushido*, though the choice of class (Profession) offsets attributes by some positive or negative amount. Lee Gold, reviewing *Bushido* in *A&E* 41 , would call that "a fairly workable system" but warned that "it may result in a lot of carbon copies as the best mix because known for each type" of character. Randomness at least does guarantee a certain amount of variety in characterization.

Point-buy character-generation systems would inevitably inspire variants of *D&D* as well. Late in 1979, Andrew Gelman expressed in *A&E* 55 his dissatisfaction with the sanctioned alternative methods enumerated in *Dungeon Masters Guide*, assessing that although they gave "players better chances to roll higher characteristics," they ultimately merely "had an effect like inflation—people just tried to roll better characters." Gelman therefore proposed simply allocating 63 points to players for distribution across the six character abilities within the 3 to 18 range—he explicitly chose that figure to correspond with "the average sum if they were rolled with dice."

He noted that a 73-point system would deliver the same for *Chivalry & Sorcery*. From his implementation experience, Gelman insisted that "the characters do not become carbon copies. There are many possibilities of characters and there is no ultimate character type."

In point-buy systems, the choice to play a "fumble-fingerered boob" rests entirely with the player. Those who find it fun can select a role with those properties, while others can avoid it, but every starting character has access to the same pool of talent, so none dominates others at the whim of the dice. Securing the consent of players to these characteristics rather than assigning them arbitrarily makes constraining characters to conduct appropriate to their statistics a matter of choice rather than imposition. It furthermore depends on players exercising creative control over the character-generation system—a clear departure from the original *D&D* guidelines, which stipulate players are not even allowed to roll the fatal dice to determine their own attributes.

Ethical Calculus

Constraints on what might be attempted arose naturally when players generated characters who were not as smart or wise as themselves and then diligently played to their dimwitted personalities. But another important early system element further restricted the statements of intentions given by players, forcing them to consider their character sheet before deciding on a course of action: alignment. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* rules are very clear that alignment is something players choose, one of the rare qualities of a character that players actively select without the help of the dice. Adherence to the constraints of alignment would be another practice linked to what it meant to remain "in character" and thus to role playing.

The "line up" of the *Chainmail* wargame originally sorted its combatants into the divisions Law, Chaos, and Neutrality in order to simulate the alliances depicted in fantasy fiction, so that elves might fight alongside dwarves but never orcs. *D&D* inherited these three categories and rebranded them as "alignment," assigning a stance to fantastic creatures but granting humans the latitude to choose any personal ideology. As originally conceived, alignment was a statistic selected by the player during character creation. Alignment governed the compatibility of adventuring parties and

the use of certain magic items that themselves held an alignment bias, such as intelligent swords. Players were largely free to adopt the alignment of their choice, though the *D&D* system did levy some restrictions: Clerics could choose only Law or Chaos, not Neutrality, and Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits could not be Chaotic.

In its margins, however, the original *D&D* shows that alignment is not fixed at character creation; it warns that if a powerful Cleric "changes sides, all the benefits will be removed!"[20] This might happen accidentally, when a Lawful Cleric dons a cursed "Helm of Chaos," say, but the text elsewhere provides the germ for a system of morality: a Lawful Cleric must not take evil actions, such as misusing the "Finger of Death" spell, because that "will immediately turn him into an Anti-Cleric."[21] When selecting actions for a Lawful Cleric, a player must thus weigh the potential in-game consequences. *D&D* took this a step further in the *Greyhawk* expansion, which introduced the Paladin and Thief character classes, the former of which must be Lawful, and the latter must not be. *Greyhawk* warns that "any chaotic act will immediately revoke the status of paladin, and it can never be regained."[22] Paladins must also "give away all treasure that they win" to appropriate charitable endeavors, live a life of modest means, and associate only with Lawful characters. In recompense for adhering to this behavioral code, Paladins receive considerable in-game advantages—so players must wisely choose actions for their Paladins, under a constant threat of lapsing into banal Fighters.

These rules strongly imply that the referee must evaluate character actions to ascertain whether they violate the constraints of alignment. But, as usual, the original "guidelines" left much for the community to sort out. In the summer of 1975, in only the second issue of *A&E*—well before the term *role playing* had gained any currency—Joel Davis reported on the implementation of alignment in his Colorado group: "I wonder if most referees pay attention to Law/Chaos divisions—other than dangerous or safe use of a few magic items such as swords. Local custom here makes alignment quite important . . . and several referees keep track of each player's law/chaos points. Progressing either way leads to special protections, occasional divine intervention, etc." Davis here suggested that local referees at the time kept some kind of quantified tally of how Lawful or Chaotic a character's actions had been and that certain game benefits or penalties could result from that score.[23]

Distinguishing Lawful acts from Chaotic ones was also a matter left largely to the discretion of groups. Lee Gold explained in *A&E* 9 that players in Los Angeles "tend to play that the Lawful's aims are to rescue the unfortunate, kill Chaotics, and get loot. The Chaotic's are to torture the unfortunate, kill Lawfuls and get loot. The Neutral's are to get loot." She added that "Lawfuls and Neutrals get along fine most of the time." But the specification of these categories admitted of enough ambiguity that there were even disputes over whether sexual violence should be considered Lawful.[24] Some reported to *A&E* on attempts to break the alignments down into components that would further clarify the expected behavior: Glenn Blacow, for example, divided the Chaotic alignment into three subcategories, Meanness, Sadism, and Dedication, each of which had an associated percentile score (*AE* 14). A character with low Meanness "tends to avoid trouble," but one with high Meanness will never flee from a fight.

However loosely or strictly referees and players conceive of alignment, characters have some in-game obligation to adhere to the ethos chosen by their players: when crafting a statement of intention, the alignment of the character is something to take into account. But acting against alignment is not simply an error in role playing, like acting smarter than one's rolled characteristic for intelligence, say, which a referee might veto. Characters implicitly possess free will in the game world and thus have the capacity to make ethical choices that contradict their stated affiliation and have consequences in the game. Potential consequences for transgressions against alignment render the decisions a player makes for a character meaningful. A referee observing lapses in character can take a number of actions, including adjusting alignment accordingly. As Glenn Blacow recommended in *A&E* 10, "If people persist in acting Chaotically, change their alignment, dammit!"

In that crucial sense, alignment in practice might not be something chosen by the player but instead a judgment of character behavior made by the referee. This was true of a variable quantified alignment system in use in New York in early 1976 recorded by Scott Rosenberg in the first issue of his fanzine, fittingly titled the *Cosmic Balance*. Rosenberg admitted twenty degrees of alignment: "Alignment on the general framework is measured from 10 to −10: 4 to 10 being varying degrees of Law, −3 to 3 of Neutral, and from −4 to −10 of Chaoticality," as he disarmingly put it. Rosenberg insisted that a character's ethical behavior determined alignment and that

cynical schemes to elevate alignment superficially, such as "paying off the monastery," would not inflate the number. "Your alignment is determined completely by your actions, interpreted by the GM." Not only did the referee score players' alignments to mirror their actions, but the exact tally also remained a secret. "You will only know whether you are Lawful, Neutral, or Chaotic—never a specific number." In Rosenberg's system, players were not privy to the execution of the morality system; it was conducted exclusively by the referee, who could surprise the players when their mounting transgressions—or virtuousness—relocated them on the alignment spectrum. Later in 1976, Howard Mahler from nearby Princeton documented his sprawling system wherein referees track quantified character alignment between 100 and −100; although he kept that precise value a secret, at least he advised that "if they start getting towards the boundary line a warning should be given to the players" before their alignment changes (*QQG* 1).

The uncertainty of these alignment-tracking systems made players internalize an ethical inner voice. By isolating players from their quantified score, it brought them ever closer to their characters. Mahler stressed the impact this had on play and in particular how it might require players to formulate actions for their characters with care. "Remember," Mahler says, "that very lawful characters cannot just go around playing the game like a game of chess. Sometimes, the best strategy from a game standpoint does not coincide with the lawful thing to do" (*QQG* 1). And in 1977, Kevin Slimak explicitly linked abiding by alignment to the concept of remaining "in character" in a way that he would not for the similar question of acting within abilities such as Intelligence: "In fact, I do insist that people stay in character. The difference is in the definition of character. I demand of the Lawfuls that they remain Lawful, especially the Clerics" (*AE* 21). Slimak added constraints for the nonreligious as well—for example, "FM giving oaths, especially on their weapons, are expected to keep them." Even for a games person such as Slimak, doing the "lawful thing" and remaining in character trumped the wargaming impulse to prevail in the tactical situation.

Dividing the alignment system into a continuum with many incremental steps only clarified so much about what it meant for an action—or a character—to be Lawful or Chaotic. In February 1976, Gary Gygax unveiled in *Strategic Review* a famous revision of the alignment system, which added a continuum for good and evil and thus raised the number of

alignments to nine, all displayed in a two-axis graph between "Lawful Good" and "Chaotic Evil." He began that article by acknowledging the opacity of the original alignment rules and the understandable confusion expressed by the community: "Many questions continue to arise regarding what constitutes a 'lawful' act, what sort of behavior is 'chaotic,' what constituted an 'evil' deed, and how certain behavior is 'good'" (*SR* 2 (1)). He even supplied a helpful list of a few dozen qualities to associate with the four endpoints of his axes: Law claims terms such as "principled" and "uniform," whereas Chaos will be "unrestrained" or "disordered"; a Good character will be "honest" and "beneficial," in contrast to the "injurious" or "corrupt" Evil character.
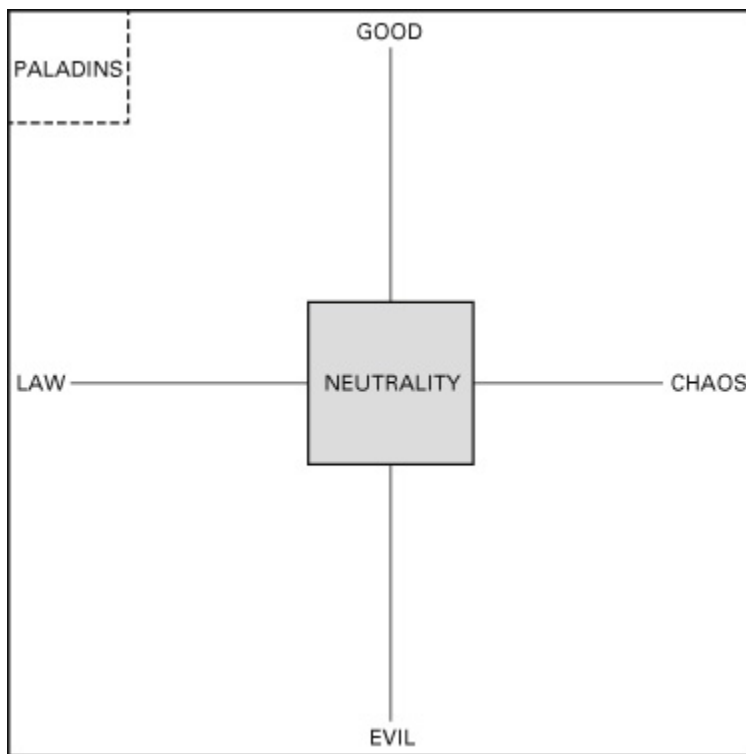
Figure 3.2

Alignment chart showing the area in which a Paladin must remain. After Gary Gygax, "The Meaning of Law and Chaos in *Dungeons & Dragons* and Their Relationships to Good and Evil," *Strategic Review* 2 (1) (1976).

What is less commonly remembered about this revised "fourfold way" alignment system is that Gygax recommended that referees literally pinpoint the location of each character on the graph and revise these positions according to how well in-character behavior corresponds to the

listed adjectives. A character's alignment thus is not absolute and atomic; each character exhibits a graphable degree of Lawfulness, Goodness, and so on. "The actions of each game week will then be taken into account when determining the current position of each character," Gygax continued, stressing that referees consider the intensity of actions to weigh how drastic a correction certain behavior might require. This essay revised the previous guidance for Paladins: rather than a single Unlawful action irrevocably erasing Paladinhood, Gygax now graphed an "area in which a paladin may move without loss of his status," in the Lawful and Good corner of the chart.

This two-axis version of alignment was soon equipped with its own quantification. Along with its "Installment L" in the spring of 1977, the Judges Guild shipped a "Character Checklist" that transformed alignment into a pair of statistics locating a character from +20 to −20 on a scale of "Law/Chaos" and +30 to −30 on a scale of "Good/Evil." It stipulated, for example, that "each act adjudged to be either Lawful or Chaotic will move the character up or down 1 in that column," so that "players not meeting alignment expectations can be charted and then penalized accordingly." Systems with these properties soon captured the imagination of the community: Lane Whittaker provided in *A&E* 33 his own hack for the Judges Guild quantifications, along with concrete guidance on properly playing the ethically challenging Paladin, Cleric, and Thief classes.

Quantification systems for alignment became commonplace in fantasy role playing by the end of the decade, though in some cases the quantities were fixed rather than variable. We can find fixed alignment values in a system such as *Bifrost* (1977), which rates alignment in two dimensions: a numeric axis ranging from Good (1) to Evil (7) and an alphabetic axis ranging from Law (A) to Chaos (G). Players in *Bifrost* select their alignment, but the system acknowledges that a player can then "decide to take action contrary to that alignment."[25] *Bifrost* leaves it to the referee's discretion what punishment if any should apply in those circumstances.

For those more interested in the tactical situation than in exploring fictional personalities, alignment serves merely as a challenging impediment, a handicap that a referee has to enforce. *D&D* uses the threat of a dire reduction in power to enforce proper behavior in Paladins, but some systems offer a trade-off instead of a direct reduction in ability.

Buccaneer (1979) has only a rudimentary alignment system, but it encourages characters to conform to the system through incentives. "Buccaneers have a 'public' image to foster," which may be either a good or bad one, and both paths confer advantages and disadvantages. A "bad" buccaneer receives a combat bonus, but a converse penalty to the roll made to determine the severity of punishment when captured; a "good" buccaneer receives a commensurately greater chance of being pardoned if captured but trades this for less force in combat. *Buccaneer* enumerates a set of good and bad actions, such as aiding wounded enemies versus torturing them; "to reach and maintain these reputations, each player must consistently perform certain positive or negative acts on the personages he captures." If the buccaneer's behavior is erratic and inconsistent, then "he is neutral with no die roll modifiers," though no way of tabulating behavior is recommended by the rules.[26]

Some quantified, fixed-alignment systems require players to roll for alignment like other attributes during character generation—and then to role play the consequences as a constraint. *Chivalry & Sorcery* is a notable example: players roll a 20-sided die, which yields a common result such as "Worldly" or a rare extreme such as "Saintly" or "Diabolic." In directing character actions, players are expected to defer to the system and accept this randomly generated alignment because it is fun, if not indispensable to the idea of role playing as *Chivalry & Sorcery* understood it. Whereas *D&D* bribed Paladins with special powers in exchange for obedience to a moral code, *Chivalry & Sorcery* contained language such as "alignment is merely a guide to players so that they can build their character's personality."[27] As another path to "letting the characters play themselves," voluntary submission to ethical tenets became one of the starkest points of demarcation between adherents to the new genre of role-playing games and their predecessors in the wargaming community.

The *Arduin Grimoire* (1977) strikes a similar posture, providing a chart that let players roll percentile dice to determine one of its thirteen character alignments and then giving explicit cues for the resulting character behavior. This could assist referees in deciding the actions of nonplayer characters, but it has equal applicability to played ones. On average, one-quarter of all characters will turn out "Moderately Lawful," the most

common outcome; only one percent will become "Amoral Evil." Each alignment is assigned a specific score in five behavioral circumstances: "Kill Factor," "Lie Factor," "Tolerance Factor," "Loyalty Factor," and "Cruelty Factor." A "Moderately Lawful" character has only a 5 percent chance of lying or engaging in cruelty and should remain loyal 85 percent of the time. By contrast, a "True Chaotic" character flips a coin for most behavioral decisions but has only a 35 percent chance of remaining loyal. A brief set of "General Notes" gives further tips beyond the five categories on role playing each alignment: for "Lawful Evil," the text reads, "Fanatical, bigoted, arrogant, nasty."[28]

Those sorts of cues for character behavior begin to stretch our understanding of the scope of alignment. Indeed, in prescribing actions associated with both alignment and abilities, early role-playing games often strayed into the more nebulous region of specifying personality. Mark Swanson proposed in 1975 a set of randomly generated minor abilities that would help to differentiate starting characters, which was immortalized in *A&E* 1 as the "Swanson Abilities." Over the next year, several authors refined his proposal: in *A&E* 4, for example, Jack Harness presented an assortment of character tweaks, which included various potential skill bonuses for combat, perception, defense, and so on, but then also dices for "idiosyncrasies" that give a sense of the character's personality. These idiosyncrasies range from being unflappable to excitable, paranoid to overconfident, and merciful to bloodthirsty. Beyond differentiating characters, they give explicit cues to the player on how to direct character behavior. By the spring of 1976, Grant Louis-d'Or had expanded this into a sprawling "Set of Special Characteristics" in *A&E* 11, a table spanning six pages and 144 different randomly generated outcomes. A character might be "moody, temperamental, easily intimidated," which would induce that character to retreat from a fight at at half hit points; or a character might be a "dynamic talker but lazy; ambitious; unromantic," which bestows a bonus against Charm spells but a penalty to combat; or a character might be someone who "thinks everyone else is insane" or who "has a buried subconscious personality." Louis-d'Or's personality traits illustrate how, even before the widespread acceptance of the term *role playing*, systems extending the baseline alignment design of *D&D* could challenge players to adapt to some behavioral constraint imposed by a die roll during character generation.

Any aspect of personal disposition could be diced and quantified in this manner. Greg Costikyan had already invented a "Sex in *Dungeons & Dragons*" system by 1975.[29] An initial "affiliation" roll would assign characters to the categories of heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, transsexual, or "extraordinary," where the latter encompasses a variety of fetishes. A "fixation" table gives new characters a 65 percent chance of being "normal" and a 2 percent chance of being obsessed with armpits. Three 6-sided dice determine a character's "sex drive," which must periodically be satisfied to avoid desperate acts; Costikyan noted the implications of this determination for alignment in that "any sadist or sado-masochist with a sex drive of above 16 must be chaotic" and that Paladins may not have a sex drive higher than 14. Die rolls determine the likelihood that a nonplayer character will welcome advances, whereas "players may, of course, fuck among themselves without checking sex drive/charisma, so long as they are of the appropriate sexual affiliation/sex." Scott Rosenberg, who played in Costikyan's game, observed "Once, I was a clerical phase-spider, homosexual with an oral fixation, masochistic (the sex characteristics are determined randomly, not by choice)—and soon dead" (*AE* 12).

With the proliferation of behaviors a system could dictate, some players wondered why it was necessary for a system to cover concepts such as alignment at all. "Why not just do away with alignments and have the players decide what their characters are like by writing a paragraph or two about the character on their character sheets?" Michael Troutman wondered (*AE* 51). *Runequest* abolished alignment in favor of setting-based factional affiliations, though some did come with certain constraints or responsibilities. But others found value in an alignment system, including Jon Pickens, who would counterpropose augmenting alignment with additional factors to create a situation "of the player balancing conflicting impulses to produce the action most consistent with the character he is trying to create" (*AE* 52). Promoting alignment as a source of tension in playing a role, where ethical choices may compete with other incentives, began to expose ways that these games could tap into more fundamental questions about human nature than the simple "line-up" sorting fantastic combatants into sides.

Trisha La Pointe, writing in 1978, reported on her experiences playing "one of the 'unacceptable' types of characters," a greedy, Lawful Evil

character who "will cheat the unsuspecting of their due and will double deal to her advantage," but who nonetheless "will associate willingly in an adventure with characters of other motivations" (*AE* 32). She found her character ostracized by "good" parties, and she ultimately concluded there were deeper matters at stake: "There is more to playing D&D than the game itself. There is the social nature of the game which brings together a divergent lot of people for, it is to be hoped, an evening of fun and challenge. There is also the meta-game where the players own values drift into their characters' values." In what would become a common sentiment regarding the "meta-game" of interpersonal dynamics that supervenes on role-playing games, La Point rueful noted that "dealing with this is one beast of a challenge, and not much fun at all."

Thus, alignment and the variant systems extending it provided another vector in which playing "in character" could override the traditional goals of wargaming. Fidelity to alignment, like constraining actions based on abilities, was not always a winning move, but some saw it as an obligation built into the system of *D&D*. Even where a rule set has no element called "alignment," ethical calculus can still exert leverage and steer character behavior. *Bushido* departs from a number of Eurocentric fantasy-gaming conventions by adopting a mythical Japanese setting. Instead of having alignments the players can choose, *Bushido* instead assigns to players a value for *on*, or "face," which the designers associate with honor and reputation. Newly created characters receive an initial *on* value based on their family's circumstances and accumulate more through honorable actions. *On* might accrue from behaving properly in Japanese society: by exhibiting courage and skill in combat, by solving mysteries, by performing various courtly activities, or just by having "outstanding style," according to the referee's discretion. More so than classic alignment systems, *on* demands that players constrain their actions to conform to the Bushido code as the game systematized it. And *Bushido* would light upon a key way to incentivize players to conform to *on*: by linking it to the game's experience system.

Personal Goals

If playing "in character" gets in the way of some ultimate objective, what is it? A traditional board wargame ships with achievable victory conditions for the players, but during the play of *Dungeons & Dragons* fidelity to the characterization of abilities and alignment chafes against something else. A *D&D* game is, to borrow the words of the *Western Gunfight* authors, "an informal 'campaign,' open-ended," without some preordained goal. So if you are not playing to win, what is a character's purpose in a game like *D&D*? What's the point of the whole game, anyway?

D&D does not specify any ultimate objective of its play—unlike its close imitator *Tunnels & Trolls*, which would state quite bluntly in its 1975 edition that "the true object of this game is to accumulate as many experience points as possible and by this means advance your first level character into as much of a superperson as you can."[30] Gygax in 1976 would say much the same of a *D&D* campaign: "progression, rather than winning per se, is the object" (*SFF* 87). If the life of a *D&D* adventurer may be compared to a game of pinball, then the experience point total for each character is the glowing score in the back box; players sneak glances at its steady rise throughout the game.[31] The progression system of *D&D* implies a character arc: characters begin as inexperienced, weak, and undifferentiated yet will over time grow in power, gain confidence, and develop a personal history, if not a legend.

The earliest commentary on the play of *D&D* celebrated the novel way characters persisted over game sessions and advanced with success. Reflecting on the key moment when he first played in Arneson's Blackmoor, Gygax remarked on how he found "the idea of measured progression" that it had introduced to be "very desirable" (*DR* 7). Progression was measured and quantified in the form of experience points accumulated by characters, which would in turn allow them to advance in level. Mike Wood, who observed a Minnesota group in early 1974, attested that he "was intrigued by the way the results of one game could be carried over to future games: a warrior could advance in rank by virtue of number of orcs killed, etc." (*MN* 39). Players participated in the exercise of the progression system so prominently that it was obvious not just to players like Gygax, but to a spectator such as Wood.

Wood here identified two crucial dimensions of progression: how it allows successful characters to advance in power; and how this occurs

episodically, spanning game sessions. *D&D* signaled its episodic nature with the word *campaign* in its subtitle: *Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns*. H. G. Wells documented wargame campaigns in *Little Wars* (1913), where he explained that a campaign is a series of wargame battles, as a "rubber is to a game of whist" (that is, a best-of-three series).[32] A wargame battle might involve only one evening of play, but ambitious gamers who simulate a protracted war could stage many evenings of related battles as opposing forces in various locations around the campaign map discover one another, fight battles, and regroup afterward. *D&D* explains in its foreword, "While it is possible to play a single game, unrelated to any other game events past or future, it is the campaign for which these rules are designed."[33]

The episodic nature of *D&D* reverberates throughout the rules, which divide a campaign into a series of "adventures," illustrated in the text with constructions such as a "campaign of adventures." The scope of a single adventure is only indirectly given in the rules, as during a dungeon delve "the adventure will continue in this manner until the party leaves the dungeons or are killed therein."[34] Any such bounded adventure might have its own purpose: a referee might design a dungeon where players have some direct objective for a given descent. *D&D* furthermore scoped the accumulation of experience to the adventure explicitly, as "it is also recommended that no more experience points be awarded for any single adventure than will suffice to move the character upward one level."[35] Progression is thus restricted during the course of a single adventure: only through surviving repeated episodes in a campaign can a character rise to the heights of power—it keeps players coming back for more. As for when exactly the advancement of level takes place, Kevin Slimak observed in July 1975 that "there's some question as to whether you go up during the expedition down in the dungeon, or when you come up" and leave the underworld (*AW* 2 (12)).

D&D grants referees almost total discretion in determining how to award experience, but it softly recommends that referees grant experience for slaying monsters and accumulating treasure. *Empire of the Petal Throne* recasts this as a restriction, making it clear that those are the "only two ways" to obtain experience points and that "no points are granted for casting spells or other types of activity."[36] Such a policy would ostensibly

steer the characters into a life of aggression and acquisitiveness, and surely many played *D&D* and other games in its tradition that way from the start.

But by 1977 the experience-point system of *D&D* and the implications of "becoming as much of a superperson as you can" for role playing had become a subject of increasing controversy and consternation. Peter Cerrato, writing in the *Wild Hunt* 22 in November that year, noted the growing interest in competing titles and hypothesized, "One of the main reasons for the reduced interest in D&D is the fact that it is becoming a zero-sum game, with the person who reaches the highest level the fastest 'winning.'" He believed, "This is in direct opposition to the concept of 'role playing'" and that successful *D&D* games were those where "the GM encourages the players to 'characterize' their characters." The very design of the original game weighed against this approach, however: "The direct cause of the lack of role-playing is how the D&D level system is set up. The whole game becomes a hunt for 'experience points.'" The result is that "the players themselves are connected too much with the mechanics of the game instead of with their characters." Cerrato did have a remedy in mind that would sound familiar to Sandy Eisen: he proposed that the referee unplug the scoreboard and be "the only person who knows a character's experience points, his level, and even his hit points." This solution echoed similar sentiments being expressed about quantified alignment and other system properties. Cerrato maintained that this would lead to a situation where "the players can pay more attention to their characters instead of to game mechanics."

Convincing players to kick the progression habit would prove a tough sell, however. Many instead experimented with systems that restructured the relationship of progression to the goals of the game. These systems included realigning the award of experience points to incentivize role playing, abolishing experience points and levels in favor of other measures of progression, replacing unidirectional progression systems with fluctuating ones, and finally substituting another explicit objective for the baseline goal of accumulating power.

First, many published and reported practices for awarding experience points broadened the set of game events that yielded rewards and more finely tuned the purpose of awarding experience. When Howard Mahler surveyed

the readership of his *Quick Quincey Gazette* about experience points before its third issue in 1976, the community immediately demonstrated that referees bestowed experience points for all sort of activities. Jim Cooper reported, "I favor giving experience for everything. Say maybe 1 or 2 points for just riding your horse." Peter Cerrato explained that "experience will be received for just that, experiences. Even if you come out of the dungeon without any treasure, just going down will give you experience points." Cecil Nurse one issue later added "throwing spells" to his own list and gave experience points "for each day in the dungeon or wilderness." Experience was a commodity these referees disbursed with largess, constantly rewarding players with small, reassuring amounts of it.

Other contemporary play reports show a similar diversity of character actions that warrant an experience award and give some inkling of the ways referees could use such award to steer characters. Early in 1977, Jim Thomas submitted to *A&E* 20 seven categories of behavior that he as a referee encouraged with experience, including "using a new professional skill successfully," as, for example, "a Magic-user gets points the first time he detects evil with a detect-evil spell," for "helping others," which Thomas deemed "particularly important for good neutrals," for Clerics successful in "converting the heathen," and even for simple "survival."

Others would more subtly groom experience rewards to encourage helpful conduct. Although Robert Clifford reported in *Wild Hunt* 12 that he tallied "group experience" for the entire party rather than tabulating individual awards, he did personalize each allotment: "During the adventure, each character is assigned positive or negative percentage points depending on how much of an aid (or a hindrance) that individual was to the party and on how well they acted in character." Tying rewards to acting in character used experience specifically to encourage role playing. This modifier, Clifford noted, "is also very handy to dock the turkey or pseudo-lawful characters who are always endangering the party or causing mayhem." Methods for coping with a "turkey," a problem player in the eyes of a group, form a major branch of the literature of the day.

Among published designs, *Tunnels & Trolls* had in 1975 already broadened the circumstances in which referees should award experience. It instructs referees to grant experience for "using magic," regardless of whether the spells contribute to the death of an adversary.[37] Making a saving

throw also grants experience. Even exhibiting "daring" by going deep into the dungeon merits such a reward. *Tunnels & Trolls* was only the first of many commercial role-playing systems to tweak the incentive of progression, and others would transform it in more radical ways. *Chivalry & Sorcery* remained fairly close to the earliest precedents for progression through experience points and levels, insisting, "There must be some system by which the success of a character can be translated into an improvement of his abilities."[38] But because *Chivalry & Sorcery* aimed for a deeper level of fantastic medieval simulation than competing titles, it scaled experience awards based on how well character actions correspond to the source literature of fantasy. Dwarves, who have a documented hunger for treasure in the fantasy genre, gain one-to-one experience points for acquiring gold, but magicians, who presumably have less passion for wealth, get only a tenth as much experience for it—a "Magick User" derives more experience from learning new spells, enchanting items, raising demons, or even simply meditating. Clerics receive experience for "doing good works," while Thieves accrue it for successful sneak attacks or picked pockets, and Knights advance through chivalric victory and gallantry.

Awarding experience points to players for adhering to characters' expected behavior in the setting was a key step in the development of role-playing games. The *Bushido* rulebook notes well that "in strict gaming terms, the object of any role-playing game is to gain experience," but in *Bushido* "the Level of a Character is determined by his Experience score and his *on* score."[39] As the surrogate for alignment in the *Bushido* system, *on* dictates the proper behavior of characters in its mythical Japanese society, so *Bushido* effectively links progression to adherence to that role. A character must meet a target sum in both experience and in *on* to advance. Certain in-character actions devastatingly affect *on*: "breaking one's word reduces one's *on* score by 25%."[40]

Other designs followed the lead of *Bushido* by rewiring experience points into something that encourages remaining in character. *Heroes* (1979) closely follows the number-and-letter quantification of alignment in its fellow British title *Bifrost* with a system that measures Good and Evil on one axis with a point value from 1 to 5 and rates Law and Chaos on a second axis as a letter range between A and E, such that an entrenched Chaotic Good character would have an alignment of 1E. "Once chosen," *Heroes* instructs us, "a character should attempt to act in character with his

alignment throughout the game." To ensure compliance, *Heroes* equips referees with a crucial tool: "Actions in line with a character's alignment should be rewarded Personal Experience Points (PEP) by the umpire, but actions out of character should be met with a loss of PEP."[41] In games where the ostensible objective is to accrue experience, nothing motivates players quite like systems that will increase or diminish their progression. If accumulating sufficient experience to become a "superperson" is indeed the closest thing to victory, systems like *Heroes* and *Bushido* show how progression can be coupled to acting in character: role playing itself becomes the object of the game.

Second, early designs began to reject the pinball-style accumulation of high scores in favor of less-quantified ways to progress. Among self-identified role-playing games, *Bunnies & Burrows* pioneered a progression system that eliminated experience points and levels entirely. It instead implemented the concept of "experience rolls." A character earns an experience roll by succeeding at the use of a particular skill while under duress; the game gives an example of a rabbit fighting off a badger as justification for awarding an experience roll for Strength. An experience roll does not guarantee progression: the probability of advancement depends on the innate value of the ability as determined during character generation. A rabbit with an innate Strength of 8 has a 10 percent chance of advancing, whereas a rabbit who originally had a strength of 17 has a 30 percent chance. If the target is rolled, then the "level" of that characteristic is increased by one.[42] Players can still seek to become a "superperson," or superrabbit as the case may be, but the process comes across as more organic. By eliminating the visible scoreboard of experience points, these progression roll systems liberate characters from the implicit goal of reaching the high score and create a space for other potential campaign goals.

Moreover, experience rolls in *Bunnies & Burrows* do not result only from fights: a character earns them as well for notable success in rolls involving Wisdom or Intelligence or Charisma. The designers of the game recognized how progression could entice players into role playing rather than into aggression and acquisitiveness. The game places a particular emphasis on in-character story-telling, where rabbits relate "the fabulous adventures of

some heroic rabbit of the distant past." As "players should be highly encouraged to invent and tell such stories," so "the gamemaster can encourage such stories by giving experience die rolls to the rabbit of a player that tells a good tale."[43] Experience rolls could can function just as effectively as experience points in steering players into desired activities.

No small part of the effectiveness of progression derives from dispensing it in measured doses, especially when the improvement will not come into play until the next game session within a campaign. The *Bunnies & Burrows* rules stress, "It is best for the Gamemaster to actually save these die rolls and make them at the end of each adventure, rather than allowing rabbits to advance during the same adventure, thus slowing down the flow of the game."[44] Players can then look forward to exercising these augmented abilities, an incentive to return for the next game session. Gains should be rare and precious enough to feel like a substantial reward to players, and thus episodic language survives in *Bunnies & Burrows*: "Not more than one Level in any given category should be awarded per Game Day."

Versions of the experience-roll mechanic appear in many subsequent role-playing games. *Space Patrol* has no experience levels, but consistently accurate use of guns awards to players a roll that, if successful, will grant a permanent combat bonus with the weapon in question. Famously, *Runequest* also dispenses with experience levels in favor of skill increases: "To learn a skill by experience, a character must use it successfully in conditions of stress. The player may then try to make a roll of (100 – current ability with skill) or less on d100. If he makes it the character gains up to 5% in ability in that skill."[45]

Not all skills could be improved through use: in *Runequest*, characters must increase some basic abilities through spending in-game time and money. These mechanisms subtly rechannel progression into a targeted self-improvement decision made for the character. Training is the most obvious way to translate money into a more lasting form of progression: games such as *Superhero '44*, *Traveller*, and *Runequest* have characters invest in education and exercise to raise their skills. *Traveller*, which takes a long-term, even tedious view of the character arc, recommends that characters enter a four-year degree program costing tens of thousands of credits in order to learn a new skill. In *Buccaneer*, a character in the regular navy can gamble £200 "for a chance to roll a six-sided die to advance himself by

study and perseverance," raising one ability, but "a roll of 1–3 accomplishes this, and a roll of 4–6 indicates the effort was wasted."[46]

Even games that completely disavowed the principle that adventuring itself would somehow intrinsically improve characters still permitted progression through the accumulation of material advantage. Science-fiction role-playing games of the 1970s seem to have fallen into a pattern of designs of this form. For example, *Metamorphosis Alpha* simply has no concept of either experience or training. A character's core statistics are fixed as originally rolled—apart from in-game events that might induce new mutations in the character, which can be either benign or malignant. The early science-fiction game *Starfaring* (1976) similarly lacks any progression system. The only advancements in *Metamorphosis Alpha* and *Starfaring* derive from money and equipment: acquiring better guns, armor, or technological artifacts through either plunder or purchase. Commerce usually happens only outside of an adventure, back in a town—or, as the case may be, in a spaceport—hence reinforcing the notion that progression happens between adventures and thus within the context of a campaign. But wealth and possessions are not intrinsic to a character like experience levels are; they can be lost, stolen, or otherwise surrendered in the course of a story.

Third, gamers began to reimagine progression as something impermanent, even reversible.[47] The notion of losing levels does appear in the margins of the 1974 edition of *D&D*, notably as the result of attacks from certain level-draining undead creatures, but in the course of play early adopters devised a more fitting cause for experience loss: death. Although a character's demise might result in the total annihilation of all progression, in practice resurrections and reincarnations abounded in these games and had little practical consequence, albeit the *Greyhawk* rules placed a limit on the number of times any single character could return from the grave. But Lewis Pulsipher reported in 1976 that in his games "when someone dies he loses 6–10% experience," a penalty that could set a character back a level under the right circumstances (*AE* 13). Lee Gold, for her part, affirmed in response that "all my D&D life I have played that a revived/reincarnated character loses 0–99% experience." Around these tabletops, progression was not a one-way street, and experience points were not an irrevocable

asset inscribed on a leaderboard that characters could accumulate without check, even in the face of death.

Earlier games had already transformed experience points and levels into almost unrecognizable forms. *En Garde*, for example, replaced experience points with status points and levels with social levels. The system is quite explicit that "the player's object is to accumulate as many status points as he can . . . in order to raise his social level."[48] At a given social level, a player requires a target number of status points to advance: to rise from social level 4 to 5, 15 points are required. Progression is episodic in that status points reset to zero after every game month, and characters advance in social level only if they meet the necessary quota at the end of that interval—but no amount of excess points permits characters to gain more than one social level in a month.

Liberated from both the fantasy setting and the original connection of "experience" to combat, the activities in *En Garde* that accrue status correspond to the expected activities of characters in the libertine Renaissance setting it simulates. Characters can gain status by joining social clubs, by carousing and gambling, or simply by holding a military rank or noble title. But social level can decline as well as advance. A minimum income of status points per month is required to maintain a social level; characters who fail to meet it will fall one social level. Any wager gambles with status as well as with cash: a winning bet grants a status point, but losing subtracts one. Although duels can grant status points, "any character who has cause and an opportunity to fight and does not will lose status points equal in number to half his current social level."[49] Those in a military profession gain status for warranting a mention in the dispatches but lose status for public cowardice. For *En Garde*, level is a fluid commodity; moreover, the system makes progression a consequence of something other than a character's aptitude for aggression and acquisitiveness: it is instead a reflection of how closely a character's behavior conforms to its literary antecedent. *Tradition of Victory* similarly has no experience point system but focuses on advancement in naval rank through a social system of notice and promotion reminiscent of *En Garde*.

Even in a heroic fantasy setting, why should campaigns explore only character arcs about improvement over time? After certain types of experiences, surely an adventurer could get worse rather than better. As

early as the fall of 1975, Matthew Diller circulated rules for "Psychotics in Dungeons & Dragons" through the early *Diplomacy* zine the *Pocket Armenian*.[50] Diller proposed the addition of a "Sanity" ability to *D&D*, rolled with the other basic attributes during character generation, which fuels a sort of nightmare version of experience levels. Characters with a less than average Sanity score will have between a 10 and 25 percent chance of "turning psychotic" when confronted with certain traumatic conditions as determined by the referee: examples include long periods of confinement, being charmed or polymorphed or petrified, or especially being raised from the dead—the latter trauma adds 30 percentage points to the chance of a psychotic break.

Repeated episodes will raise a character's Psychotic Level and lead to recurring mental illnesses that surface under milder stress situations, such as routine *D&D* combat, manifestations of which include hallucinations, paranoia, catatonia, and other incapacitating effects. As characters advance in Psychotic Level, they accrue more illnesses and a greater chance of triggering them in response to stress. Upon reaching the tenth Psychotic Level, the character becomes permanently insane and liable to involuntary commitment to a monastery for treatment. The rules do allow Clerics above the fifth level to study "therapy," which can aid them in rehabilitating psychotic characters by both assuaging symptoms of an episode and, through protracted therapeutic sessions, reducing the character's Psychotic Level.

A character arc where adventurers become disabled by long exposure to trauma and stress, rather than relentlessly improving, offered a welcome antidote to the addictive self-aggrandizement of the *D&D* progression system.[51] Yet the most interesting implications of Diller's approach lay in the sort of role play it encouraged. In some outcomes, a character might become a hypochondriac who must claim to suffer from imaginary conditions or invent a wish-fulfillment alter ego or suddenly lose interest in acquiring material possessions in a fit of neurotic selflessness. Some immediately render a character's alignment Chaotic. It challenges a presumably sane player to try out new experiences, even when they had the potential to be uncomfortable or even frightening. It implicitly sets characters the personal goal of keeping it together.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, games began to search for goals unrelated to progression. Why should the advancement of a campaign depend on characters getting either better or worse? Human beings can be motivated by desires other than just the base acquisition and retention of power.

Any given game session could, after all, be based on a situation with a particular objective. *Traveller*, which eschews traditional experience systems, emphasizes that "players can play single scenarios or entire adventuring campaigns set in any science-fiction situation." Its rules elaborate that "the scenario resembles a science-fiction novel, in that some basic goal or purpose is stated, and the adventure occurs as the group strives to achieve the goal. Usually, the scenario is a one-time affair and ends when the evening is over or the goal is reached."[52] If progression factors only into long-term episodic campaigns, then playing through a single scenario requires a goal other than progression: early tournament scenarios such as the famous *D&D* "Tomb of Horrors" at the Origins convention in the summer of 1975 established the defeat of a powerful adversary at the end of a dungeon as the most enduring objective. Tournaments typically employed pregenerated characters that were discarded after use; the documentation used by tournament referees rapidly evolved into the single-scenario commercial product that would soon be called a "module."

The designers of *Traveller* must, however, acknowledge the unsatisfactory nature of unconnected adventures: even though the intention of such "one-time affairs" is for "the characters and situation to be discarded at the adventure's end," they find that, "strangely enough, players generally become attached to their characters and usually want to continue their lives in further adventures. To this purpose, the campaign is designed."[53] Once players began to identify with characters through playing their roles, this naturally evolved into a lasting bond. Still, the scope of role-playing games would include both protracted and one-shot adventures: the *scenario* versus *campaign* terminology would become the standard, appearing as well in titles such as *Superhero '44* and *Runequest*; in its section on the time requirement for play, the latter notes that it ranges "from a couple of hours for a quick scenario to years for a long-running campaign."[54]

Implementing a scenario within a campaign with recurring characters can benefit from linking the scenario's objectives to the rewards system.

Uuhraah! (1978) specifies four scenarios for its prehistoric setting: a hunt, a migration, a dinosaur kill, and a war between tribes—though of course it notes that "the total number of scenarios that can be played is limited only by the referee's imagination." *Uuhraah!* scenarios were supposed to run fast: its designer attests that sessions "took an average of a half-hour to play," though "quickie games can be played during half time." In addition to awarding experience points for killing monsters, the rules also grant "experience for scenarios," stipulating that "each character successfully fulfilling the conditions outlined at the beginning of play gains 10 experience points if he retains more than half his hit points, or 5 points if he retains less than half."[55] Before starting the next scenario, characters can trade in 100 experience points to raise any core ability by one.

By the late 1970s, more radical systems had begun to enter the market. In the design of *Legacy* (1978), David A. Feldt recognized that for most role-playing games "the primary factor which differentiates a scenario from a campaign . . . is the lack of an ongoing pressure to increase the characters' abilities and characteristics as the single significant avenue of advancement." Instead, "scenarios are always organized around some specific goal or task."[56] But there is no practical reason why a specific goal or task cannot similarly become the objective of an episodic campaign.

So, Feldt reimagined the concept of progression entirely: he proposed that instead of gaining experience levels, characters should accumulate "Information Levels" on specific topics integral to the game world. He explains this design decision in the rulebook: "I didn't like experience points because there was no such thing even approximately in reality; because I didn't agree that killing some pirates who happened to have a ship full of gold made me smarter, wiser, or better than studying magic in the library or practicing swordsmanship in the courtyard." Instead, "I personally feel that it is a lot more interesting to wander around in the wilderness or in a dungeon searching for clues and information regarding what the deal is with the crazy world I am in and trying to take advantage of information I discover to increase my powers and abilities than I do wandering around in the wilderness and looking for treasure and killing monsters and wild beasts."[57]

Determining "what the deal is with the crazy world I am in" recast the object of the game from gaining in power to resolving a mystery. *Legacy*

ordinarily rates these Information Levels between 0 and 10, though for some topics the level may go as high as 25. Only at Level 7 do characters reach "the beginning of the real clues as to what's going on and what might be in store at the higher levels of information."[58] As the referee informs players of the Information Level they have reached, this bestows a sense of quantified accomplishment not unlike gaining levels of experience.

Whether in a protracted campaign or a one-off scenario, liberating characters from their addiction to aggression and acquisitiveness opened new spaces for role playing. But we should probably understand the *Legacy* Information Level system not as a replacement for personal progression but as a way of measuring a different and perhaps more compelling axis of campaign advancement. Even Feldt had to confess, "I as well as many other gamers harbor a secret liking for experience points,"[59] and his system does permit advancement through a complex system of "enablers" with various skill levels. The impulse for self-improvement would remain a key tool for motivating players and encouraging role playing when wielded properly by a referee.

Beyond gathering intelligence on a world or a scenario, characters might have their own personal purpose in a game world: the literature contains many echoes of players' search for a personal goal beyond just becoming a "superperson." Tom Smith, in a 1978 article, complained that his *D&D* players frequently pestered him with questions about their characters, such as "Who am I? Why am I here? Why do I have to get hacked up by these orcs when I could be herding cows or making shoes or some other menial (and safe) thing like that?" (*AAW* 20). Smith therefore set out to solve this "problem of character motivation" with a set of charts for generating backgrounds that would help players understand why their characters became adventurers. These include birthplace, social class, family situation and connections, and similar elements. But, most strikingly, it concludes with a chart about character motivation called "What the Hell Am I Doing Out Here, Anyway?" Outcomes of its percentile die roll include various reasons for seeking wealth or glory: for example, to impress a love interest or to escape criminal prosecution—which might be unjust or quite fair—or for being on some sort of religious pilgrimage or geas. On a roll of 00, the character is "working on a slow, subtle plan to conquer the world (30% chance of being insane)."

But should the direction of a character's life be left to chance? Writing in the fall of 1979 in a piece called "Fantasy Role Playing: How Do You Play a Role?," Paul Mosher sought more from role players than simply an understanding of "the character's abilities, advantages, disadvantages, etc." and how they affect play: he insisted that players invest characters with a personal goal (*AE* 50). The player "must decide what motivated the character to go out in the Big Wide World to make his way. Is the young woman leaving home to raise her family's station in life or because of an unusual wanderlust? Is the Prince seeking a suitable wife so he may legally ascend the throne or has he been banished by the King? Once the player has determined this motivation, he is ready to breathe life into the character." Mosher encouraged his players to fill in part of the backstory of the world, making them partners in the creative process of the game.

Tom Smith had titled his piece "Turning Numbers into People," a catchphrase that summarized one of the main goals of the earliest players who talked about role playing. The idea of rolling against a chart to determine some overarching goal for a character fit nicely into the discussion of remaining "in character" that spanned the 1970s: just as characters are expected to act within the constraints of abilities, or alignment, so too can character behavior be guided by prescribed goals. The community immediately recognized that fidelity to these constraints on actions stood at odds with the traditional approach to wargaming and that this set these new games apart from earlier ones. But there was also a common tension across all these discussions around whether these constraints are imposed on players or chosen freely by them and indeed how much players even know about them. Characters with their own motivation for adventure, something beyond just self-empowerment, raised one of the most fundamental questions about role-playing games: Who or what really drives the events of a game?

4

The Role of the Referee

If players are the people who do the role playing, what exactly is the function of a referee in a role-playing game? Although we must be careful about projecting authorial intention onto a set of rules that identify themselves as mere guidelines, we might still say with some confidence that *Dungeons & Dragons* assigns two separate tasks to referees: first, a pregame process of developing a world and its dungeons and, second, an in-game process of conducting the dialogue with players and running the system as they explore that world. How distinct these two tasks are depends on the referee: the referee keeps much information about the world a secret —the players wander the wilderness and descend the dungeons to learn their layout—so players might be at some pains to discern how much a referee has prepared in advance and how much was invented on demand. But regardless of when the world design happens, it is the primary creative activity that *D&D* assigns to the referee, as Gygax saw it: "It is up to that individual to devise a setting for his campaign and create all of the 'world' in which it is to take place" (*EU* 4/5). The second task, executing the system, we know from Gygax's later comments, is intended to be a more impartial role, one through which the referee can largely "let the dice tell the story"—though being only guidelines, the rules leave much for the referee to fill in.

Barely a year after the release of *D&D*, Sandy Eisen, for example, filled in the blanks with a vow: "I will not permit the players (people who do not know about D&D yet) to discover the rules." His conception of the role of the referee goes back to 1966, when Korns already knew that granting a referee broad latitude in the execution of a system could unlock a property more interesting than simple impartiality. Judges "are the only ones who need to be familiar with the rules," Korns stipulated, as they "are used to isolate the players within the confines of the knowledge of their troops." This is in some respects a corollary of principles dating to the dawn of *Kriegsspiel*, when Reiswitz hoped his game would instill in a player "the same sort of uncertainty over results as he would have in the field," but

Korns stressed that it is the referee in particular who delivers this property. The referee puts the player in the situation of the character, and there is every reason to think that this process was crucial to initiating the shift to role playing that Eisen experienced. But what Eisen saw was just a possibility in *D&D*, one way of exercising its guidelines—other referees could and did approach play differently.

Whichever attitude referees took toward involving players in the system, their role was central to the experience of the game. As *Monsters! Monsters!* explained in 1976, "Although the players' own characters may enter the fantasy world, the players themselves can participate only through the GM. The more imaginative, articulate and painstaking the GM is, the more convincing his/her world will be and the more involved everyone will become."[1] But in some early implementations, even describing the referee as the sole conduit through which the players interact with the game world was far too restrictive. The first attempts to explain the purpose of the referee reveal what the practitioners of the time thought about the nature of role-playing games in a discussion that would stick out like a sore thumb in prior wargaming literature.

Early adopters recognized these games as a new and distinctive category, one that they knew required fresh thinking: as the fanzine *Wild Hunt* identified itself as a venue for referees, it carried some of the weightier considerations on what role the referee plays. Late in 1976, Jim Michie wrote in issue 10 about how role-playing games were "more closely analogous to real life games, such as company politics, the stock market, intersexual play, and the like, than to ordinary abstract games like chess, go, *Monopoly* or even *Stalingrad*," a famous board wargame. Thus, to understand this emerging hobby, Michie insisted that "we must try to get at its roots to see what makes the game appealing" and discover "the methods through which we as game leaders can improve and expand the enjoyment shared by our players." The first step in finding these roots was acknowledging, as he put it, that "the game itself has become, in the club at MIT at least, a game of social and psychological interaction" as opposed to a competition. Like McIntosh, Michie highlighted the player's strong identification with the character: "Each player tends to project aspects of personality on the characters, aspects which he either admires or hates, depending on his nature," and as a consequence "the player's emotions closely interlocked into the life of the character(s) he is controlling."

Stories turn out to be fundamental to the way Michie articulated the role of the referee. He observed that among players "there is a great interest in the story line of the adventure," despite the appearance that the "action of the game is more or less random as designed originally" in the seminal *D&D* rules. Michie argued that rather than letting the dice tell the story, the referee must take that randomness and shape it into something the players can recognize as a narrative; the characters of a role-playing game are, for Michie, characters in a story. "By good management, the GM injects building suspense and growing uncertainty into the developing story as it unfolds. This leads to a series of building climaxes which stick in the imagination to form a memory of adventures shared by the group." Once the group begins to internalize this emergent story, then retroactively "the random action of the past games imposed by the dice is soon forgotten as the tales of glory or agony borne grow in the memories of the participants." Eventually, after multiple installments of an episodic campaign, "a history of saga-like grandeur begins to develop among regular players of the game."

These "tales of glory" do not remain confined to the past: "the retelling of old hunts and old battles before the beginning of the next adventure adds color," Michie explained, "and locks the imagination to the upcoming action." In this respect, he proposed that role-playing games tap into something fundamental about our nature as human beings: "These aspects of the game appeal to what I think to be deep-seated tribal instincts in us, explicitly based in the story telling arts in our past. The shared tales build in us a tribal hunting-team spirit which reaches below our civilized natures, and binds us to a common tribal lore." He argued that "the development of this tribal/team spirit is significant in the welding of a leader's game into a world of consequence to its players."

Tapping into the "story telling arts" is thus the vocation Michie saw for referees. He advised them, "We can begin to improve our own game by learning some of the arts of the story teller: the art of building a picture in the minds of players, the art of giving leading hints and suggestions so that they can begin to anticipate the suspected action about to be revealed, the art of building suspense, the art of the surprise and the reasonable result." He went on to relate some techniques that would "create emotion, anger, sympathy, hate, love, etc." in players and spoke particularly to studying fantasy literature to learn its rhythms.

Up to this point, he restricted "story telling" responsibilities exclusively to the referee. But then he underscored that this process involved more than just unilateral action by the referee—he saw a need for the referee to engage players in the creative process of the story. "Allow your own mental picture to interact and be guided by the mental picture that they appear to be following." He even suggested delegating part of the task of representing the game world to the players: "To aid the players in getting their imaginations started, ask them to verbally fill in for the others their own partial description of the scene which you initially verbally sketch." He cautioned referees against being overly prescriptive in detailing the game world for the players, "else you run the risk of destroying their mental picture."

In addition to giving tips on key story-telling techniques for "building suspense, anticipation, and surprise," Michie also gave some advice on what not to do: he found the development of a compelling narrative far more important than the execution of cumbersome system mechanics, counseling only to "use the dice to guide life and death decisions and to make quick decisions without breaking your concentration." The referee must de-emphasize the system in order to isolate the players in the story. "When the game begins to work for you as described above, you and people playing with you will feel it," he promised. "The game comes to life."

Pieter Roos picked up this thread of advice to referees a few issues later in *Wild Hunt*. He stipulated in issue 15 that "the G.M. must be as the author and create a world that looks, feels, sounds and even smells real." Roos knew that this can yield extraordinary results for the players: "If this is done right, the players should sense it, get the feeling of the universe in which their character live, and react to it. With a little co-operation from the players, the game can transcend mere amusement; the characters can come to live and breathe within a separate world for the span of a few hours. This can and should be the goal of the Gamemaster." This sound very like Eisen's vow to furnish a game where his players "lived the part," suspending disbelief until they felt they were "in the dungeon," without giving any thought to "wargame mechanics."

In laying out these responsibilities, Roos described a function not only for the referee but also for the entire game that trancended even Michie's ambitions. "The effect one is striving for, in more concrete terms, is the

total immersion which can be obtained when reading a good book or viewing a good film. The person experiencing the book or film becomes lost in the sweep of action, oblivious to his real surroundings as he moves beside the characters portrayed before him."[2]

This use of *immersion* followed only a few issues after Kevin Slimak wrote about "submerging yourself" into characters and again reflects the referee's capacity to isolate players within a story. But, like Michie, Roos was aware that achieving such immersion requires overcoming many obstacles, especially the distraction of executing the system, and that "the difficulties with applying these to a role-playing situation are many," especially because games are not "passive activities" like movies or books. "In the game, the participant must be aware of himself and his surroundings. He must keep track of the actions of the rest of the party and the G.M., he must maintain notes on several abstract quantifications of abilities. He must roll dice to determine the results of activities. All these activities break the enchantment, if you will, of the world created by the G.M." Perhaps the ideal form of the game he envisioned would remain out of reach, "yet how can we know if we do not try?"

Neither the terms *referee* nor *judge* seems remotely adequate for the duties articulated by Michie and Roos. Tellingly, Michie never used *referee* in his essay, instead preferring *leader*. As with the contentious term *role-playing game*, different interpretations of the role of the referee motivated some designers to call the job by other names. *Dungeon master* became common on the West Coast by early 1975 and from there made its way into *Tunnels & Trolls*—though it might seem to limit the responsibilities of the referee to supervising the monsters, traps, and treasures found in a typical underworld. East Coast gamers of the day, such as Roos, preferred the older and more generic term *gamesmaster*, which admitted of many variations, such as *gamemaster*, *games master*, and *game master*; it would grace designs unlikely to dwell on dungeoneering, such as *Bunnies & Burrows*, *Bushido, Gangster!* (1979), and *Villains & Vigilantes* (1979). Some British games such as *Heroes* and *Mortal Combat* (1979) favored *umpire*, a term much used by earlier wargamers in the United Kingdom. Although in 1977 the text of *Chivalry & Sorcery* sprinkled around the terms *referee* and *dungeon master* interchangeably, by 1978 its designer Ed Simbalist would quip, "*Chivalry & Sorcery* talks about game masters, while D&D talks about dungeon masters. There is more to a fantasy world than dungeons"

(*APR* 3). *High Fantasy* would stick with *judge*, as would *What Price Glory?!* and *John Carter, Warlord of Mars* (1978), a title that talks about *role playing* but is still firmly anchored in wargames. *Space Patrol* adopted the quirky *Mission Master* for its own usage, and that term would be borrowed, along with much of that game's system, by Heritage's *Star Trek* role-playing game *The Final Frontier* (1978). *Starships & Spacemen* games ran under the supervision of a "Starmaster." *Legacy* calls the referee a "game operator." There was as little consensus about the proper name for this role as there was about the nature of role playing itself.

As the setting of role-playing games burst out of the confines of the dungeon in the designs of the 1970s, the referee became a proxy for the richness of the world—or in some cases the game narrative—required to foster role playing. Some early designs attempted to aid or in respects even constrain the referee in this endeavor. Though a referee might bear the responsibility for deciding when to invoke mechanisms such as saving throws that quantify a character's resistance to ill fortune, some systems did not favor the referee isolating players from those decisions and instead allowed players to decide when destiny would intervene. Taking that to its extreme, a few of the earliest products that would be called role-playing games even dispensed entirely with the referee, allowing players to exercise the system to generate their own flow of events.

Steering a Story

Mark Swanson observed in 1976 that "recently, D&D literature has been overrun with calls for gamesmasters to make their games more 'realistic.' Or, if not that mirth-provoking word, at least a coherent, complex world where characters have something else to do besides forever descending deeper and deeper into nastier and nastier holes in the ground" (*AE* 10). Swanson famously branded the previous year the "Year of the Gilded Hole" because many referees of the time limited their "worlds" to underground labyrinths improbably brimming with fiends and treasure, which characters raided for purposeless plunder.

Designing worlds was the referee's job, a creative activity that the original rules very decidedly set above players. The project of world building in *D&D* traces back to Gygax's wargame *Chainmail*, whose

fantasy supplement explicitly encourages wargamers to "refight the epic struggles related by J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and other fantasy writers; or you can devise your own 'world,' and conduct fantastic campaigns and conflicts on it."[3] The many taxonomies of *D&D* draw inspiration for monsters, spells, and so on from existing fantasy literature, but the rules endorse no particular author's "world." As such, the referee can decide how thoroughly articulated and considered the game world will be. In the foreword to *D&D*, Gygax invokes the fantasy authors who created the imaginary worlds of Nehwon, Barsoom, and Hyboria, inviting players to "enjoy a 'world' where the fantastic is fact and magic really works!"[4] From Swanson's account, we might gather that many of these early campaigns provided a less-considered setting than the game promised.

Halfway through the Year of the Gilded Hole, article in *Wargamer's Information* 7 by Tim Waddell outlined a way to escape that perfunctory abyss. He had refereed *D&D* intently enough to know that "its potential knew no bounds." The potential he envisioned included "a world full of fabulous treasures and terrifying monsters, full of staunch castles, little towns, foreboding dungeons, and evil secrets," in turn "a world where anything is possible." But he had to acknowledge that the degree to which *D&D* can deliver this in practice depends "on the amount of work the ref is willing to put in. It depends mostly on the ref. He is the game, so to speak."

Waddell divided *D&D* campaigns into four "levels" of sophistication, beginning with level 1, which is very much Swanson's "Gilded Hole."[5] Nothing exists but the dungeon, so if characters "want to buy anything, the GP's are taken away, and they get the item automatically," rather than playing through a dialogue of visiting an in-game town or merchant, say. Waddell firmly asserted of this basic level that "D&D was meant to be more, i.e., it doesn't do the game justice." In level 2 campaigns, there is "a dungeon, maybe even two or three, and some wilderness" mapped out in hexes. Level 3 adds to the mix "at least one town." But it is at level 4, Waddell stated, that we reach the point "D&D was meant to be." Here there are "several completely mapped towns, plenty of interesting townspeople, rumors, legends, history, etc. A total fantasy world."

In an important sense, the depth of the setting has as much influence over how statements of intention are resolved as does the system. In a Waddell level 1 world, a player who says, "I sell the two goblin swords and the

bronze goblet" might well hear the referee respond with the amount of silver received. In a world with a higher Waddell level, however, a referee might challenge the player with, "To whom do you sell those items, exactly?"— much like the referee would challenge a player who vaguely stipulates "I try to become king" to explain what steps she is taking. This might lead the player to a particular town, with a particular merchant, a spate of haggling, in what Mark Swanson might call a more coherent world. A lack of this coherence became jarring to people who felt like dungeon adventuring did not tell the whole story.

Waddell's own campaign, he believed, had so far reached level "3⅔" though he aspired to evolve it into "a full-fledged 4." He had filled a large map with "towns, rivers, mountains, castles, evil places, etc." and then specified these in accompanying documentation. For each town, he recorded who lived in every mapped residence, providing for each "a biographical sketch of the person," and for stores he listed the proprietors, inventory, and so on. He furthermore specified the laws, religions, important citizens, their secrets and dispositions, as well as "legendary people and places" that the players could investigate. Characters in his game "start in a town where they may purchase what they need, rent a room at the inn . . . then, by inquiring about the surrounding area," they decide on a course of action, which may involve investigating some nearby "legendary place," exploring the countryside, or even staying put in town, where Waddell offered alternatives to adventuring. "If luck gets too bad, they may have to get a job to keep from starving." Career opportunities could lead the characters back into the story: "As a bartender they could pick up some cash and meet both townspeople and strangers from far away lands bringing strange rumors." The notion that characters might focus on tasks other than defeating monsters in subterranean lairs, including working the crowd at an inn, promotes exactly the sort of interactions between referees and players that would inspire commentators to call *D&D* a role-playing game.

"This is the complete fantasy experience," Waddell asserted. "This is *Dungeons & Dragons*" as it was meant to be. Encouragements of this form were not entirely absent from the original *D&D* rulebooks, which discuss the village of Blackmoor and the city of Greyhawk: "Both have maps with streets and buildings indicated, and players can have town adventures roaming around the bazaars, inns, taverns, shops, temples, and so on.

Venture into the Thieves' Quarter only at your own risk!"[6] Arneson had provided a map and much detail of the town of Blackmoor in his article "Facts about Black Moor," which would soon be augmented and reprinted in *First Fantasy Campaign* (1977) (*DB* 13). But it is important to note that Waddell's proposition did not go unchallenged. Rick Loomis, who edited *Wargamer's Information*, added a perplexed note to the end of Waddell's article. "I don't see why it is 'unquestionably better' to have a detailed wilderness," Loomis submitted (*Wargamer's Information* 7). "Suppose I just want to go down into the dungeon? Can't you spend just as many hours, and just as much imagination, making a really good dungeon?" If the tactical situation of the dungeon is what the players really want to experience, why clutter the campaign with extraneous overworld personalities and verbiage?

Loomis failed to recognize that the creative license granted to the *D&D* referee proved irresistible to people who delighted in building worlds, especially those fanatics who had already lovingly elaborated their own fantastic worlds through fiction. But how essential to the role of the referee is it, really, to invent a personal world? Waddell acknowledged that a level 4 world would be "the result of hours upon hours of work by a ref with a reasonably fertile imagination," and he therefore could excuse those many referees who only had time to run at level 1. Couldn't you just borrow someone else's world?

Soon, relief from responsibility for world design could be purchased, most famously in the form of *Guide to the City State* of the Invincible Emperor released by the Judges Guild in 1976. The eponymous city, with its innumerable dwellings, denizens, and idiosyncrasies, provided a first foothold in a complete fantasy world where players could have all manner of urban adventures. The Judges Guild positioned itself as a supplier to the harried referee, shouldering much of the pregame burden that *D&D* imposed. Referees too flummoxed to sketch even a Waddell level 1 dungeon could also turn to the marketplace: products such as *Palace of the Vampire Queen* (1976) began offering prepackaged "module" dungeons that made adventures into off-the-shelf commodities.

But even earlier, around the time that Waddell identified his four levels in 1975, the first published games influenced by *D&D* began testing to what degree the system design could itself dictate an exclusive intended setting,

lifting any obligation on referees to devise their own worlds. *Empire of the Petal Throne* traded on the depth of its setting: we might fairly say that the game existed for the sake of its designer's imagined world. M. A. R. Barker had detailed his world Tékumel in works of fiction published in the journals of science-fiction fandom since the 1950s, and he saw in *D&D* an opportunity to introduce more people to his creation. *Petal Throne* specified its setting to an unprecedented degree, as Waddell's level 4 was effectively Barker's starting point: he had already long since fully articulated his cities, their key inhabitants, a rich world history, and even an invented language.

Barker is surely the first to have demonstrated that a game can provide access to a specific imaginary world just as well as a work of fiction, if not better. In the section titled "To Prospective Referees," Barker emphasized that it is the referee's responsibility to run Tékumel as Barker defined it, not as a spin-off world of the referee's invention: "The first priority for a would-be referee for Tékumel, thus, is familiarity. All of the background Sections should be read over several times" until the referee has thoroughly absorbed this imaginary culture.[7] But even so, it remains the referee's responsibility to control the flow of events within the constraints of the overall world and narrative, and in that sense, Barker promised referees in a section titled "Developing a Scenario" that "the world of Tékumel is at the disposal of the referee, and it is up to him to people it with all the enjoyment of good fantasy."[8] The prespecification of a world thus does not completely eliminate the creative responsibility of the referee. But where Waddell said of a *D&D* referee who creates his own world that "he is the game," one might hesitate to say the same for a *Petal Throne* referee, who must diligently channel Barker's baroque vision.

To understand Barker's creation, we must postulate another level beyond Waddell's 4, where the referee or a designer defines not only a world but furthermore a situation in that world that the characters will encounter. Waddell himself implied this step when he positioned his starting adventurers in a particular town and circumstance within his game world. But this creative task can go beyond specifying an initial condition and involve a longer-term plan for the direction of game events. Barker pushed beyond Waddell's categories by providing in the game's rulebook not just a world but also an outline of a story that characters will encounter. "For convenience's sake," Barker wrote, "it is assumed that all player characters arrive in a small boat at the great Tsolyáni port city of Jakálla."[9] That is the

way the rules state that characters enter the world of Tékumel, where they then "may attempt to sell the small boats in which they arrive from their (presumed) barbarian homelands." All such arrivals, including castaways, are "housed in one of the Imperial resthouses in the foreigner's quarter," where they gradually learn about the society of Tékumel through interaction with nonplayer characters. A lavish map with a detailed key shows the city of Jakálla and its major features. Venturing unsupervised into Jakálla proper when not on official business can easily lead one to commit a random faux pas resulting in unceremonious execution.

Barker's *Petal Throne* thus went beyond specifying a setting or even a world to make a particular narrative integral to its system in an almost authorial fashion. The high-level premise is one of barbarian characters integrating themselves into Tsolyáni society: all human characters who reach the fourth experience level are granted imperial citizenship and will by that time presumably have been sufficiently indoctrinated into the ways of Tékumel through exploration of the setting. We might be forgiven for inferring the game itself to be just a pretext for a Tsolyáni immersion course. The outline of this story fills the section of the *Petal Throne* rules titled "Starting the Game," and no alternative ways of playing *Petal Throne* are suggested by the system. Citizenship is, for a starting character at least, the object of the game, although play does not necessarily end when it is achieved. But what if players were not interested in becoming citizens of Jakálla? This begins to raise new questions that *D&D* does not: To what degree does a setting, one constructed by a referee or a game designer, impose a narrative direction on players? And in what sense do player actions determine the story of a campaign?

Some referees felt an obligation to bring the situation of the world to life in a historical context, which characters would then be thrust into, as a further responsibility beyond the basic design of a world. Mark Chilenskas had at the beginning of 1976 a Waddell level 4 world, a place with "a past and geography for foundation, folklore for flavor and social structure for interest," which he even invested with "a direction."[10] He did more than just articulate his setting; he also set its events into motion in a way that he compared to authoring literature. He it is "here the gamesmaster fulfills his role as a novelist. We have nations and society, but where are they going? Will there be war, and if so, what is its outcome?" But Chilenskas wisely recognized that he was no novelist, that he was instead responsible for

engaging players in his setting, and he worked diligently to foster "the ability of the players to affect the course of history in a meaningful fashion" (WH 7).

As the first commercial systems began calling themselves *role-playing games*, their designs specified a general setting, or a particular imaginary world, or even a specific story to varying degrees: for example, *Bunnies & Burrows* drew heavily from the setting of the novel *Watership Down* but left the referee to define the world, or warrens, where rabbits would adventure. Its rules even warn referees not to stray beyond specifying that world into plotting a specific direction for the game: "It is absolutely impossible to foresee what players will do in the game. The best-laid traps will be avoided, players will do what you least expect. . . . So save yourself the headaches of laying out too much detail of the future of the game; it's more fun to let the game evolve for you as well as them anyway."[11] This shows a key side effect of advancing beyond Waddell level 1 games: when you release characters from the confines of a dungeon, dungeon design itself becomes a speculative activity because players will not reliably explore the areas of the game world that the referee has specified.

Referees might try to steer characters, gently or blatantly, into sanctioned spaces of the game, but that might provoke resistance. Mark Keller, writing in the *Wild Hunt* 13 in 1977, acknowledged that "how much the GM should steer the players is an interesting question." Any sort of fixed scenario, such as a module, seemed to require it: "If they're low-levels hired to do a specific job, their scenario is completely planned out, of course." In general, he recommended more subtle indications to nudge a party in the direction that would serve the narrative. "Otherwise, I plant clues. Leaving town? 'Why not stop at the tavern first for a last drink?'—and in the bar is a wanderer with a story of treasure glowing near the North Road." Players can then choose to follow the lead or not—though if they opt out, it is ostensibly up to the referee to proffer an alternative. Or as the author of the *E'a* (1979) would put it, "If the players don't want to get involved, don't make them."[12]

If responsibility for steering a story rests with the referee, the structure of that story, as Michie recommended, can fall back on the source literature that inspired the worlds and characters. Some of the earliest disputes among

players of role-playing games focused on how referees might curate games that were too lenient on the players, but fantasy literature gave ample precedent for steering stories in that direction. In a 1977 essay called "A Defense of Monty Hall," John Strang playfully puzzled over criticisms levied at generous referees. He pointed out that fantasy stories tend to display conspicuous generosity to their protagonists: "Most of the adventures and myths and fairy stories that D&D and C&S derive from are pretty Monty Hall." In fantastic literature, power and riches often accrue unearned rather than through arduous endeavors, so Strang felt justified in asking, "What does Bilbo (a first level hobbit) do to earn Sting and the One Ring?" He then showed how fairy stories such as "The Widow's Son" heap rewards on characters for incidental acts of charity rather than heroic feats of arms. "Fantasy," Strang must conclude, "is a pretty Monty Hall situation" (*AE* 29).

For Strang, the connection of role-playing games to stories posed an interesting question about realism—even though Mark Swanson had already deemed *realistic* a "mirth-provoking word" when applied to fantasy gaming—because, as Strang put it, "the question isn't so much one of 'should the FRP game scenario be realistic' but rather 'which should it be realistic to, the realistic wargame or the patently unrealistic world of fantasy?'" Whereas some referees might endeavor to simulate a reasonable fantastic world, others might instead replicate the narratives of fantasy. So, for Strang, the pejorative Monty Hall accusations epitomized the divide between the two cultures and how on one side of it "a lot of DMs are still uncomfortable with fantasy and want realistic wargame stuff."

Fidelity to source literature had effects on game designs that borrowed little from the Tolkien set. *Superhero '44* brought role playing to the superhero genre, and with that genre comes certain formulaic restrictions on the course of events. "Villains will always try to capture a hero" rather than killing him outright, for example, and subsequently "they usually put him in a death trap and leave (they are very squeamish and don't wait around)."[13] A later superhero game, *Villains & Vigilantes*, takes this a step further: "If our game was to be based on comics and comic book style characters, we should follow the Comics Code."[14] A number of constraints on play fall out of that decision. As the rulebook explains, "According to the Comics Code followed by the major comic book publishers, villains in comics cannot be portrayed as the type of person one would want to be or become," so

"players may NOT be villains and 'chaotic' behavior on their parts will result in the loss of Charisma points."[15] Although superheroes enjoy freedom of decision, the ethical calculus in early superhero role-playing games focused on simulating the types of stories about superheroes that appeared in comic books, and used alignment-correction mechanisms to encourage players to comply.

Just as it was possible for a premade setting to relieve a referee of the responsibility for inventing a world, so too could a design lift the burden of steering a narrative out of the referee's hand. The starkest example is the Fantasy Games Unlimited (FGU) title *Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo* (1977), written by the company's founder, Scott Bizar, in concert with the science-fiction and fantasy author Lin Carter. *Flash Gordon* was surely the first self-described role-playing game to license a preexisting media property, with all of the backstory that entails. Although the game takes place on the world of Mongo, the purpose of the system is no longer to simulate a world but instead to simulate a particular type of story, where the players take on the roles of characters in the story. *Flash Gordon* goes beyond merely defining an objective of play—it even specifies a clear victory condition that ends the game, something anathema to *D&D*. Yet it had no trouble proclaiming itself a role-playing game, and we would be at some pains to disqualify it.

The introduction to the rules of *Flash Gordon* quite starkly begins, "It is the intention of these rules to provide a simple and schematic system for recreating the adventures of Flash Gordon on the planet Mongo." Although the adventures themselves are purportedly "free-wheeling and widely varied," they all have the "final goal of overthrowing the evil government of the Emperor Ming the Merciless."[16] Thus, not only is the *Flash Gordon* system built around a specific world, but the design itself scopes play to a specific type of story in that world: one where the characters aspire to defeat Ming. That is simply a premise for the game that all players must accept. Characters have four randomly determined characteristics, and based on those roles each player selects one of three character classes according their prime requisites: a warrior favors combat skill, a leader requires charisma, and a scientist needs scientific aptitude. There are no other quantified character attributes of any kind. In the course of play, a character may become wounded, but there is no concept of hit points;

rather, the nature of the situation determines the wound effect and its resolution. The system is stripped down to a bare minimum.

A world map shows the various regions of Mongo that the party traverses on their way to confront Ming—but the actual progress of the party through the story of defeating Ming is tracked on a separate "schematic map." The *Flash Gordon* rules emphasize that "our schematic or representational outlook simplifies the situation to make a game playable without the extremes of paperwork necessary in most role-playing games."[17] In some respects, play resembles a traditional board game in that the "schematic" map depicts a set of concentric rings broken into segments, each of which represents both a territory in the world and the particular adventure the parties in that location will experience. The rulebook describes the perils within each segment of the schematic map, enumerates the strategies players may employ to overcome those perils along with any necessary die rolls, and finally specifies a reward characters will receive once they successfully advance to the next region. The reward frequently translates into a boost to a characteristic, though it may also entail enlisting new soldiers allied to the party's cause. Parties may choose a direct route to Ming through conduits defined on the schematic map, but a more circumambulatory approach will allow characters to accumulate the rewards and allies necessary to secure victory. However, even the most circuitous route would surely resolve within a single evening's play, and thus we should understand *Flash Gordon* as a game without an episodic structure, instead featuring a single replayable scenario composed of the scenes designated by the schematic map.

What does a referee actually do in *Flash Gordon*? The players start at a random location on the schematic map, but from that point forward they choose where they move, and thus the narrative flow between encounters is selected by the players rather than by the referee. The rules say the "referee or gamemaster" is the one who "determines the dangers encountered by the player characters" when they enter areas,[18] but "determines" seems to mean "consults the rulebook." Action resolution is very different from the traditional dialogue of *D&D*: the system is focused on resolving situations with a simple die roll rather than by refining statements of intention such as "I'm going to escape" into actionable tasks. No secret information is involved, so surely players could run the game themselves, without a referee to parrot the rules. Perhaps what is left as the referee function when

you take away world building or even control over the flow of events is, as Sandy Eisen might have it, the power to isolate the players in the situation, to grant them the luxury of ignoring the rules, even rules as simple as they are, to submerge themselves into the characters. Thanks to the reductive power of the dialogue, the players have little visibility into how complex—or not—the considerations are that the referee takes into account before relating the results of their actions.

Flash Gordon furnishes an early example in which the referee's creative contribution to a role-playing game is unrelated to building a world or even determining the flow of events but must instead lie in more intangible aspects of how the dialogue is presented. To paraphrase *Monsters! Monsters!,* the referee's responsibility extends to convincing the players of the reality of the world by explaining what they see and hear around them. This is where Michie and Roos would argue that the way the referee articulates the world is itself a creative responsibility. A referee can always rely on the "story-telling arts" in conducting the dialogue to create a compelling dramatic situation out of even the most rudimentary system.[19] Ken St. Andre, the designer of *Tunnels & Trolls*, wrote an early review of *Flash Gordon* where he acknowledged the "enormous potential" of the game but also complained, "Unfortunately you will have to do most of the imaginative work yourself, as only the barest skeleton outline of various situations is described in the book" (*SN* 29). Perhaps he meant that the referee would have to exercise the latitude to go beyond the rules in order to make the game interesting.

It is hard to even rate a work like *Flash Gordon* on Waddell's scale because *Flash Gordon* did not aim to provide a "coherent" world in the sense that Swanson described. Why would it? Flash Gordon stories are not about shopping for equipment in towns or about downtrodden adventurers tending bar when strapped for cash. Owing to their origins in comic books and film serials, they are formulaic adventure narratives. Surely that also holds true for much of fantasy fiction—Conan would gladly perish before taking a straight job. Merely designing a detailed world does not necessarily encourage adventuring: the referee and the players must create an environment where characters will become the protagonists in a compelling story. To achieve this effect, the dramatic course of a story need not adhere so closely to preordained events as does the *Flash Gordon* game: freed from the constraints of recycling a specific media property, a game design could

schematize the direction of a story in a way that allows the players and the referee more creative control.

Merle Rasmussen's design drafts for *Top Secret* contained various iterations of a flowchart, "Schematic Diagram of Game Plan," which showed the structure of stories in the secret-agent genre that the game emulates. Each node in the flowchart shows a sequential stage in the narrative; a note suggests that "a token can be moved from block to block" to track an agent's progress through the story, as in a board game. Once an agent character is created, the agent is assigned to a particular bureau of service and then briefed on an allocated job. The agent then travels to a location and attempts to find the target in order to fulfill the job. This might or might not involve committing a crime, but once the job is done, the agent needs to make a getaway. As the constraints of the genre require, this cannot go smoothly: from the "Getaway" the agent must move to either the "Complications" node—which is ominously shaped like a pistol—or the "Capture" node. A captured agent will be summarily executed or jailed; from "Jail," a jailbreak may be attempted, which leads the agent back to the "Getaway" node. The agent ultimately either succeeds and receives "The Payoff" or ends up on the coffin-shaped node called "R.I.P." From that node, the only possible move in the schematic is to return to character creation. In practice, any *Top Secret* game could be mapped onto this structure: Rasmussen gave an example of a mission where the Jackal must "hijack a tank located on a fishing trawler off the coast of Asia," and in the early iteration the game the "Fulfill Job Assignment" node relies on resolving those broader goals rather than on breaking them down into tasks for resolution: the Jackal has "a 35% chance of getting on the trawler and a 75% chance of unloading the tank" (*DR* 40). Failure means a hasty getaway and possibly "complications."

SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF GAME PLAN

Figure 4.1

"Schematic Diagram of Game Plan," from a draft of *Top Secret* (c. 1977). Courtesy of Merle Rasmussen.

Where once a game would furnish a map of a world, now instead it furnished a map of a story. By the time *Top Secret* made it into print in 1980, it no longer included this schematic—though Rasmussen did reprint it in a contemporary issue of *The Dragon* (*DR* 40). It provides an indication of how early designers began to think in terms of simulating the formula of a story rather than merely trying to simulate a world that players can wander around in. These designs were, as Michie and Roos would hope, trying to integrate the structure of stories into the system of play. Missing any of Rasmussen's nodes in the secret-agent genre story would result in a failure to conform to the source literature just as inserting the wrong weaponry in a wargame involving a particular historical period would be a failure of "realism." Moreover, any constraints and parameters imposed on a gamed story will trickle down to influence the fate of the characters who inhabit it—and thus guide how roles must be played.

Destiny's Mark

If designing worlds was the intended purview of the referee, the question of how game events unfolded was a bit more complicated. Players could have their own personal goals, even if they were no more atypical than becoming a "superperson," and those goals could conflict with the direction in which a referee or designer tries to steer the story of the game. Michie, writing in 1976, already knew stories could not be entirely top down, that referees had to take cues from players. Referees had techniques that could help them keep players in the game, but the question inevitably became whether that decision really belonged with the referee in the first place.

The path to becoming a "superperson" could be arduous, requiring a character to overcome many episodes of peril. To rise to the highest rank required that an adventurer many times stand the hazard of the die. An unfortunate roll could swiftly end the career of a budding King Conan, so to give players the time needed to develop long-term destinies for their characters, role-playing game designs included mechanisms for preventing sudden death. Hit points were the most prominent and pervasive. But one mechanism in particular became central to the design questions surrounding the respective responsibilities of the player, the referee, and the system, and to the equally entangled questions about stories, destiny, and chance: saving throws.

D&D inherited saving throws from the wargaming tradition, most directly from *Chainmail*. Saving throws in *D&D* act as a crucial check against powerful spells: unlike blows with a melee weapon, spellcasting requires no "to hit" roll by its caster; instead, the target of a spell gets a saving throw, which might halve or in some cases negate the spell's effect. Saving throws also let players override the effect of poisons and certain other negative status conditions. A failed saving throw could mean death and with it perhaps the end of a character's story. Yet the original *D&D* rules offer little by way of explanation for why saves exist or what properties of the game world they model. They are, like hit points, a mechanism that keeps characters alive and thus prolongs adventures; just as higher-level characters gain more hit points, they similarly have better odds of making a saving throw.

The earliest imitators of *D&D* usually retained the device of saving throws or something very like them. *Tunnels & Trolls* calls them "saving

rolls" and explains, "From time to time, the D.M. will ask you to make a saving roll for your character, always when there is a chance that something bad will happen to you." *Tunnels & Trolls* has a character attribute for "luck," so saving throws in its system explicitly depend on chance: as the rules put it, "there are situations from which only great good luck can save you."[20] They describe a saving throw as something rolled by a player reactively, at the referee's request, when misfortune looms.

But sometimes behind what appears to be luck hides the hand of providence. *Bunnies & Burrows* has some very striking text surrounding saving throws and the role of the referee employing them. The authors write, "Through years of Gamemastering, we have found that it helps the games for the GM to be flexible in the use of Saving Throws. Rigid adherence to Saving Throw rules tends to be very deadly, with less fun for the players." The rules consequently recommend that referees practice a bit of divine intervention, as Gygax would have called it. They explain, "We may shade die rolls just a bit in certain key situations, so that a rabbit may survive to play again."[21] Rather than letting the dice tell the story, when the destruction of the character is on the line, the referee should exercise discretion and "shade" the results of rolls to preserve the lives of characters —and note that there is no mention here of Gygax's restriction on doling out such a reprieve only to characters who have earned it, nor of what might make a situation "key" other than that it is potentially lethal.

The *Bunnies & Burrows* rules recommend that such adjustments to the die roles "nearly always should favor the players" rather than nonplayer antagonists, which privileges the players above the forces controlled by the referee, implicitly encouraging the referee to treat the game cooperatively rather than as a competition. Crucially, *Bunnies & Burrows* also warns that the referee must not let players depend on a referee "acting the part of God too much"—instead a referee must "let the players retain the illusion that they determine their own fates." When the time comes for divine intervention, would-be deities must practice it in secret: for players, the dramatic uncertainty of the game relies on the "illusion" that it is the dice that decide rather than the discretion of the referee. Thus, players cannot be parties to the execution of the system when the referee decides to "shade" the roll. Blacow would corroborate the perils of disillusionment in the *Wild Hunt* 17, remarking, "I can't see much interest in a game where you know the DM will go out of his way to keep you alive, acts like Santa Claus, and

otherwise operates a 'can't-lose' situation." This can make players feel as if they have no freedom of decision, no ability to make meaningful choices—a consequence that results when players become too isolated from the system.[22]

Referees who tacitly preserved the lives of characters might have goals of their own at stake in these games, such as destinies planned for characters. At the beginning of 1976, Mark Chilenskas reported in *Wild Hunt* 1 that "I have found it useful to assign people a secret mission in life." For example, he imagined that a thief's purpose might involve stealing some "highly prized artifact." But selecting a purpose for a character requires more than just recognizing the obvious objectives of the class: "You should also try to match the purpose to the personality of the person possessing the character." Chilenskas saw purpose as something that the referee gradually introduces to the player: it should unfold like the layout of a dungeon map. "I feel the character should initially have no knowledge of his secret destiny. The gamesmaster should bring it out slowly, through encounters and legends, books he has read and places he has seen. . . . Eventually, no matter which course he follows he will hear more and more about the task I have set aside for him." Discovering one's own secret destiny became a potential premise of the game, though not every player would appreciate having greatness thrust upon him or her so flagrantly, as Chilenskas acknowledged: "Of course a player could choose to ignore this, which is fine, he has his own life to lead. Some people probably would resent having a goal that they had to accomplish." But Chilenskas was confident that "finding one's true destiny is a challenge few can resist."

Referees require nothing but fluency with the story-telling arts to give players a purpose, as Chilenskas described, but system mechanisms can also be deployed to direct characters toward a destiny. This was best expressed in the era by the "Intentionality" mechanism of *Legacy*, which might be seen as an attempt to wrap a system around the concept of a secret "purpose" assigned to characters by referees of the sort Chilenskas proposed. To use the Intentionality system, the *Legacy* rules stipulate that the referee "must establish a series of general Intentionality trends or currents at the same time that s/he is designing and creating the game environment" in such a way that these Intentionality currents "indicate the general directions in which the game operator wishes the game to go."[23] Where applying a bit of "shade" to a saving throw might help avert the

catastrophic end to a story—namely by preventing a potentially game-ruining death—Intentionality offered a finer tool for nudging players into specific actions and events.

Intentionality in *Legacy* is a quantified attribute of characters, either player or nonplayer, as well as of certain items. As the rules put it, "Intentionality is a motivational force which tends to influence the likelihood of things happening,"[24] so, practically speaking, it modifies die rolls when events related to these Intentionality trends and currents are at stake. This provides a more formal framework in which the referee can influence die rolls when necessary to steer the game in the desired direction —and, moreover, can do so more openly, without risk of shattering illusions. To corral the potential abuse of this mechanism by the referee, the rules suggest committing to paper a "statement of effect" that the referee keeps secret from the players and that determines when die rolls will be modified by the Intentionality current.

Entities in the game with an Intentionality statistic higher than 2 are termed a "nexus," and those at 10 or higher a "primary nexus." The rules give an example where "a player character with an Intentionality of 12 is being partially directed and steered by an unknown statement of effect for a Primary Intentionality Nexus. The player has noticed that his/her ability to recognize and avoid poisonous plants has increased, and that his/her general appreciation for plants and their value seems to have been enhanced. Clearly the player is receiving die roll modifications as high as +100 for certain types of situations, but s/he is as yet uncertain of what these are. The major clue seems to be that they involve plants."[25]

Players, as the *Legacy* rules suggest, can be "partially directed and steered" by Intentionality, which the referee secretly manages. Because players know the results of die rolls, they will notice when they undergo such a dramatic modification; Intentionality thus provides players some visibility into a system that lets referees steer a story. One can also easily imagine uses of this mechanism that would encourage the story to move toward particular themes or events. Although it does not deprive players of freedom of decision, everyone likes to succeed, and the bonuses that Intentionality provides would certainly pique players' curiosity and influence their decisions, perhaps more effectively than Chilenskas's

"purpose." One early reviewer of *Legacy* wrote of the Intentionality system that it "can only be described as a quantification of Destiny" (*DW* 2).

The fragmentary and opaque *Legacy* system surely saw little direct uptake, though its innovations would influence further design and play, and it serves as one indicator of how the referee could lightly manage the destinies of characters. Saving throws never became entirely free of this fateful connotation either, though it would not be until the publication of the *Dungeon Masters Guide* in 1979 that Gygax would explicate the purpose of saving throws in the *D&D* system. In his own estimation, saving throws in wargaming were always about destiny because a saving throw "represents the chance for the figure concerned to avoid (or at least partially avoid) the cruel results of fate." Speaking to role-playing games in particular, he contextualized the inspiration for saving throws very much within the tradition of sword-and-sorcery literature, namely in the sorts of escapes that heroic figures perform that allow for "continuing epic" tales. Because in fantasy stories "some of the characters seem to be able to survive for an indefinite time," Gygax argued, we have the same expectation in fantasy games that "the player character is all important," and thus "he or she must always—or nearly always—have a chance, no matter how small, a chance of somehow escaping what otherwise would be inevitable destruction."[26]

Gygax saw that the ultimate rationale for these daring escapes is the generation of a satisfying story. He wrote, "The mechanics of combat or the details of the injury caused by some horrible weapon are *not* the key to heroic fantasy and adventure games. It is the character, how he or she becomes involved in the combat, how he or she somehow escapes—or fails to escape—the mortal threat which is important to the enjoyment or longevity of the game." Gygax here placed the emphasis not only on the characters but also, more importantly, on the story of the character's actions: player characters "are in effect writing their own adventures and creating their own legends."[27] The purpose of saving throws, one might say, is to preserve the lives of characters in order to keep the story alive—and thus the saving throw does not model a property of characters or the world but instead a property of fantastic narratives.

At the end of the day, however, a saving throw is just a die roll: it offers only a chance, sometimes quite a remote one. Behind the scenes at TSR, designs offering a more radical approach to modeling adventure narratives

were already under development in the 1970s, ones that let players take a more active role in preserving their own destiny. The year before the *Dungeon Masters Guide* came out, during work on the pioneering espionage role-playing game *Top Secret*, Merle Rasmussen elected not to include a saving-throw mechanism. He discussed this decision in person with Mike Carr during the summer GenCon, and then in October wrote to TSR design manager Al Hammack that "since there is no 'saving throw,' often a character dies or is seriously harmed with no chance to resist," so Rasmussen proposed "a non-gametested pair of survival traits called 'fame' and 'fortune.'"[28]

The "fortune" trait, Rasmussen explained to Hammack, is an expendable resource assigned to every beginning character that simulates "beginner's luck." He gave the following example: "When a lethal bullet should strike the character, he can use one 'fortune' point to deflect it. However, once used, 'fortune' points are gone."[29] Rasmussen's proposal went beyond merely permitting a die-roll chance to survive and granted players the ability to undo a deadly event retroactively: a control over fortune that no games at the time had yet bestowed onto players as a quantified system element. Here the player could spend one of these "fortune" points to act as fate and change the course of the game's story, trumping the dice. "Fame" points behaved in a similar way, but they accumulated with character experience and modeled how, in spy stories, the renown of a secret agent might act as a counter to undesirable game circumstances—it would not be a satisfying story if some famous character met an ignominious end unworthy of his or her legend. In real life, no amount of fame deflects bullets: this is a system that models a property of stories rather than physics.

Hammack wrote back, "Mike [Carr] and I both like the 'Fame' and 'Fortune' traits: it's a really super idea." Recognizing the need to maintain some dramatic uncertainty in the minds of players, Hammack offered one slight tweak to the "fortune" design: "We suggest that the exact amount, however, be determined by a secret die roll of the administrator (say one roll of a 10-sider with perhaps a minimum number being 2 or 3). In this way the player would literally never know when his luck was going to run out!"[30] This design strikes a key compromise between Rasmussen's initial reach for player control over system execution and a nagging doubt that keeps the players in suspense, thanks to secret information hidden by the referee.

Top Secret would not see print until 1980, so these innovations remained internal to TSR for the time being. But other designers studying the problem of adapting role-playing games to settings other than heroic fantasy lighted on similar alternatives to saving throws—ones rooted in cinematic conventions, and ones that empowered players to intervene when disaster struck, rather than relying on a referee to "shade" the results. *Once upon a Time in the West* (1978) identifies its rules as "about fifty–fifty based on real life and 'Spaghetti' Westerns" and divides gunfighters into four status ranks, the highest of which, named the "Protagonisti" after the main character in those Italian films, has skills that come straight out of the movies.[31] These include not just a "sixth sense" but also an ability intended to prevent death from "a lucky shot from a Peon," the lowest rank of gunfighter. "When a Protagonisti receives a wound, and dices for effect . . . if the result is not to his liking he may re-dice, only once." But the rules provide an immediate caveat that for exceptionally cinematic conditions, "such as re-creating the finish of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* . . . the rule could be extended so that Protagonisti can have three dice attempts."[32] It is up to the player, rather than the referee, to invoke this mechanism, and a re-roll might risk a pessimal outcome, but it makes possible a victory worthy of a movie climax.

The design of the hybrid game *Commando* (1979), which shipped in a box containing one booklet of wargaming rules and another of role-playing rules, includes similar systems that explicitly incorporate what Eric Goldberg, in a design note, would call "the 'unreality factor,' which allows characters to get away with the same outrageous maneuvers that heroes routinely pull off at the climax of the movie, comic book, etc."[33] Rather than simulating a realistic world where commandos conduct raids, *Commando* is realistic to the rhythms of heroic narratives based in that setting.

Commando awards characters a Hero Rating, which increases with the successful completion of missions. A character who reaches the level of a "TV Hero" receives a Hero Ability chosen by the player. Some abilities include straightforward increases to attributes, but other options offer more fantastical bonuses. In the mold of a *D&D* Paladin, a character can "Establish Good Terms with an Intelligent Horse," like the Lone Ranger's Silver. Other offerings include a "Sixth Sense for Danger," an ability to be in the "Right Place at the Right Time," or the good fortune that comes with the "Luck of the Irish." Perhaps the most intriguing of the Hero Abilities is

"Engaged to a Striking Paramour" because it effectively grants the character immortality with the excuse that "love conquers all," but only fleetingly. "Basically, the character is considered immune to any lasting damage or change,"[34] but it comes with a duration limited to only three missions, as the love, or love interest, of an action hero presumably shall not endure.

Once a character reaches the Hero Rating of a "Major Novel Hero," which is just one level shy of a "Big-Budget Movie Hero," the player may invoke the right to a Miraculous Escape once per mission. Like the "Fame Points" conceived by Rasmussen, a Miraculous Escape may be declared by the player "immediately after any one combat action resulting in the Character receiving Wound Points or being killed."[35] In order to perform a Miraculous Escape, the player must make a die roll similar to a saving throw: cast the dice against a 36-option table, with only rolls of 2 and 18 resulting in a "crap out" failure to escape. For each of the remaining 34 possibilities, the system specifies a particular Miraculous Escape, ranging from the plausible to the preposterous to the downright metafictional. In a plausible result for a roll of 8, the "Enemy Gun Jams." For a roll of 22, a passing golf ball "hit with tremendous velocity from a golf course several miles" away collides with the fatal bullet in midair, deflecting it. For result 30, "The Great Director yells cut, ending all action. A retake is necessary; begin the Game-Turn gain, replacing all Men at their previous positions and removing any Wound Points suffered."[36]

In parallel with these efforts, other designs began to expand the connotation of saving throws beyond merely reacting to avoid negative consequences; these systems instead allowed players a saving throw to perform extraordinary actions. *Space Quest* (1977), for example, defines saving-throw values as the "indicators of the probability of a character succeeding in some extraordinary feat, or staving off the effect of some horrible hazard." The rules allow saving throws to be rolled for "feats of strength" or "bursts of speed," but only under the right circumstances: "Only conditions of great and imminent peril allow the superhuman exercise of abilities to resist fate."[37] Again, the term *fate* recurs in these descriptions of the function of saving throws, along with the idea that players can twist the fates of their characters in crucial moments. Whereas earlier systems had the referee requiring a saving throw, *Space Quest* suggests that players can demand one themselves in an attempt to summon that "superhuman exercise of abilities." The producers of *Space Quest*

would incorporate similar systems and language into their next game, *Bushido*, the following year.

As some games moved away from the heroic-fantasy concept of a saving throw, designers of the 1970s explored new ways to grant players a degree of control over the course of play that allowed them to override the system and under certain circumstances to assume a power similar to the discretion that the referee could exercise over the resolution of events. It was no longer a matter of the referee letting "the players retain the illusion that they determine their own fates" while fudging die rolls—instead the system delegates to the players the responsibility for deciding when to fudge die rolls, within constraints managed by the referee. These and similar mechanisms began to show how a system could grant players in a role-playing game something more like the status of authors of their story.

Unsupervised Adventure

Taken to its extreme, how much control could players ultimately exercise over the course of a game? If the referee is what stands in their way, then perhaps the referee could be eliminated entirely. It might seem as if this would disqualify a design from being a role-playing game, but titles with this property emerged almost immediately and were sorted by critical consensus into the same bucket as *D&D*.

Among the earliest titles grouped under the label *role-playing game*, *En Garde* has the distinction of providing in 1975 a system that does not mention a referee at all. There is no question of a neutral arbiter designing the world or steering destiny: the rulebook specifies a world and the chances that characters will succeed in it. Everyone plays swashbuckling European gentlemen adventurers of the seventeenth century who aspire to gain status points to advance in social level. Players may explore any of a number of paths to advancement, such as a military career, in the process accumulating influence, winning duels, carousing, and so on. Dice that players throw against tables in the rulebook decide the results, and the interpretation of these rolls is subject only to the mutual supervision of players, who are free to collaborate or compete within the game's framework.

Although the character-generation and progression systems of *En Garde* borrow from *D&D*, its refereeless structure owes more to the multiplayer format of *Diplomacy*. *En Garde* is broken into turns, each of which models one week of game time: "For each week of the game, all players, after a short negotiation period, secretly note their personal actions for the week," which gives them the opportunity to arrange competitive or cooperative activities with each other. "A player need not keep his word to other players, but must do what is written on his calendar," *En Garde* reads, paraphrasing the sentiments of the *Diplomacy* rulebook.[38] *Diplomacy* emerged from an operations-research community that had referred to certain political wargames as *role-playing games* since the mid-1960s, so it is perhaps no coincidence that the *Diplomacy*-inspired *En Garde* would encourage the attachment of that label to the new genre of games following *D&D*.

The division of *En Garde* games into strict turns, at the end of which players simultaneously reveal their actions following an interval of collusion and role playing, replaces the dialogue loop of *D&D*, where players propose statements of intention, and the referee explains how those actions have altered the game world. That necessarily meant that *En Garde* discarded the discretion of the referee, the opportunity to exercise judgment when a player proposes to attempt some unanticipated action, in favor of a more rigid scope of agency. Playing a role depends hugely on the amount of freedom a character has: in these unchaperoned games, choice is limited in crucial ways in order to compensate for the lack of a referee who can broadly interpret the players' will.

The absence of an *En Garde* referee left a gap that players familiar with *D&D* immediately felt. Mark Swanson observed of the game in *A&E* 9 that "large amounts of die throwing occur continually, without a gamesmaster to act as the 'voice of destiny.' At least in the groups I've been involved with, this resulted in boredom and neglect." In practice, however, some players of *En Garde* imported the assumptions of *D&D* into its play—although the design does not mention a referee, nor does it bar one. Charles McGrew explained in *A&E* 16 that although "*En Garde* as written isn't much more than a game of mathematics," actually "any D&D ref can spice it up a lot." He then gave a colorful narrative account of swashbuckling debauchery from his local game, clearly embellished by the influence of a referee.

En Garde set a precedent for refereeless role playing that sufficed for its Renaissance setting, but that model would prove difficult to apply to dungeon adventures, where the referee must keep secret information—the dungeon architecture and population—away from the prying eyes of players. Two early techniques were contrived to solve that problem: first, systems in which players generated dungeons dynamically while exploring and, second, systems where some new physical component of play revealed the secret information to players selectively on a need-to-know basis.

These refereeless systems existed mostly to support solo play; the difficulty of recruiting both a referee and a stable of players led to numerous early experiments with solo role-playing games. When TSR published the first issue of *Strategic Review* at the start of 1975, it included a feature titled "Solo Dungeon Adventures," which let players randomly generate an underworld literally as they explored it. This followed a precedent in the baseline *D&D* game that effectively permitted solo adventuring in the wilderness on the *Outdoor Survival* (1972) board, complemented with charts for determining encounters, as this introduced no practical requirement for referee oversight because the wilderness board is public rather than secret information.[39] With the "Solo Dungeon Adventures" addition, a player could similarly start a dungeon map in the middle of a page of graph paper and randomly generate underground passages, chambers, traps, adversaries, and plunder in real time during the exploration process.

In solo *D&D,* the randomness of the dungeon-generation tables serves as a surrogate for the gradual process by which the referee would ordinarily reveal the secret design of the dungeon. In some areas, the procedures for a solo game required no amendment to the rules other than reassigning responsibility for executing the system to the player rather than to the referee. The original *D&D* rules encourage the referee to check for random encounters, for example, and when this results in an encounter, to then consult tables in the *D&D* rulebooks to generate a random wandering monster: those responsibilities carry over unchanged to the player in the solo game. Whereas George Phillies wrote that *D&D* "reduces to you vs. the gamesmaster and the dice," the solo rules provide a way to drop the referee out of the equation, at least within this narrow scenario of dungeon adventuring.

The results could, however, prove chaotic. One report in *A&E* 4 from Robert Sacks complained that "the two times I tried D&D solitaire, I rolled a room without any other entrances, and every time I roll for a character, I get a Cleric." Leaving the entire dungeon structure to chance could lead to comical absurdities and abruptly truncated adventures, although the solo rules recommend that when the result of a layout roll bursts free of the page or violates the previously generated structure, you "amend the result by rolling until you obtain something which will fit with your predetermined limits."[40] But surely unsupervised players would be sorely tempted to tweak the results in all sorts of other ways that an active referee would never permit, often leading to a solipsistic and unsatisfying experience.

Those who found randomly generated dungeons confounding could avail themselves of another approach to refereeless role-playing games: this one required introducing a new game element to maintain the necessary secret information and reveal it selectively to players. Today, that would obviously be a computer, but in the mid-1970s computers were hardly household items. However, in the summer of 1975 intrepid experimenters on the PLATO computer system, an early intercollegiate computer network famous for its graphics capabilities and playful culture, produced an implementation of *D&D* that permitted a single character to explore a dungeon and defeat monsters to gain experience points and treasure, all without the benefit of a human referee. The game that is today known as *pedit5* (1975) serves as one of the few examples with some contemporary documentation from the era. Its dungeon is static and designed into the program, but the computer randomly generated the abilities of each new character—though players could "reject this hero and ask for another" if the characteristics generated were undesirable.[41]

In exchange for obviating the need for a referee, these early computer adventures necessarily limited the scope of agency of players, arguably more so than either *En Garde* or solo *D&D*. Not only could players not propose actions to a referee, but the programmer, in the seat of the designer, effectively had to anticipate and incorporate all possible actions, which in the case of *pedit5* reduced to the most rudimentary forms of attacking, spellcasting, and dungeon movement. Then again, if a game aspired to furnish only a Waddell level 1 adventure, the proverbial "Gilded Hole," how much more agency did it require apart from the basics of exploration and combat? These earliest PLATO dungeons had clear victory conditions,

such as obtaining 20,000 experience points in *pedit5*. Computer dungeon adventure games would proliferate in the late 1970s as the microcomputer revolution opened up new possibilities for commercial software in the space, but in 1975 only a small community of gamers had access to a system such as PLATO.

A more widespread tool for eliminating the referee entered the market in 1976 with the release of Flying Buffalo's *Buffalo Castle*. It combined a dungeon description with a gamebook format; although the celebrated second-person *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series did not start until 1978, *Buffalo Castle* could draw on still earlier precedents, including the Tracker Books series. *Buffalo Castle* relied on the *Tunnels & Trolls* system and provided small rules changes intended to make the game compatible with a "solitaire dungeon." For example, it restricts characters only to first-level fighters and parties only to a single character. As in solo *D&D*, players are instructed, in lieu of a referee, to execute rolls for wandering monsters themselves.

As a sort of configurable dungeon adventure transcript, *Buffalo Castle* begins its dialogue with a simple second-person choice: "You are facing a large, gloomy castle, with three large wooden doors. If you choose to go in the left door, turn to 4A. If you wish to go in the center door, go to 8A. If you wish to go into the right door, turn to 12A."[42] The book effectively offers statements of intention to the player in a multiple-choice format. Every numbered page contains several alphabetical (usually A through F) game nodes, each giving a referee description of the result of the choice: some nodes describe the space a character has just entered, others a treasure found, still others the nature of a trap that the player has triggered or the actions of a foe encountered. In nodes that indicate that a combat ensues, players will direct the tactics of both sides, tabulating any wounds and experience that results on a character record sheet. Players navigated until they perished or found an exit, much the way that *D&D* scoped any dungeon scenario. *Buffalo Castle* became the first of many such modules that Flying Buffalo would produce, and with the fame of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series numerous other game companies developed competing solo-module franchises.

By exercising a modified preexisting system within a very narrow scenario, these gamebooks turned scenario design into an authorial practice.

The situation that a player reads in each node is, in essence, the referee side of the dialogue, not unlike the incidental descriptions of rooms or situations that a referee would improvise during play, but often more elaborate. The review by Steve Jackson in *Space Gamer* 9 stressed that "*Buffalo Castle* is well-written, with the wit and imagination that characterizes a really good FRP game." We must, however, take that in the context of the example Jackson offered from the game, which is a node reading: "You have tripped the 'stink' trap. You are squirted with essence of skunk oil. Your charisma is reduced by 5 for the rest of this trip, and by 1 permanently."

Early textual node-navigation games and computer games quickly increased in diversity and sophistication as they cross-pollinated. By the end of 1975, Mark Leymaster had already computerized the solo dungeon–generation principles from *Strategic Review* into a program that created a textual description of running through a random dungeon; by the end of the 1970s, Flying Buffalo would adapt similar techniques into its *Computer-Generated Dungeon* product, which dynamically generated a node-navigation booklet such that every printed copy contained a different dungeon. More famously, adapting textual node-navigation principles to the computer yielded classic text-adventure games such as *Adventures* and *Zork*.[43]

All of these developments occurred as *role-playing game* began to gain currency in the community, and so confusion about the scope of the term could only grow as the diversity of practices collected under its name increased. Nor did this result solely from the exigencies of solo play. Although much of the development of referee-less games focused on the solo player, some early role-playing games specified multiplayer modes without referee supervision. When Steve Jackson began releasing solo modules for his *Fantasy Trip* products, starting with *Death Test* (1978), they supported a one-player mode, a two-player mode, and a multiplayer mode and could operate with or without a referee.

The presence of a referee was sometimes held against titles that did not identify themselves as role-playing games. In some wargaming circles, a referee who could bend or mend rules was sometimes condemned as a mere Band-Aid for covering design blunders. A critical review of TSR's space-colonization game *Star Empires* (1977) in *Space Gamer* 14 enumerated a

number of problems and inconsistencies in the rules before exclaiming, "But wait! All is not lost! They recommend a referee, and referees are magical: They can modify game rules to make them playable, and can rule out impossible situations, and can do all sorts of wonderful and nasty things." A referee could be seen as just pixie dust sprinkled on an incomplete or incoherent system, a way for a designer to explain away deficiencies in the design that would need to be resolved in a refereeless system. A system without a referee required more rigor.

Or perhaps a referee could serve as training wheels. The second edition of *Superhero '44* notes at the outset that "it is possible to play without a referee," though it cautions new players that "it is best to at least start with one."[44] Its foreword indicates that the game has its roots in an alternate-universe *D&D* campaign, but we can in *Superhero '44* discern clear signs of the influence of *En Garde*. *Superhero '44* campaign play, for example, stipulates that a player create a "weekly planning sheet" that enumerates the activities that he or she will undertake during that interval, which may include routine patrolling, training, or schooling, "day job" work, research, or even participation in lawsuits resulting from any damages to the city prior superheroism had precipitated. The game is tightly coupled to its setting: the island city of Inguria in the year 2044, which has its own politics, factions, geography, and so on—even the zones that players can patrol are marked on a hex map in the rules.

In refereed play of *Superhero '44*, the referee collects these weekly planning sheets, executes the system, and then returns them to the players. For the most part, these referee duties are clerical in nature, without any need or opportunity for discretion—except for combat scenarios, which occur in play when superheroes encounter crimes on patrol. The only essential feature required to eliminate the referee was a means to generate and decide these criminal interventions, and so the "Solo Rules" published within months of the initial release of the game contain a "Synthetic Scenario Machine," which employs dice to generate crimes, with their perpetrators, locations, witnesses, and so on.

Game Designers' Workshop produced *En Garde* before it started marketing its products as role-playing games—but by the time it released the three-volume science-fiction game *Traveller* in 1977, it knew well what to call such a game. As we might expect given the player experience of *En*

Garde, *Traveller* acknowledges that the question of whether role-playing games are individual, Waddell level 1 scenarios, or full campaigns of scenarios, or solo games, is all just a matter of player preference. "There are three basic ways to play *Traveller*: solitaire, scenario, and campaign. Any of these three may be unsupervised (that is, without a referee; the players themselves administer the rules and manipulate the situation)." *Traveller* is clear, though, that "the main thrust of the game is the refereed or umpired situation. An independent referee allows a large degree of flexibility and continuity often not possible when players themselves control the game. A referee inserts some measure of uncertainty in the minds of the players as they travel through the universe."[45]

What ultimately made it possible for a role-playing game to circumvent a referee? In notes appended to *Commando*, Greg Costikyan proposes the general theoretical principle that "true role-playing games can be divided into two general categories (with some overlap between the categories occurring): closed-system role-playing games and open-ended role-playing games." Games of the latter category require "a Gamesmaster to invent a world, construct adventures for the characters, and provide new rules as necessary to round out his world," though they "are designed not so much to limit the Gamesmaster, as to provide a flexible framework of rules to be amended as he desires, and which aid him in the construction and operation of a world."[46] This follows the referee-centric "free" *Kriegsspiel* tradition of miniature wargames that formed a cornerstone of *D&D*, in that the *Commando* system is merely a set of guidelines shaped by the players and referees. But "a closed-system role-playing game, by contrast, may not even require a Gamesmaster." Costikyan cites *En Garde* as the obvious example of such a game, where "the rules cover every eventuality that may arise in the course of play; they are a closed-system not requiring outside interference."[47] No doubt Costikyan also had in mind his multiplayer fantasy adventure game *Deathmaze* (1979), which "requires no gamemaster, but pits the players' skills against an un-gamemastered game system."[48] The same sentiment would seem to apply to *Buccaneer*, which makes no mention of a referee, and of course to various gamebooks and computer games. The latter adhered to the "rigid" *Kriegsspiel* precepts that had stood at the opposite end of the spectrum from the open practices of "free" *Kriegsspiel*, and their application to role-playing games amply demonstrates

how the legacy of wargaming still dominated critical discussion at the end of the 1970s.

Costikyan acknowledges that even games that require no referee cannot obstruct the intervention of one, which means those games can "readily be developed into an open-ended role-playing game," just as early players grafted a referee onto *En Garde*. The temptation to transition to an open-ended system arises, he says, because closed systems are "ultimately limited."[49] Even if published rules were to explicitly forbid the use of a referee, no design on paper has the power to prevent players from instating a referee who can commandeer the system and modify it arbitrarily.

Closed systems impart crucial insight into the purpose of the referee in early role-playing games precisely because they can function without a referee. A referee satisfies the potential need for new rules, or for someone to smooth over broken or confusing systems. As an arbiter of fate, a referee may even need to "shade" functioning rules that lead to an unsatisfactory outcome—but only tacitly, while simultaneously letting "the players retain the illusion that they determine their own fates," as *Bunnies & Burrows* puts it. The referee's ability to deliver results without having to explain how or why the results were achieved goes back to nineteenth-century *Kriegsspiel*, where the referee's decision was summarily protected from dispute. And, following Eisen's vow, this property of deferring the system to the referee, and allowing players to experience the *immersion* of acting as their characters, was deeply entangled with how players understood role playing.

Intermezzo: Transcending Design

It is fitting that *Traveller*, perhaps the most adaptable of the designs of the 1970s, should exemplify the extremes of both open-ended and closed systems. Offsetting the complex rules in its core booklets, the game's first supplement, *Mercenary* (1978), offered referees a few alternative ways of determining the outcome of a mission, including one called the "free-form" system. *Mercenary* explains: "No precise rules can, or should, be given here, as much of the realism of the system derives from the on-the-spot interaction between the referee and the players."[1] True to its word, the section literally goes no further and allows this "free-form" method of mission resolution to proceed unencumbered by rules. This liberated the referee and player from any dependency on dice or system, leaving only the dialogue between them: the imaginative power of players to articulate intentions and the judgment of the referee to decide their consequences.

It was always a possibility built into the dialogue that events might resolve in this "free-form" way: whenever *Dungeons & Dragons* players posed statements of intention that could not be resolved by the system that Gygax and Arneson committed to paper, the referee could just determine things by fiat or invent a system on the spot. This quality presumably informed the early reviews of games like *D&D*, which in 1975 began referring to them with the label *boardless, role-playing, free-form system*. *Metamorphosis Alpha* wore that badge proudly, its foreword identifying the game as "a free-form system, giving rules and guidelines for the basics of play and setting up the starship, but allowing the players and the referee unlimited use of their imagination."[2] So even where the system did offer "guidelines," referees could override them in practice, "shading" rolls or even ignoring them entirely. So what ultimate purpose did the guidelines in a design serve?

Gygax himself acknowledged back in 1975 that his own play of *D&D* differed from the printed "guidelines," and he granted blanket permission for everyone to diverge just as radically. "Each campaign should be a 'variant,'" Gygax affirmed, "and there is no 'official interpretation' from me or anyone else" (*AE* 2). He felt strongly enough about the matter that he even swore an oath to the game's fans to protect that principle: "As long as

I am editor of the TSR line and its magazine, I will do my utmost to see that there is as little trend towards standardization as possible." It is not clear that Gygax at the time fully appreciated the consequences of his stance. The many variations on system elements such as abilities, alignment, and experience quickly underscored the fundamental disparities in rules that could feature in play still nominally considered to be of the game *D&D*. So which system did people mean when they talked about playing *D&D*? Comparing the situation to the dilution of brand terminology such as the verb "to Xerox," Bill Seligman stated in 1977, "The problem TSR has is that the term 'D&D' is starting to refer to fantasy role-playing games in general, and not those just bounded by the D&D official rules" (*AE* 28).

In some respects, every original *D&D* campaign was a variant designed by its referee. As early as 1976, Greg Costikyan already identified the way he played as a game distinct from its base design: "As far as I am concerned I don't gamesmaster D&D. I gamesmaster a fantasy game in which each player takes the part of a fantasy character" (*FTA* 2–3). Blake Kirk, who met Costikyan at a science-fiction convention in Boston early in 1977, attributed to him the even more radical view that "there is no such game as *Dungeons & Dragons*, but rather there are umpty-eleven different fantasy role-playing games, approximately as many as there are dungeonmasters."[3] This seems almost a necessary consequence of what Costikyan would call the "open-ended" system of *D&D*, which encouraged referees to amend rules as they saw fit: to reshape the plastic stuff of *D&D* in their own molds. You could swap out the Vancian magic of baseline *D&D* for the spell point system of "Warlock" as early as 1975. Perhaps a dozen versions of the Druid or Neutral Cleric class circulated simultaneously with the "official" version in *Eldritch Wizardry* (1976.) Players could import classes from the *Manual of Aurania*, critical hit tables from the *Arduin Grimoire*, and a skill system from the *Wizard's Aide* (1977).

Figure I.1
Digest-size unofficial supplements sized for inclusion in the original *Dungeons & Dragons* box.
Shown: *The Book of Monsters* (1976), *The Arduin Grimoire* (1977), *The Wizard's Aide* (1977), and
E'a: Chronicles of a Dying World (1979).

Even a title as far removed from fantastic medieval dungeon exploration as *Superhero '44* claimed it originated as a *D&D* variant. The designer, Donald Saxman, explains how local campaign referee Mike Ford had introduced into his *D&D* game "a device which allowed the players to travel to over two dozen alternate universes, each with its own natural laws and historical motif." Among those parallel dimensions was one "populated

with comic-book and pulp-novel characters," where "the party of magicians and swordsmen met Batman and Doc Savage, and ultimately fought Doctor Doom and Darkseid with the help of Luke Cage and the Phantom Stranger."[4] This naturally occasioned the development of variant systems for those comic-book entities, which in turn spurred *Superhero '44*. But what was left of *D&D* in it? Who's to say if it was or was not *D&D* at that point?

At that extreme, to Costikyan's point, we might say that *D&D* had effectively dissolved in its own plasticity. What remained was a hobby, floating atop a more fluid implementation of the role-playing experience, which called itself "FRP," for "fantasy role playing," but moored itself to no design. As alarming as the notion that "there is no such game as *Dungeons & Dragons*" might have been to Gygax and his colleagues, it also boded poorly for any competing designs as well. The sheer prevalence and scope of variant implementations of *D&D* deflated any presumed urgency to base a campaign on any "next-generation" system published outside the *D&D* franchise.

Jim Thomas, writing in *Wild Hunt* 22, weighed the advantages of switching to one popular competing game system: "I, too, think that *Chivalry & Sorcery* is a neat book, full of all sorts of dandy ideas. It might well be a better starting point for a fantasy role-playing 'game' than *Dungeons & Dragons* was. And I have a strong hunch that nothing's ever going to be more than a starting point." If every published design represented only a starting point for a lengthy and open-ended process of patching or extending rules, then how much did it matter whether the referee based a game on *D&D* or on any of its competitors of the era?

Whether a set of variant rules had achieved sufficient autonomy to warrant designation as an independent game also had no objective markers: as Lee Gold would advise in 1977, "If your house rules run more than thirty pages, I suggest you consider you've invented a new game and copyright it" (*AE* 29). It was not hard to hit that mark because everyone was constantly hacking the system. Kevin Slimak, feeling "tired of trying to kludge a good game out of Gygax *D&D*," decided on a solution: "Stop pretending to be playing *D&D*; call the game something different and rework/rewrite the rules to my own taste" (*WH* 5). Slimak serialized his ideas through a fanzine, but there was no great ontological distinction between that and

sharing them through a self-published product. The authors of *Mythrules* (1978) decided after more than a year of developing variants that "it became apparent that we were no longer merely writing addenda to other authors' rules but were actually creating an independent game of our own."[5] People seemed to understand that in perspective: by 1979, we can see the author of a self-published volume such as *E'a* admit that, "basically, I'm just like a lot of you out there, one player with a few ideas and a lot of good friends willing to help me over the rough spots. I believe that by now it's almost impossible for any system on this type of gaming to be totally different from all the others."[6]

We see language everywhere authorizing referees to modify the system. "The essential feature of *Chivalry & Sorcery* is the flexibility built into all campaign types," the rules read, identifying themselves as "guidelines by which players may easily create the kinds of worlds they want" though they "may ignore all elements that are not relevant to their needs and aims."[7] *Runequest* introduces its rules by telling you to "take those portions you can use and ignore the rest. Like any FRP system, these can only be guidelines. Use them as you will."[8] *Tradition of Victory* "must emphasize to prospective referees: no rule in this booklet is inviolable, and any may be changed or overlooked with the agreement of the referee and the players."[9] And *Mortal Combat* allows, "It is the umpire's prerogative to reject any part of the rules that do not fit in with his campaign."[10] This consensus about open-endedness blurred the borders that separated one system from another, raising fundamental identity questions about games: we see someone such as Gordon Lingard say in *A&E* 50, "I've started running *D&D* using *Runequest* rules," though he casually posed that fraught proposition before introducing a system for social skills he had added himself that covered bribery, investigations, influence, business acumen, and so on. Which system was Lingard really using? Was it TSR's or the Chaosium's or his own?

With so many system elements floating in the mix, referees bore most of the burden for selecting the right elements à la carte rather than as a prix fixe, and we are left to wonder if the ingredients mattered more than any printed menu. Howard Mahler argued in *A&E* 46 that "GMs are responsible for systems" and that "if a system produces absurd results, the GM should not be using it." A given campaign could siphon rules from anywhere— from the *D&D* rulebooks, from a competing title, from the grungiest

fanzine, from its participants' sudden inspiration—and whether the players deemed the resulting game an instance of *D&D* or not became a superficial and almost superfluous question. Albeit, many players, like Lingard, seemed more disposed than not to call their campaigns by the name of the best-known role-playing game—the "Xerox" of the young industry. But early critical discussion vacillated between *D&D* and the FRP hobby in general with little evident distinction—only advocates for particular competing systems, most particularly their authors, would insist on more specificity. While Steve Perrin worked on *Runequest*, he reported of Ken St. Andre, "he's of the opinion that, with all the FRP games on the market, only D&D will survive. I, of course, am hoping he's wrong" (*AE* 30).

"I don't think new games/rules are going to make much of a difference in the long run," Jim Thomas concluded in *Wild Hunt* 22. "It will probably turn out to be that a DM, or DM coterie, is so good at DMing that the interest of a group of aficionados is maintained, and other good DMs develop within the group, and things perpetuate themselves." This placed a heavy burden on referees that would surely limit the mass-market spread of fantasy role playing but would not prevent a dedicated community from sustaining the hobby: "The idea's too good to die out, and it's too demanding to sweep the world," Thomas predicted. Ironically, the idea would indeed sweep the world in another couple years, but for reasons that no one at the time could have foreseen.

If nothing would ever be better than a "starting point," how much system did that starting point really need to furnish? Sandy Eisen might argue that a referee serves to isolate the players from the rules so that they can fully experience the game situation, and thus only minimal rules would seem to be needed, just enough to guide the player into the character's position. The early *D&D* community had some consensus that quantified attributes assigned to characters were valuable to the players as cues for role playing, even if it disagreed about how directly the attributes should influence character behavior, much as with alignment. Although the scoreboard of experience points could steer players toward campaign goals set by the referee, systems as early as *Bunnies & Burrows* in 1976 demonstrated how to use progression without experience points to encourage role playing.

Perhaps some rough understanding of a character's attributes, accompanied by a clatter of dice, sustained the illusion that the referee was

not simply making decisions out of pure fiat. In 1979, Greg Costikyan produced for the second issue of *Different Worlds* a short and simple game satirizing the extreme of open-ended design: a system he called "Lord of the Dice." It is predicated upon assigning the referee personal responsibility for virtually all functions that would ordinarily be specified in the system by a designer, and, as such, its rules occupy only around half a page of the issue. "Lord of the Dice" contains an introductory section describing itself much like any other role-playing game, requiring that a "Gamesmaster co-ordinate the Players' characters within his concept of a fantasy world." It promises newcomers access to "this fascinating hobby without having to learn extremely complicated rules."

Character generation in "Lord of the Dice" immediately subverts the familiar design principles of role-playing games. The rules call for each player to roll dice continually until obtaining "a series of die-rolls he feels are esthetically appealing to him," at which point the gamesmaster "assigns names to the appropriate characteristics, detailing their effects upon the world." Whereas the game's designer would ordinarily supply a set of abilities that characters have in common (as *D&D* does with Strength, Intelligence, and so on), which are determined by die rolls, here abilities and their game properties are simply a matter of referee discretion. Similarly, any time a "Player wishes to undertake an action with his character, the Gamesmaster rolls the percentile dice. If the Gamesmaster rolls a high number, the character has succeeded," but if it is "a low number, the character has failed in his action." Because even in a parody it is necessary to resolve ambiguities, the rules helpfully add that "if the Gamesmaster is not sure as to whether the roll is high or low, he should roll again until he decides one way or another." That is the entirety of the system—no charts, no elaborate taxonomies of equipment or powers or adversaries, nothing but the imagination of players, the discretion of referees, and the occasional consultation of a die roll.

"Lord of the Dice" pares down the system to one where the referee "mentally" calculates the chances of success for any action on the fly. The entire game transpires behind what *Kam-Pain* calls "the GM's Cloak," the principle that the referee can act with total discretion. It is one where players effectively have no insight into how decisions are made—the referee has complete latitude and secrecy. Tongue firmly in cheek, Costikyan promised that in his game "no more will Players be fettered by

crotchety old designers, but their spirits will soar as they discover the many facets of the game." A designer himself, one raised in the strict tradition of wargame simulations, Costikyan surely intended this modest proposal as a thought-provoking reductio. Most readers at the time understood it that way because it contains a few caustic asides corroborating that interpretation, such as the promise that it dispenses with "bullshit sounding fantasy [n]ames." A letter to *Different Worlds* 4 calls it "a nice humorous touch" and encourages the magazine "to print more such things." But as the divisions in the role-playing community grew more profound over the next couple years, some players would return to "Lord of the Dice" in earnest as an explicit source of inspiration for games with a referee-centric design philosophy.

The identification of this extreme position as a "free-form" approach to fantasy role playing runs through its early literature. A gamer named Jeffrey Paul Jones played with Dave Arneson at Pacificon in the summer of 1979. Although Arneson was at the time promoting a new game, *Adventures in Fantasy*, it does not appear that Arneson played by his own rules, but this was in keeping with remarks he made elsewhere that year about the insignificance of "rules" to the invention of role-playing games.[11] Jones reported that "Dave runs a free-form adventure which allows players the freedom to be themselves, and his technique facilitates role-play at its best. In fact, it is virtually impossible to anything but role-play, and this was an achievement I had not thought possible except among fanatics" (*CP* 94). Here Jones identified that liberating players from the rules makes it impossible for them to approach the game through any other means than role playing, attributing the effect to Arneson's use of a system that was "as simple as possible," but with the caveat that "the DM himself can make or break an evening's activities."

Although we might think that any free-form game has to depend entirely on the moment-by-moment supervision of the referee, by the end of the 1970s some referees had begun to remove themselves from this most versatile expression of the role-playing game. With a sufficiently large group of players and a bit of initial coaching from the referee, peer interaction could take the place of the centralized dialogue of *D&D*. Although such games had only minimal need for documentation, a few pioneers still endeavored to explain them in print: a key example of the

scenario building required is Greg Stafford's playing aid "Sartar High Council" from 1979.[12]

During the course of his Sartar campaign, a section of the Glorantha setting that served as the basis for *Runequest*, Stafford became dissatisfied with the lack of perspective the player characters evinced when they committed acts that had a momentous impact on world politics. He thus devised a scenario for the campaign in which "each of the players played one or more members of the Sartar Tribal Council, summoned together to discuss the grievous consequences" of the party's transgressions. As the players would set aside their ordinary characters for this session and instead play the dozen established faction leaders of the setting, Stafford first prepared "a sheet of common knowledge . . . information which all of them had about each other," and then a sheet of "special knowledge which was focused on each character, and given only to those players." Armed with that information alone, players took on these new roles and advocated for their faction's interests in the council. They did so without recourse to a system as such—Stafford explained, "Indeed, we have not even determined the stats or abilities for them!" Instead, it became an exercise in pure role playing.

"The role-playing was an enormous success," Stafford reported. "Everyone was very true to form, in a couple of cases characters developed a (game) animosity which has plagued the kingdom ever since." Through the interaction of the council, "the single most evident problem which emerged was that the Sartarites really needed a leader." This led the council to conduct a spontaneous election, which elevated Kalyyr Starbrow, Queen of the Kheldon, to the position of temporary Princess of Sartar. The overall event was such a success that it became a regular feature of the Sartar campaign: "Whenever major problems now arise which might affect the whole nation, the players get together and summon the council characters for another meeting." Stafford observed that one fringe benefit of the council is that "I have been relieved of some of the referee burden of determining all of the historical developments in the campaign" because now the council directed world events with which the player characters would later contend. With no need to execute the system, the referee for this sort of scenario becomes a sort of *deus absconditus*, just setting events into motion by explaining the initial situation and then withdrawing to observe the results, possibly offering a bit of steering and counsel from time to time.

Here the bulk of the responsibility for the moment-to-moment operation of the game devolves to the players themselves.

Stafford published his description of the scenario, along with material needed to play—such as the common-knowledge sheet and many of the private-knowledge sheets—in the Chaosium fanzine *Wyrm's Footnotes*. He also drew some attention to it through *Wild Hunt* 42 that same year, where he identified it as an example of a way that he had successfully encouraged role playing in his local group. For the purposes of understanding the implications of *role playing*, the "Sartar High Council" scenario shows how easily a game can break free of the confines of the dialogue with an authoritative referee and transpose into something more like improvisational theater, where the referee recedes into a position like a director watching a rehearsal from off-stage, only when necessary intervening or fielding questions. Many later live-action role-playing games would build on similar principles.

The emergence of "free form" as a recognized style of game gives us another clear data point on how early adopters understood role playing and the practices that encouraged it. Some, like Jones, clearly thought that when you took away the system, role playing is what remained—that the obliviousness to system recommended by Sandy Eisen was the core of role playing, and it hardly mattered what was going on behind the referee's screen. But the century-old example of "free" *Kriegsspiel* illustrates how players can find the lack of system arbitrary and disempowering, to the point where there is not enough of a game left for people to consider themselves players. Predictably, a backlash would follow, especially given how many people stood to lose if it turned out, as Thomas put it, that new rules were not going to make much difference. An entire budding industry depended on him being wrong. But this also had disquieting implications for anyone hoping to articulate what makes something a role-playing game: namely, that those qualities might not be extractable from systems and rulebooks. What makes something a role-playing game might instead live in the state of play. But then the entire project of developing rules to encourage role playing would seem to be in grave doubt.

5

Toward a Philosophy

So, really, what is the thing we call a *role-playing game*? Once a new term enters the vernacular or an old one gains a new connotation, there is a great urgency to tame it with a philosophical definition. When the term encompasses a novel and poorly understood phenomenon, this endeavor will not proceed smoothly. *Role-playing game* embarked on the journey to define itself with every conceivable disadvantage, and the quest to define it would predictably languish in a labyrinth of contested assumptions for decades.[1] That road began with a small group of essayists in the 1970s who attempted in polemical form rather than through design to engage the question of what these games were and what they should be.

The breadth of the design space that early adopters identified with role playing in the 1970s was enormous: it ranged from extremes of openness to rigid constraints, from systems entirely subordinate to a referee to systems that required no referee, from games pegged to a particular story to games that provided a sandbox world for players to explore. But other factors transcending design also influenced how people understood role playing—namely, commercial factors. At the end of 1976, barely a handful of commercial titles proclaimed themselves to be role-playing games; over the next two years, an upheaval of industry priorities rocketed that number into the dozens. We must speak vaguely about the total sum because there were no accepted criteria for admitting a title to the nascent category—we might say there were around 50 by 1980. Before published designs routinely self-identified as role-playing games, this was solely a matter of external critical opinion, but when the label began to carry commercial implications, the decision to attach it to a product could depend more on marketing than on philosophical rigor. This leaves us with a number of oddities and corner cases that we hesitate to classify.

Take the case of *Madame Guillotine*. First released by Gametesters in the United Kingdom in 1975, the title was acquired by Fantasy Games Unlimited and reissued in the United States the following year with a new commercial identity. Some of the earliest advertisements for *Bunnies &*

Burrows gave a double billing to *Madame Guillotine*, calling it "abstract role-playing in the Reign of Terror." *Madame Guillotine* is in a class of multiplayer political board games such as *Kingmaker*, all of which owed a certain debt to *Diplomacy*. Two to six players take on the characters of particular figures in the French Revolution, such as Robespierre, and attempt to curry favor with factions of society by reacting properly to the various crises that naturally arise in such a period of turmoil. There is a prescribed diplomacy phase where players can confer and inhabit those historical roles to the degree they see fit. A review of the FGU version in the beginning of 1977 assented, "This is another role-playing game, such as TSR's *D&D* and GDW's *En Garde*" (*CP* 77). Like *En Garde*, *Madame Guillotine* loads its role-playing component into a diplomacy phase, though in *Madame Guillotine* players can win by securing enough victory points and are restricted to playing a small cast of historical personages. So should we consider *Madame Guillotine* a role-playing game?

The opposite difficulty arose for products that did not advertise themselves as role-playing games but found themselves shoehorned into that category. *Once upon a Time in the West*, a title first published in 1978 with the subtitle *Rules for Gunfight Wargames*, laid no claim to membership in the company of role-playing games. But after TSR rebranded its Wild West ruleset *Boot Hill* as a role-playing game in the summer of 1979, the designers of *Once upon a Time* felt market pressure to do the same. In an introduction to the game's supplement, *The Return Of*, Ian Beck re-creates a heated conversation with his publisher, where he asks, "Who says *Once upon a Time in the West* are role playing rules?" The publisher gently informs him "everybody" does "'cause that's what they are."[2] The designer is forced to concede this point, but only warily because he loaths fantasy and the role playing associated strongly with it. The publisher's incentive in this matter is clear: role-playing games sold much better than wargames in 1979. So the design of *Once upon a Time* now included campaign rules catering directly to, as Beck puts it, "'loonies' out there who actually wish to try to live longer than a single game."[3] But was there any greater justification to label *Once upon a Time in the West* a role-playing game than its ancestor the *Western Gunfight Wargame Rules*?[4]

Many published games hedged their bets, especially those that kept a foot planted firmly in conflict simulation. Both *Tradition of Victory* and *Commando* marketed themselves explicitly as hybrid games by shipping as

two demarcated booklets: one of wargaming rules and one of role-playing rules. Studying which rules got sorted into which booklets can reveal something of how designers saw the distinction between the two genres. It is more difficult still to classify earlier transitional wargames such as *Warriors of Mars* (1974) and *Knights of the Round Table* (1976), which offer in a single rulebook basic conflict simulation rules bundled with progressively more complex campaign rules that incorporate key features we identify with role playing. No one reading the first two chapters of *Knights* would see anything more than a medieval wargame system, but the rules beginning in the third chapter introduce elements that steer character behavior, stipulate that referees generate maps and situate various Arthurian adventures on them—or simply roll for encounters on random tables—and administer long-term campaigns in which "the fortunes of the characters rise and fall."[5] So does that make it a role-playing game?

Even more puzzling are efforts such as *Elementary Watson* (1978), a game that, per the back of the box, "combines the features of the traditional boardgame and the contemporary role-playing game." It takes a detective board game in the tradition of *Clue* and adds a referee who presents the situation, knows the solution to the crime, and answers arbitrary questions posed by the players. The game plays out almost entirely through those inquiries; the board serves only as a map of London to track the position of characters over time, as some questions may be asked only at particular locations, such as "Are there fingerprints on the parlor doorknob?" The game has little by way of characterization other than a handful of unquantified skills that players select for their characters, such as disguise and anatomy, which they may invoke as areas of expertise when posing questions to the referee. Ed Konstant stipulates in the designer's notes at the end of the rulebook that "players should be free to use their imaginations to their fullest as long as they follow the guidelines of the rules."[6] Should we understand *Elementary Watson* as a role-playing game or not? It was arguably the first published title that explicitly set out to marry the role-playing concept to a game system outside the tradition of wargames and conflict simulation.

In just five years of design energy following the release of *D&D*, the community made astonishing progress in exploring the new space it had identified around role playing, though none of that work seemed to make these games any easier to define. Commentators inevitably brought with

them to this process their own assumptions and goals: finding a point of equilibrium that best emphasized the qualities prized by fans—be they *immersion* or *role playing* or *story*—required the intervention of a sort of critical theory of role-playing games that informed future design and shaped play. Most of the early critical discussion centered on *D&D*—even when writers desperately tried to steer the conversation toward one its competitors. But that reveals the most formidable difficulty faced by theorists: drawing any boundary around a game that admitted of such adaptability and revision.

At first, theoretical literature addressed the small but passionate community of fans who contributed to the hobby press of the day, a group that took upon itself the task of resolving the philosophical problems necessary to understand and improve role-playing games. By this point, the community's vibrant tradition of criticism on the subject of role-playing games had spread across a broad range of periodicals. Each of the four coastal hotbeds of role playing now had its own communal fanzine: *Alarums & Excursions* based in Los Angeles, *Wild Hunt* in Boston, *Lords of Chaos* in San Francisco, and *APA-DUD* (also known as *Pandemonium*) in New York. Similar ventures would emerge as far away as the United Kingdom (*Trollcrusher*) and Australia (*Morningstar*). *A&E* would retain by far the most diverse stable of writers, though the most ardent fans contributed to as many of the APAs as possible. For all that, the community engaged in this discussion remained insular: in the fall of 1977, *A&E* printed only 400 copies, and *Wild Hunt* barely managed 150.

Figure 5.1
Examples of the four primary Amateur Press Association (APA) game fanzines in the United States in the 1970s. Shown: *Alarums & Excursions*, *Wild Hunt*, *Lords of Chaos*, and *APA-DUD*.

Bear in mind, though, that at the start of 1976 *D&D* had sold a little more than 4,000 copies and that community engagement kept pace with the spread of the game. As the commercial hobby gained momentum, this discussion began to spread from the hastily assembled amateur fanzines of the mid-1970s to glossy offset magazines produced by the major game companies. Publishers began to glean that their readership wanted not only

to explore game mechanics but also to engage in a critical exploration of the nature of role-playing games and what they mean to people.

Games Workshop solicited such essays for its fanzine *Owl & Weasel*—with Andy Evans's "Reality in Fantasy" being the first it published, in issue 18. Evans wrote broadly about the promise that *Dungeons & Dragons* offered: that "we could all live a character through the equivalent of *Lord of the Rings* and games would have reached a height never before achieved or imagined in that dim and distant past when one man first bet with another on which way a particular bit of flint would fall." A role-playing game, to Evans, offers the chance to "make decisions as if you really were in that situation and facing those problems." He recognized it is "a new class of game," one in which "it is not necessary even to know the rules." He added, in words that echo the guidance Eisen gave just a year earlier, "In fact, it is better if you don't and make your decisions simply as if you were in that situation."

Starting with its debut in the spring of 1976, *The Dragon* carried bimonthly pronouncements from Gary Gygax and his colleagues in Lake Geneva, but it also ran freelance pieces, including some that considered the broader situation of role-playing games. Take, for example, Tom Filmore's article "The Play's the Thing" in *The Dragon* 11. Filmore began by asserting that "role playing is a side of D&D which gives it much of its flavor," explaining that "as our character grows in experience and memories, so does his depth of personality, becoming more individualistic and unique." He encouraged exploring motives for adventuring and creating a "colorful background" for each character. Although Filmore knew that some game systems already provided "tables for discovering background information and randomly giving each character various advantages and disadvantages," presumably including abilities and alignment, he meant something more: those systems are "just the raw data, it is still the player who must incorporate it all and reflect it in his playing of the character," providing something like the "breath of life" noted by Dick Eney. Filmore promised that if you "personalize your next character," it will make the game more "satisfying" and will "extend the game down hundreds of new avenues." Seductively, he urged, "Let yourself go. Try to be someone you are not and see how it feels."

Games Workshop followed the lead of *The Dragon* with its own glossy magazine *White Dwarf* in 1977, which ran essays on the philosophy of role-playing games from its first issue. In 1978, Flying Buffalo de-emphasized its own primitive newsletter *Wargamer's Information* in favor of the polished *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, which carried a variety of critical literature. The Chaosium had published essays in its fanzine *Wyrm's Footnotes* in 1978 but then redirected them to its professional magazine *Different Worlds* in 1979. *Different Worlds* in particular poached the most prominent authors from the APA fanzine community to write its articles, especially those dealing with the philosophy of role-playing games. Through the wider circulation of these magazines, the ideas of the hobby community of the late 1970s reached a larger audience than the APAs of earlier years did—*The Dragon* circulated an average of 6,000 copies a month in 1977 and more than 10,000 in 1979.

Many game designers who participated in this hobby-wide discussion insisted that some fundamental shift had occurred between *D&D* and more recent titles—but the exact turning point remained elusive. Given the open-ended system of *D&D*, how could one prove that a variant of *D&D* could not be devised to support any given criteria proposed to mark this shift? Thus, these competing designs did not stop at merely identifying themselves as role-playing games but also began sorting themselves into "generations." Although no consensus prevailed on the exact qualities that separated second-generation games from their forebears, the simplicity and underspecification of *D&D* became the most obvious targets of criticism. The shadow of the two cultures loomed large over this debate as "games people" and "story people" jockeyed to dictate the hobby's core tenets. Accounts of role-playing games of whichever generation inevitably revolved around a familiar set of controversies: the referee's control of the played system, the obligations associated with playing characters, and the control that players have over the direction of a game. But these accounts more fundamentally began to explore why we play these games in the first place.

Wargamers Counterattack

Faithful wargamers monitored the ascendance of *Dungeons & Dragons* with understandable suspicion. The first detailed articulation of their concerns came from Lewis Pulsipher, a long-standing wargamer who, like Gary Gygax, Mark Swanson, and Kevin Slimak, was a prominent member of the International Federation of Wargaming and several regional clubs prior to the foundation of TSR. Pulsipher's fanzine *Supernova* tracked science-fiction and fantasy games of the early 1970s; it was a rare venue that covered experimental games in science-fiction fandom, such as Midgard and Elsinore.

In 1975, *Supernova* 25 ran a review of *D&D*. Pulsipher tacked on to that review a brief informational note explaining that *D&D* "is not a game for someone who cannot get away from the 'competition' idea; luck plays too large a part for the game to be a fair struggle of mind against mind," as in a traditional wargame. He called it "a 'fun' game rather than something to play 'for blood,'" though he acknowledged its growing popularity among both nonwargamers and wargamers alike.

By July 1976, Pulsipher had absorbed the early reports of *D&D* play in *A&E*, which he attacked with a piece of his own in *A&E* 13, commenting on the state of the game: "I am a fringe SF fan, but I play *D&D* as a wargame (I hate luck) and consequently I find many of the things reported/suggested in *A&E* ridiculous." He had come away with the impression that "stfen DMs," which in the argot of the time refers to referees in science-fiction fandom, "tended to control the game completely, overtly or not." The notion that a referee might control the game covertly recalls the "illusion" that *Bunnies & Burrows* referees retain even as they "shade" die rolls. Such referees rescue players from lethal situations, whereas Pulsipher believed that those "players would be massacred in a skill-oriented dungeon." But Pulsipher did not argue for more lethality as such: "That a dungeon is very dangerous or has high casualty rates does not make it balanced. When death is nearly meaningless, who cares about dying?" Pulsipher instead advocated for games where "entire parties are wiped out if players seriously err" and where death results in penalties to experience totals even when characters are resurrected. Finally, Pulsipher addressed Glenn Blacow's early concerns about striking a balance between generosity and lethality, which had just appeared in the previous issue of *A&E*, arguing instead that the only meaningful distinction is balanced versus nonbalanced, where "the problem comes when people try to mix the

two types." Pulsipher advised that "Glenn would be better off ignoring those who don't prefer his own style."

Whatever his early experiences were with the game, Pulsipher found himself playing with unfamiliar groups when he left the United States to study abroad in England. Although he had turned over editorship of *Supernova* to Flying Buffalo, he continued to report on "gaming in Britain" for it, and he noted in the May 1977 issue that "fantasy gaming is very popular in Britain," though because "there are comparatively few wargamers in Britain," it transpires that "*D&D* is dominated by SF fans even more than American *D&D*." The distinction between the two cultures spanned the Atlantic Ocean, but even on another continent Pulsipher remained adamantly opposed to the approach that science-fiction fandom took to *D&D*. He lamented, "I must be the only real proponent of wargamers *D&D*—skill and believability, not a silly substitute for getting drunk—in the country" (*SN* 27). What could he mean by calling a game "a silly substitute for getting drunk"?

In the summer of 1977, Pulsipher began writing for the newly founded periodical *White Dwarf*, the house organ of Games Workshop in Britain. Pulsipher's contribution to the first issue, a piece called "*D&D* Campaigns: Part I—Philosophy," explicitly set out to settle the fundamental question that divided the story people from the games people: "Is *D&D* a talking-book or a serious wargame?" Pulsipher's answer was that "Gary Gygax has made it clear that D&D is a wargame, though the majority of players do not use it as such." His article is largely a counterattack against the emerging nonwargame interpretation of *D&D* and a defense of a more player-driven approach to the game.

Pulsipher began his argument by proposing a player typology, one that cut stark and familiar battle lines in the community: "*D&D* players can be divided into two groups, those who want to play the game as a game and those who want to play it as a fantasy novel." This lent further credence to the popular supposition that community disagreements about *D&D* play were rooted in the different cultures of wargaming and science-fiction fandom. Pulsipher held this opinion in common with many others, though no one had yet articulated the matter as clearly. Jim Cooper, writing at the end of 1976 in *Quick Quincy Gazette* 3, was well aware that there were "two ways of playing D&D," and he intuited that play "does seem to be a

mixture of characterizing and straight-out battle, with variety due to degree of either, and ratio of combination." Others had explicitly found the roots of the debate about generosity and lethality in the assumptions of the two cultures. In *A&E* 18, Sean Cleary noted that "around here [the MIT Strategic Games Society] there has been a steady push for harder dungeons" and the associated lethality, but he observed that West Coast science-fiction-fan dungeons he had visited "leaned to a player oriented dungeon rather than a monster oriented one." After lamenting some referees' willingness to disburse treasure according to the tables provided in the *D&D* rules, which Cleary deemed overgenerous, he blasted "the philosophy of 'the dungeon is for the players'"—that is, that dungeons exist for the sake of advancing the players' characters. Cleary was well aware of the two cultures behind such philosophies but admitted, "I don't know if this philosophy is of the 'fan' type"—that is the science-fiction fan—"or the 'wargamer' type."

Pulsipher stressed in his *White Dwarf* essay the "escapism" inherent in approaching *D&D* as if it were some sort of enacted fantasy novel: those players experience a "direct escapism through abandonment of oneself to the flow of play," which he contrasted unfavorably with "the gamer's indirect escapism"—that is, "the clearcut competition and mental exercise any good game offers." He used the pejorative label *escapist* or, more commonly, *silly/escapist* to designate those players who wanted to abandon themselves to a fantasy narrative in contrast to the "game-players" who strove to engage in a competitive contest. By separating players into two camps this way, Pulsipher recalled similar dichotomies proposed in the wargaming community in connection with disputes over realism and playability or the threefold model advanced by Thornton. Pulsipher's motivation for proposing this distinction was less philosophical than polemical: he hoped to persuade British gamers, whom he saw as thralls of science-fiction fandom, to embrace his preferred wargaming play style, even if he had to shame them into doing it.

Pulsipher admitted further subdivisions in his categories of players. Among the games people, some prefer fighting monsters, but others focus on solving puzzles, dealing with riddles, traps, mazes, and so on. He condemned the overgenerosity and grossness of some campaigns in familiar tones: for him, any "parties of eighth to twelfth level and higher" give offense, with their "innumerable magic items." Although the players in such

campaigns will be bored in a less power-driven game, Pulsipher perspicaciously speculated that "players accustomed to a more subdued campaign might be delighted or terrified by the rewards and dangers of the situation which would bore the supergamers."

He also saw two camps among the escapists: there are "those who prefer to be told a story by the referee, in effect, with themselves as the protagonists, and those who like a silly, totally unbelievable game." The former results from "manipulation of the situation by the referee, however he sees fit." To a seasoned wargamer, the absence of control this implies could only inspire horror: this is how we should understand his earlier remark about *D&D* players who "want to play it as a fantasy novel," a passive stance difficult to distinguish from mere spectatorship—a mirror image of the "immersion which can be obtained with reading a good book" that Roos recommended so heartily. The latter "silly" play style results from contrivances such as "magical decks of cards, buttons, levers, and so on— lottery *D&D*," where chance takes the place of the referee's whim in depriving players of their right to make meaningful decisions.

At his most generous, Pulsipher submitted that "there is nothing inherently wrong with the silly/escapist method," though he judged, "it is a strange way for game players to act." But he then went on to condemn it roundly: "I personally consider the silly/escapist style to be both boring and inferior for any campaign." He argued that "even in a fantasy game, moderation and self-discipline are virtues necessary to top refereeing. While campaigns may be run on other bases, I believe that a skill-game campaign is likely to satisfy people more in the long run. Some people prefer luck and passivity, but they are seldom game players." Finally, he heaped one last insult on the "silly/escapist" approach that explained how he connected this play style to intoxication: "If you feel a need to get drunk and/or stoned, however, try lottery D&D, the similarities are surprising."

Pulsipher's disparagement of a nonwargame approach to *D&D* as "silly," let alone stupefying as a narcotic, reflected an opinion that he surely shared with other veterans of conflict simulation. In the spring of 1977, a published title such as *Realm of Yolmi* could still stress in a section called "The Spirit of the Game" the hardline Gygaxian view that the referee should "let the dice tell the story."[7] We might contrast this attitude with that of Wayne Shaw, a seasoned wargamer, who around the same time circulated an essay

called "From Whence Did This Grow?" in *Lords of Chaos* 2, in which he expressed a very different perspective. "I play *Dungeons & Dragons* as an exercise in creative story telling, not, note, as a war game. Oh, I enjoy complex battles as much as the next person, but I was a wargamer before I was a D&D player, and in the sense of playing it as a war gamer, there are other games I prefer much more." And even Kevin Slimak, who practically defined the adversarial relationship between the player and referee, had begun to revise his viewpoint after playing in Los Angeles science-fiction fandom circles late in 1976. "I find myself more and more feeling that any character that I have is really a cooperative effort between me and the DM whose game/games he's been in," he wrote (*WH* 9).

As the battle lines formed over the best approach to *D&D*, the detachment required to see both sides of the issue was often wanting. In 1972, Fred Vietmeyer, responding to similar typologies in the wargame community of that time, had warned that "for one type of player to place his own viewpoint as superior to another's hobby enjoyment is simply being too egocentric." No doubt Pulsipher's assault on the "silly/escapist" crowd won few converts. But it did reflect the community's growing sensitivity to the divide and the need to acknowledge it when recommending approaches to play.[8] Writing in *A&E* 28 toward the end of 1977, Howard Mahler could refer to "the old question of the different aspects of playing D&D," where "one split might be between a characterization aspect and a wargaming aspect." Although Mahler professed that he enjoyed both, he knew that he could not make recommendations about play without first identifying which camp in that divide he was addressing, which led him to preface simple advice with cumbersome caveats such as "What I am about to say definitely has little if no applicability to campaigns in which characterization is more important (as opposed to equal or less) than the wargaming aspect." People had begun to sense that there were fundamental and incompatible philosophical divisions that commentators needed to tiptoe around.

Pulsipher's initial philosophical salvo was lengthy enough that it spilled over from the first to the third issue of *White Dwarf*. This next installment focused squarely on the fundamental design decision that made possible the excesses he lamented: on the tension between referee latitude and player control over the operation of the system. Pulsipher stressed that "the referee

is neither infallible nor completely impartial" and that "any referee can kill any party if he really wants to," so the interaction between the player and the referee must necessarily give the party the opportunity to succeed. To avoid despair, the referee must foster "a sense of control by the players of their own fate" and its corollary "participation by all the players," both of which require "reducing referee interference." In support of that goal, Pulsipher insisted that players be allowed to "roll their own attack and saving throw dice," that "each person be permitted to decide what his characters do," and that the players should enjoy "extended time to think about what they intend to do," up to the point that they can even "change their minds about what they intend to do (before they are told results, of course)."

Although Pulsipher knew the arguments for depriving players of access to the details of system execution, he attested that the advantages "of letting players roll their own dice are that the sense of participation is vastly increased." Here he echoed John Boardman in the most cogent rebuttal to Eisen's vow: when it comes to inducing desirable experiences in players, the sense of participation yielded by involving players in the system trumps the feeling that the player lives the part of the character. Pulsipher also cannily noted that "when players roll their own dice they can't blame the referee for poor results! This can be more important in a campaign than might be expected." Without any knowledge of how the system is executed, players have no insight into how much discretion the referee is exercising: by rolling their own dice, they usually glean a general sense of how well or poorly an attempted action has gone, especially for very high and very low results. This is not to say that Pulsipher opposed the referee altering any of the published rules, but he insisted that the referee "make sure players know about a change before it affects them" and even recommended that the referee "discuss rule changes with players before making a final decision." He expected every player sitting around the table to know and understand the system.

You get the sense that Pulsipher wanted players to hold their characters at a certain distance from themselves. He rejected the sorts of time limits on the formulation of statements of intention previously endorsed by Sheldon Linker and others. Insisting "this is a game, not training," Pulsipher wondered why a referee would require players to respond within the time constraints that characters operate under: "The characters in *D&D*," who

are "career adventurers," would "know by reflex what they're supposed to do." But "why expect someone who plays this weird game once a week to have the same reactions? It's ridiculous." Here Pulsipher raised a familiar and crucial question about the scope of the simulation: the degree to which a player is expected to think for or think like the character. And although Pulsipher dismissed the role of the caller completely, he was willing to allow other players to interfere with an incautious statement of intention. "If a player impulsively says, 'I'll pick up the skull' and the others immediately tell him he shouldn't, who does the referee pay attention to?" Provided the player is willing to listen to hastily shouted reason, or, indeed, if the situation permits the other characters to restrain a reckless companion by force, then an ill-advised statement of intention need never acquire the force of action. "Again," Pulsipher averred, "I do not expect the player to be as disciplined as the character."

Pulsipher forbid referees from lying to players and stressed that players need the opportunity to glean sufficient intelligence about their situation to formulate actions. Detection spells give players "information they must have to control events," and this information is necessary to make "the most basic of all D&D player decisions"—that is, "to fight or avoid a fight" because "if there is no way to avoid a fight, for lack of information, players are hamstrung." The judicious use of information-gathering system tools, when combined with careful questioning of the referee will, Pulsipher submitted, "enable players to have some control over the game." Yet in the vein of Mahler he noted how completely referee discretion dictates the amount of information players will receive. "If the players are given sufficient decision-making opportunities then the sense of control can be established. No skill-oriented campaign can succeed if the players are unable to make decisions which significantly alter the course of an adventure, and they cannot do this if they are unable to obtain information before they act." The value in granting players the wisdom to make informed decisions is in the "sense of control" it imparts: without that sense of control, players can feel helpless—or, worse, passive, deprived of the means to steer the game.

Pulsipher would not have to wait long for Gygax to reaffirm their shared sentiments on the relationship of stories to games. For *The Dragon* 31, Gygax penned a long essay called "Books Are Books, and Games Are Games, and Never the Twain . . ." While it in part counseled referees to

reject appeals to fantasy literature as an excuse for overpowered characters, Gygax framed this in a larger argument about the unsuitability of preconstructed narratives for games, contrasting the passivity of readership with the agency of role playing. "A fantasy adventure game should offer little else but the possibility of imaginative input from the participant," Gygax stressed, and given that the best of adventure literature is "so complete as to offer little within its content for reader creativity," we can infer that "novels fix character roles to suit a foreordained conclusion," whereas "game personae must be designed with sufficient flexibility so as to allow for participant personality differences and multiple unknown situations." Surely this applied to any referee who deprived players of agency in the manner Pulsipher feared. In Gygax's view, a game campaign steered to a narrative would be dull, predictable, and confining, provided it goes beyond the "sketchy story line" necessary for something like an adventure module. Gygax could not imagine drawing a compelling game from the narrative of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy because, for him, games introduce a flexibility that would necessarily give evil the opportunity to triumph, and so "the 'Ring Trilogy' is quite unsatisfactory as a setting for a fantasy adventure game." Games, for Gygax, just are not like stories.

Pulsipher would continue to contribute similar pieces to *White Dwarf* and the major print periodicals as the initial popular wave of *D&D* crested in the early 1980s, but his views in these earliest essays reflect some of the first substantive critical thinking about role-playing games to reach a wide audience.[9] Circulating these ideas in a glossy magazine such as *White Dwarf* made them available to a far wider audience than earlier discussions in fanzines, which necessarily triggered further discussion. Once the first pioneers stuck their necks out with essays toward a philosophy of role-playing games, a philosophical dialogue started to emerge around controversial points.

Pulsipher was so committed to the idea that *D&D* was a wargame that he never used the term *role-playing game* in his early essays, despite the fact that others liberally applied it to *D&D* in that first issue of *White Dwarf*—including the magazine's publisher, Ian Livingstone, in his inaugural editorial. There is some irony that another short piece in that issue effectively equated role playing with a certain sort of wargame: Andrew Holt wrote that "there is also much to commend in D&D, the general

concept is an inspiration, and it has made the 'role-playing' game, and the free Kriegspiel in general, respectable and popular."

Advocates of "free" *Kriegsspiel* quickly expressed opposition to Pulsipher's stance. A letter from Peter Tamyln in *White Dwarf* 10 addressed "playing D&D as a 'game'—see Lew Pulsipher's articles" as being a matter of adherence to "a rigid set of rules" foisted on players and the referee alike. In the vein of Sandy Eisen, Tamyln objected, "However, that sort of play does not really exploit D&D to its full potential. The players are not really 'role-playing', they are maneouvering their pieces in a form of personalized wargame. In order to enjoy the full flavor of role-playing, I believe it is necessary to play *D&D* as a Kriegspiel, i.e., a game in which the rules are known only to the umpire and the players make decisions as they would in 'real' life." This view reinforced the connotation of *role playing* as an alternative to participation in the system, wherein players simply generate statements of intention without any sense of how the referee resolves them. Tamyln rejected Pulsipher's arguments for granting players access to information about the system and instead contended that the only thing players need to understand beyond their characters is the game setting: "In this sort of game it is essential that the players have access to any information (e.g., social customs) that the characters would have and that, after allowing for such things as magic, has enough internal consistency for the players to make rational decisions and not be caught out by loopholes in the rules."

This disagreement about approaches to *D&D* could now be articulated in both extreme positions and various middle grounds. A year after Pulsipher's article, the British fanzine *Underworld Oracle* enumerated in its fifth issue three distinct methods of play. In the first, "the D/M is completely in charge, making all the die rolls necessary, and more or less relating a story to the players," which involves "telling them what results their actions have, and allowing the players' visual imagination full flow." In the second method, "players are encouraged to take a fuller part in the structure of the game, making their own die rolls for hits and saving throws," which reduces the referee's workload. The third method transposes *D&D* into something more like a board game by displaying the tactical situation with miniature or counters, which "allows players to see exactly what is happening and correspondingly, to appreciate the danger that the character is in at any given moment." In the more parsimonious modes, "various

other details may be given or withheld from the players," including factors such as "the number of hit points that a character has left after melee" or "even the level that a character is at." Although the first method is "a very good introduction to the game," it might make it difficult to mentor players into prospective gamemasters ready "to start refereeing a game themselves" because they will have been playing "without any idea of the game mechanics." And what if, like Sandy Eisen, players introduced through the first method feel as if they have lost something as they transition to the second or third method?

Definitions and Controversies

One can readily appreciate why wargamers sometimes struggled to wrap their heads around this emerging game genre. An essay by Len Kanterman and Charles Elsden called "Introduction to Yourself: *Dungeons & Dragons* for Beginners," which appeared in *Campaign* 81 in the fall of 1977 began with the promise, "This article has been written for those conventional wargamers who have heard strange rumors of a fantasy game called *Dungeons & Dragons*," with a mind to "help any such hardy newcomers avoid some of the pitfalls entailed in commencing an activity that is quite unlike any other game."

After reviewing the obvious differences—the lack of a board or victory conditions, the unusual dependence on statements of intention—the essay posited that a *D&D* game simply serves a different purpose than a wargame: "*D&D* may provide a path of insight into one's own thoughts and his relationship to the others." It necessarily reveals something of the nature of people, Kanterman and Elsden contended, when "players become actors, ones with unfinished scripts." Deep personal insights become unlocked because "players act in a void of mystery" that extends from the nature of the game world to the system executed by the referee: "We suggest that players who do not intend to lay out their own dungeon set-up should *not* read they rules!" Instead, they urged "participants to approach it as role-players. Ideally, the player should attempt to get inside his character, understand his motivations, and then react in various situations as he imagines his character would." The authors maintained that *D&D* is not so much a wargame as a process of introducing you to yourself: "Like the

psychodrama games of the mid-sixties, designed to put one in touch with one's self and his fellows, *D&D* can become a vehicle for increased self-knowledge." Whatever Kanterman and Elsden saw in *D&D*, it was no wargame but instead a tool of self-realization: "from the realm of fantasy, we can safely reflect upon our inner selves."

How could you wrap a tidy definition around a game like that? A few months before Pulsipher's essay appeared in *White Dwarf*, Pieter Roos had already informally defined a role-playing game as "one in which the participants assume a character and act within that role." A year later, one of the earliest role-playing game theorists dedicated an essay to a more expansive definition of the term.

Steven R. Lortz stipulated in his article "Reflections on the Structure of Role-Playing Games" in the Chaosium's fanzine *Wyrm's Footnotes* 5 in the summer of 1978 that "a 'role-playing game' is a game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment." Although Lortz immediately acknowledged that the definition is broad, he explained that "after a bit of consideration it becomes apparent that the scope of possibilities inherent in role-playing requires a broad definition."

Lortz's definition of a role-playing game, like Roos's, depends on the activities of players but says nothing about referees. Late in his piece, Lortz hastily added that "most role-playing games require that someone assume the role of the imaginary environment. This person is known as the 'game-master,' and the other players involved in the game are called 'players.'" The earliest critics of the genre deemed *En Garde* a role-playing game, so Lortz might understandably have gravitated toward a definition that omitted the referee entirely. But given that a referee was required to allow players to remain ignorant of the rules, a quality that Kanterman, Elsden, and others deemed essential to role playing, Lortz's definition drew a boundary around the practice that differed from other contemporary opinions.

Lortz's ambition for his essay extended beyond just defining *role-playing game* to providing a broader critical vocabulary for the common concepts associated with the genre.[10] He distinguished concepts such as a "campaign" from a "game" or a "session," giving crisp accounts of each: a "session," for example, is "a number of moves or sequences played out at the same place in real space and time. A session is usually several real hours long and

occurs at a convenient gathering place." By contrast, a "'campaign' is a game that is played out over the course of a number of sessions, involving the adventures of an on-going cast of characters in one particular universe, and usually mastered by a single game master." Intriguingly, Lortz also alluded to how "moves" in the game are "linked by a continuing flow of dramatically significant action," and it is in this respect that Lortz saw a break from the genre of wargames, which "generally represent a single major dramatic action which is played out on a single scale" rather than the character-driven flow of drama across a campaign that he saw in role-playing games.

In 1979, Lortz would expand on all of these themes in an article series that began with the first issue of the Chaosium's glossy magazine *Different Worlds*, starting with a reprise of his earlier piece under the title "What Is a Role-Playing Game?" It added a few terms to his critical lexicon, such as *scenario*, which he defined as "a closed-ended amount of play, usually occupying no more than one session." He gave far more emphasis to the role of the referee, whose responsibilities permeate the description of play. The revised article also appended a section titled "Move Structure in RPGs," which provided a detailed critique of one exchange in a dialogue centering on a statement of intention as the effective "move" of a role-playing game. Lortz first identified that "a move is a segment of play which represents a specific amount of game time," as determined by the time scale, and so in game design "the object of move structure will be to accommodate all of the imaginary interactions possible within a given amount of game time." Within a move, he saw two parties capable of acting: the characters and the environment. The former's actions derive from the players, and the latter's actions from either a referee or the system; the characters may trigger a response from the environment and vice versa. Thus, Lortz broke down the move phase into four parts: first, an "Encounter Phase," where the referee determines if any events arise from the environment and "also gives the players any new information" about the environment that has arisen since the last update; second, an optional "Players' Consultation Phase," in which the players may talk among themselves to negotiate a plan of action, if the situation permits; third, a "Player-Character Action Phase," in which "the players indicate what action their characters are performing" through statements of intention and in which "the game-master and the players . . . use the game's resolution

systems to determine the outcome of the player-characters' actions"; fourth and last, an "Environment Response Phase," in which the referee must "determine what reaction the environment makes" to the characters' actions, if any.

In Lortz's move structure, the first and third phases most obviously correspond to the classic conception of the dialogue, where in the first the referee describes the situation in the game and then in the third the players submit their statements of intention. Lortz's account differs from the way Totten described the effective turns in *Strategos* insofar as Totten did not anticipate a party of colluding players who might optionally require a second phase for deliberating on how to act. Lortz placed significant emphasis on enabling "all of the players to become sufficiently involved," even breaking down his Player-Character Action Phase into one where the referee goes around the table hearing which action each character is performing, a collection of statements of intention that Lortz called "a cycle." He made no mention of the concept of a caller and instead noted that "each player-character has free-will and should be able to do as he sees fit during the Player-Character Action Phase." But Lortz definitely understood this agency as a reactive one: where Totten's informal description puts the player's statement of intention first in the turn and covers how the referee decides on the result, Lortz had the referee describe the situation first and solicit an action from the players, which then may have various consequences.

As an investigation of the formal structure of role-playing games, with an emphasis on defining terminology and modeling play, Lortz's initial *Different Worlds* article effectively inaugurated a new branch of scholarship. To help illustrate his critical principles, Lortz supplemented this apparatus with a complete role-playing game of his own invention. Lortz called the system "Cannibals & Castaways" and billed it as "the world's simplest complete role-playing game." It is undoubtedly simple and short: the rules span only around three columns, spread out over a couple pages.

"Cannibals & Castaways" is a fitting choice both to illustrate Lortz's definition of *role-playing game* and to highlight the difficulties such a definition can face. Per his definition, the game does indeed allow "a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters," in this case

the number of players being one and the imaginary characters being undifferentiated castaways. At each turn, the player will "operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment," though that degree is not a large one because it depends on whether a die rolled each turn heralds the arrival of either a potential rescue ship or menacing cannibals. In the case of a ship, the player has only one sane course of action: the character will attempt to contact the ship. In the case of cannibals, the player may elect either to attack the cannibals or not—literally no other player decision is made in the course of the game, and the system resolves any attempted attack with a single odds-based die roll. Finally, just as Lortz's definition de-emphasizes the role of a referee, the function of the game-master in "Cannibals & Castaways" is exclusively to roll dice at preordained times: as with *Flash Gordon*, this responsibility can be reassigned to the player without compromising any secret information. The referee is totally impartial—insofar as he or she has no discretionary powers to exercise whatsoever. "Cannibals & Castaways" is literally a game where the referee must "let the dice tell the story," what Costikyan would call a closed-system role-playing game.

After explaining the system, Lortz gave a brief example transcript of the game, and it is here that he showed the playing of roles: in the dialogue, where the player is largely isolated from those bare-bones rules. In the example, when the game-master rolls a six, indicating a ship has appeared, she improvises, "Looks like you may be in luck today, you spot a tramp steamer just off the reef." The player then replies, "We light a fire and try to make smoke signals," though in fact the player has little choice in what he does, only in describing the manner in which he does it because the rules encourage that an attempt be made to contact the ship in this case. We might ungenerously say that *role playing* seems to mean to Lortz only that the participants have some obligation to embellish the diced events with little verbal details such as "tramp steamer" and "smoke signals," even though these utterances in no way alter the outcomes of the game. "Cannibals & Castaways" transpires in a dialogue, but it is a far cry from the dialogue of a *Kriegsspiel* wargame or *D&D*, wherein a player makes arbitrary statements of intention and the referee has broad latitude to interpret these actions and determine their consequences for the game world.

Should "Cannibals & Castaways" qualify as a role-playing game? Lortz received some corroboration from other early role-playing game designers: Steve Jackson, for example, argued in *Different Worlds* 2 for a very expansive understanding of the genre, that "the most popular board game ever developed in the US is pure role-playing. Yes . . . *Monopoly*. Consider: each player takes on the role of a cheerfully rapacious real-estate tycoon." Jackson argued that his own first design, the tank wargame *Ogre*, was in fact a role-playing game, even though he "didn't (consciously) realize it at the time" he made it. *Runequest* designer Steve Perrin suggested in the next issue that "any game is role-playing," seeing little distinction between the role playing he does today and what he had done as child. A letter from Brian Wagner in *Different Worlds* 4, however, curtly rebutted this broad a scope for what role playing is. Wagner began with Lortz: "I strongly disagree that his *Cannibals & Castaways* is a RPG." In Wagner's vision, there are three necessary conditions for being an RPG: a character creation system for individuating characters; a progression system for advancing characters; and "some world or universe" that the characters exist in. Lortz's game does not fulfill the first two of these conditions. Wagner continued, "I also disagree with what Steve Jackson said in *DW* #2 about *Ogre* and *Monopoly* being RPGs. I just can't see it. If you want to go as far as saying games like that are RPGs exactly where do you stop?"

One could play *Monopoly* and, following Lortz's example, have each player dramatize the game events into a sort of cohesive narrative after every die roll, every sum paid, and every card drawn. But as Andy Evans had already pointed out about *Monopoly* in 1976, "You are never really in the same situation as a Property Tycoon, you are only playing within the rules of a game created artificially by the designer" (*Owl & Weasel* 18). With sufficient ingenuity, one can dramatize any game, even a game of tennis, into a personal narrative: nothing prevents tennis players from assuming the roles of imaginary characters, maybe space aliens, and declaring the tennis court to be some imaginary environment, maybe one of the moons of Jupiter, and each player can exercise their freedom to hit balls where they choose and dramatize the events afterward as a volley of planetary bombardments, all without altering the rules of the game or the outcome.[11] The explanatory power in any definition lies largely in how it lets us decide what to include in the category a word designates—so what

would be the criteria that demarcate role-playing games from other games in Lortz's model?

Dave Arneson, like Wagner, thought that progression was essential to the concept of role-playing games. In the closest he came in this early literature to offering a definition, he wrote in *Different Worlds* 3 that "RPG is, I feel, a game where the individual character can enhance his abilities and station within the game through the characters used in play." If we understand that enhancement to mean a progression system, this definition would admit of some ready counterexamples among self-identified role-playing games, including *Metamorphosis Alpha*, but Arneson considered progression a disqualifying omission: "Many so-called RPGs only pay lip service to it by including characters that can never develop but are always the same. That's not RPG in my book."

But Arneson's remarks would come two years after Peter Cerrato had blamed the experience-point system for a lack of role playing in his circles. And Brian Wagner was refuted in a letter in the fifth issue of *Different Worlds*, which insisted that "Steve Jackson's *Ogre* is an RPG!" The prominent differences of opinion on the subject inspired Clint Bigglestone to observe that "no two people appear to agree on exactly what 'role-playing' is" (*DW* 3).

Having established baseline definitions for key terms, Lortz then built on these in further installments of his "Way of the Gamer" series in subsequent issues of *Different Worlds*. His second essay, "Dramatic Structure of RPGs," revisited the earlier hints he had dropped about how moves and dramatic sequences differentiated role-playing games from earlier wargames (*DW* 2). Although he acknowledged that "an RPG can be thought of as being related to the legitimate stage, where true role-play exists in the form of 'improvisational theater,'" he found that a closer analogy to the actual operation of a role-playing game is the cinema. Just as "a movie is composed of a large number of individual still photographs known as 'frames,'" he posits that "a game is composed of a number of 'moves,' which are frozen images of an imaginary time." As his first essay established, "moves" consist of the interchange of statements of intention and environmental changes, but here Lortz proposed that just as in a movie the "stills are ordered into 'shots,' 'sequences,' and 'scenes,'" so too in a

role-playing game "activities are ordered into 'sequences,' which are numbers of moves occurring sequentially in game time, played out on the same scale, and linked by a continuing flow of dramatically significant action."

For Lortz, it is the necessity for "dramatically significant action" that connects role-playing games to motion pictures and that illustrates a clear break from the previous traditions of conflict simulation. He explained that at the time of the cinema's introduction, it was simply a novelty, as "a movie consisted of nothing more than a simple shot of something like a locomotive steaming toward the audience," but eventually pioneers such as "Edwin S. Porter conceived the idea of stringing a number of shots together to tell the story of a daring train robbery." Intriguingly, Lortz presented that act as more editorial than directorial. Lortz similarly postulates that "the art of running an RPG lies in the game-master's ability to order moves and sequences into a dramatically satisfying whole." He recognizes that this means that "the first artistic skill a game-master needs to learn is the ability to recognize a sequence of moves," which requires that the referee "become familiar with the components of drama, and the form these components take in a role-playing game." That requires studying dramatic art in general—a lesson that Michie had recommended as far back in 1976, so that we referees could endeavor "to improve our own game by learning some of the arts of the story teller."

As an example of "an abstract structure of a dramatic situation," Lortz gave the following: "A protagonist existing within some sort of environment finds itself in conflict with some part of that environment. The nature of this conflict gives rise to some concrete objective which the protagonist must attain. During the protagonist's attempt to achieve the objective, complications occur which raise the question as to whether the protagonist will succeed or not." For a default fantasy adventure game such as *D&D*, he argued that "the basic conflict between the characters and the world stems from the fact that the characters are neither economically, nor politically, as powerful as they would like to be." Lortz explained that we can quantify economic and political power through commodities such as gold pieces and experience points, and in the attempt to acquire them "complications arise in the form of nefarious creatures who inhabit the underground labyrinth and prey on characters venturing into their domain." But the resolution of that conflict unfolds across an entire campaign: for the

purpose of running the game from moment to moment, the referee must instead focus on the motivational question behind each dramatic sequence: most commonly, "the intensely dramatic, immediate question as to whether the characters will succeed, or even survive, against some specific being or condition encountered in the souterrain."

Lortz instantiated these motivating questions within the context of a dungeon adventure. These range from uncertain matters such as "Will the characters reach the surface?" or "Will the characters be able to get eight hours rest?" to very tactical matters along the lines of "What lies behind this door?" In each case, Lortz scoped a "sequence" to the resolution of its motivating question. Resolving a sequence is very different from the resolution one finds within the scope of any given move in a game, where a player poses a statement of intention and the referee reports the result according the system: in the scope of a dramatic sequence, more expansive intentions such as "I'm going to escape"—or maybe even "I try to become king"—are indeed the very matters at stake, things that would resist traditional system resolution. All this is not to say that every moment of the game must hinge on some pivotal question: Lortz further admitted that in addition to "dramatic" sequences, there are also "transition" sequences "in which some low-key action, such as peaceful travel, is being carried out" or when the characters "rest, heal or research spells." His examples show a necessary interspersing of transition sequences between intense dramatic sequences, but the motivation for a game ultimately rests on its resolution of dramatic uncertainties. "If there are no questions left unanswered, the game-master and the players know it's time to set new goals for the characters, and start a new adventure."

In light of this later essay, we can look differently at the rudimentary event-resolution system that Lortz provided for "Cannibals and Castaways." What mattered to Lortz was resolving the motivating questions of the dramatic sequences in the game. Will a ship be sighted? Will the cannibals attack? Will the castaways prevail in combat? Rather than focusing his system on simulating all of the underlying skills and activities that might underpin those actions, he instead tuned it to resolve the motivating questions. *Flash Gordon* does this for a more elaborate story and factors various abilities and conditions into event resolution, but it strikes the same path to resolving dramatic sequences scoped to the nodes of its schematic map.

In his assessment of the dramatic structure of role-playing games, Lortz anticipated many far later theories of game design and play.[12] We might generously say that Lortz's work was ahead of its time, as the readership of *Different Worlds* did not heartily embrace his attempts to engage them in philosophical consideration of role-playing games. A letter to the fourth issue puts it quite bluntly: "I suggest you get rid of this ridiculous series by Stephen L. Lortz. He discusses RPG in the most abstract terms possible for no discernible purpose. I can't bring myself to finish either of his articles so far, simply because they are totally incomprehensible and, even worse, boring." Another reader similarly reported, "I don't know why I don't like it but I find that I am unable to finish the column." Lortz in fact targeted his work at critics and designers; in his first essay, he suggested, "If you're going to write your own rules, or even just talk about RPGs in general, you've got to ask yourself, 'What the heck is a role-playing game, anyway?'" But despite the lack of interest evinced by some readers, he did manage to get his definitions and ideas out into the intellectual commons at this crucial point when role-playing games had begun to forge their own identity.

When in 1979 Greg Costikyan offered a definition of role-playing games in *Commando*, it more or less echoed Lortz's: "A role-playing game is a game in which several players assume the role of a character or person in an imaginary (or simulated) world."[13] But where "Cannibals & Castaways" presents what Costikyan would call a closed-system role-playing game, the second issue of *Different Worlds* showed us a diametrically opposed open-ended design philosophy though Costikyan's "Lord of the Dice." Where Lortz deprived the referee of discretion and latitude, "Lord of the Dice" was predicated upon assigning the referee personal responsibility for virtually all functions that would ordinarily be specified in the system by a designer. Its rules occupy only around half a page of the issue, which surely spoofs Lortz's claim to have invented the "world's simplest role-playing game." But the reaction "Lord of the Dice" inspired was no joke, and before long people were taking it quite seriously as a model for what role-playing games should be.

Simbalist's Paradoxes

Many early essays on role-playing games were written with a commercial agenda, to elevate new products and to denigrate the genre's parent, *D&D*. The partiality of this literature does not necessarily rob it of insights, however. Perhaps no one attacked *D&D* as ferociously as Ed Simbalist, and although his own design work may not have lived up to the theoretical framework he built for his polemic, his articulation of the nature and potential of role-playing games is practically a manifesto for the story people of the 1970s.

In 1977, *Chivalry & Sorcery* advertised itself as a game that made significant conceptual improvements on *D&D*. Its authors, Ed Simbalist and Wilf Backhaus, explain in the rulebook's introduction that their design "began innocently enough with a discussion about the vacuum that our characters seemed to be living in between dungeon and wilderness campaigns" and about their dissatisfaction "over the limited goals that were available to our characters."[14] This led to the development of "Chevalier" (1976), an unlicensed *D&D* supplement spearheaded by Simbalist with the assistance of Backhaus and others in his circle in Edmonton, Alberta. It attempted to simulate an authentic, realistic fantastic medieval setting, one which models far more than just a subterranean quest for blood and treasure. Like many before them, Simbalist and Backhaus eventually made the decision that their variant rules in fact belonged in an independent game rather than remaining an extension or modification to *D&D*.

"One might say," Simbalist argued in 1978 in an *A&E* 37 essay called "Fantasy Role-Playing: The State of the Art" "that FRP has gone through three generations of development in considerably less than a decade." In his account, "second generation FRP games were essentially cleaned up versions or revised variants of first generation rules." He cited the *Arduin Grimoire* as a prominent example, but he even assigned early games with crisp, simple systems, such as *Bunnies & Burrows*, to this epoch on the grounds that they were "eminently playable." Perhaps he would count his own "Chevalier" among them. But those second-generation games, he argued, ultimately "owe their existence almost entirely to players who developed new systems and approaches or else modified existing systems to permit a broader scope of play" than *D&D* originally allowed. The implementations of these informal variant designs eventually reached a threshold of difference where the experimenters recognized they "were no

longer playing D&D as it was designed to be played." This, he maintained, "turned D&Ders into FRPers."

But Simbalist's core point is that the shift to this second generation was imperceptible to many and that players themselves rarely acknowledged that they had transcended *D&D*. "Caught up in the excitement of FRP," he explains, "players elevated D&D to a cult and placed the game on a pedestal. In fact," Simbalist insisted in phrasing that echoed Costikyan's assessment of the situation, "any experienced player worth mentioning was playing a game far different from D&D." Along similar lines, Simbalist elsewhere maintained that "few experienced fantasy role players are really playing D&D as it is printed in the rules. Variant games are played instead" (*APR* 3). As the designer of a competing game product, Simbalist understandably fumed at the supposed dominance of *D&D* over the fantasy role-playing game community. "I am tired of hearing people say that they are 'D&Ders' when they are FRPers (fantasy role players)!"

Simbalist saw a starker division between such second-generation variants, easily mistaken for *D&D*, and what he deemed the third-generation games, which "were in the business of generating secondary worlds from the beginning" (*AE* 37). These secondary worlds "were the worlds of fantasy literature," which have, as Simbalist relayed to us from Tolkien, an "inner consistency of reality."[15] By this definition, Simbalist believed that "the first third-generation FRP game of note was *Empire of the Petal Throne*" because it "provided a total world, a complete package which even included the language of the peoples inhabiting an imaginary world in deep space."

Situated on a timeline, Simbalist's three generations faced some sequencing challenges: *Petal Throne* well predated the *Arduin Grimoire* and *Bunnies & Burrows* and indeed had circulated in a playable draft form by the summer of 1974. But Simbalist spoke here more to formal properties than to a chronology. He found the *Petal Throne* rules "far more rationalized and integrated with the needs of role-play" than *D&D*. He deemed *Runequest* another third-generation example because it brings to life the world of Glorantha. Effectively, he argued that any system designed to convey that literary "inner consistency of reality" while simulating a fantastic world had the hallmarks of his third generation.

This literary connotation of realism, which recalls Strang's account of realism as fidelity to the "patently unrealistic world of fantasy," is more a measure of the specificity and consistency of an imaginary world than of its believability. Its articulation heavily informed the design of *Chivalry & Sorcery*. Simbalist wrote in *A&E* 31 that "to simulate something, there must be a clear conception in depth of what you are simulating." In order to achieve that depth of understanding, the *Chivalry & Sorcery* system encompassed so many contingencies in character generation, in combat, in the operation of magic, and in aspects of medieval life that it quickly developed a reputation as an exhaustively complex, even overwhelming approach to role playing. Simbalist proudly boasted that "of all the new FRP rules, C&S is at the leading edge of FRP gaming, for it is most concerned with providing for complete role-play" (*AE* 37). And, he added, "role-play, by definition, is simulation."

In what sense could role playing be simulation? Not a sense that a wargamer such as Pulsipher would recognize, surely. Simbalist considered his own game's commitment to realism, which "makes a coherent and integrated campaign possible in a world setting," as a key indication that "illustrates that absolute void that separates *Chivalry & Sorcery* from *Dungeons & Dragons*" (*APR* 3). Of course, Simbalist had to acknowledge the sense of ownership attested by referees such as Waddell, who had built elaborate environments for their *D&D* campaigns: "Some campaign designers will say that they have set up their own worlds. That's right! You have; D&D and TSR didn't! You designed your world and probably with little or no help from the rules! You created the systems necessary to give that world some semblance of realism and consistency" (*AE* 37). The referee bears the entirety of this burden because, Simbalist proposed, "the vast majority of D&D rules in both the original and in the new revised set of rules are geared to the single-minded activity of generating virtually isolated forays into the dungeon."

For Simbalist, world design and system design ultimately had an unavoidable interdependence. "Rules are designed to do particular things," he wrote (*APR* 4). "If the design did not include concepts and systems required to do certain things, massive alteration and revision of the rules is needed to do those things." As such, he proposed in *A&E* 37 that "a game's underlying philosophy affects everything that the game's systems do or fail to do." And if the underlying philosophy of *D&D* does not embrace the

"simulation" that role playing requires, we might well wonder if we should even call it a role-playing game.

Paradoxically, however, Simbalist simultaneously believed that the underlying philosophy of role-playing games is steeped in alteration and revision. Exhaustive as the design of *Chivalry & Sorcery* is, Simbalist labored under no illusion that its system encompasses all possible eventualities. The first page of the *Chivalry & Sorcery* rulebook gives the standard disclaimer in rulebooks of the time, that players of the *C&S* system "may ignore all elements that are not relevant to their needs and aims." In *A&E* 37, Simbalist expanded on this to the effect that all "rules are made with meddlers in mind—particularly in FRP gaming—because role-playing games take on the flavor of the group playing a campaign. No two campaigns are alike. C&S rules are designed with player modifications anticipated and indeed encouraged."[16] How this argument could square with his insistence on rules "designed to do particular things" requires further explication.

To some extent, Simbalist merely acknowledged the reality on the ground. Every designer familiar with the community of the late 1970s had to know that referees expected and exercised this freedom to meddle—Gygax himself explicitly invited referees to "change the bloody rules to suit yourself and your players," and that invitation was universally accepted. "At Origins and in my correspondence," Simbalist continued in *A&E* 37, "I have become acquainted with the trend that many serious FRPers are following. They pick and choose and adapt whatever systems they wish from whatever role-play rules they find to their liking and which satisfy the needs of their campaign." It was Simbalist, with some encouragement from John T. Sapienza, who elevated that very principle to the status of the primary rule of role-playing games, perhaps their only inviolable rule, one that spans all systems. In *A&E* 38, he cast it as the "Gamer's First Law: if a rule is silly, change it or ignore it—just so long as everyone knows that's what your preference is ahead of time."[17]

But the prerogative to fix "silly" rules did not render design itself a pointless exercise. For Simbalist, the design spaces that *D&D* passed over in silence are so crucial to role playing that their absence is qualitatively different. He argued that "the myth of D&D is that it is open-ended, that one can do everything with it. The fact is that D&D was not designed to do

much outside of a dungeon environment" (*AE* 37). He perceived in Dave Arneson's recently-published *First Fantasy Campaign* a glimmer of how *D&D* could have encompassed a true campaign world rather than merely serving as a vehicle for subterranean aggression and acquisitiveness. "Let's be honest. Many players have come to regard FRP as nothing more than monster trashing and backstabbing one's opponents. Count out the loot and retire your character back to your notebook in anticipation of the next raid. It's fun at first, but after a while dungeon-crawling becomes a juvenile and limiting activity."

Unsurprisingly, Simbalist's philosophy attracted some criticism from the wargaming culture. He faced predictable resistance from the likes of Lewis Pulsipher, who damned *Chivalry & Sorcery* in *White Dwarf* 5 with faint praise, deeming the game "the fantasy role-playing expression of wargamers who favor realism and simulation while D&D is the expression of playability fans who want a good *game*." Simbalist, no doubt remembering Pulsipher's player typologies in *White Dwarf* 1, painted his critic a "GAMER as opposed to a ROLE PLAYER," explaining the distinction as "gamers play to win; role-players to enjoy the give-and-take of personal interaction with the other people around the table" (*AE* 35). Gary Gygax, who knew well the endless debates about realism and complexity in the wargaming community, argued in a letter to *White Dwarf* 7 that when it comes to fantasy, "'realism' in a game must go out the window," and he repeated similar remarks in his provocatively titled essay "Role-Playing: Realism vs. Game Logic; Spell Points, Vanity Press, and Rip-offs" in *The Dragon* 16, in which he would not risk promoting Simbalist's competing title by mentioning its name.

If anything, the resistance Simbalist encountered only stirred him to more radical philosophies. In his two "Kismet" essays in early 1979, subtitled "The Game Master as Fate" and "Role-Playing Modes of Gaming" and published in *A&E* 43 and 44, Simbalist succeeded in articulating a philosophy of story in role-playing games that departed significantly from prior thinking. He achieved this largely by assailing the core wargaming principle that a referee should or even can act impartially. First, Simbalist defined two modes of refereeing, which he called an "adversary mode" and a "role-playing mode" or "discretionary mode." The adversary mode revisits the "player versus referee" conflict that Gygax, Slimak, and others articulated in 1976; Simbalist defined it as games in which "the role-player

is regarded as a seeker after experience and loot who must successfully pass all of the tests which the DM sets for a character as he penetrates into the depths of the dungeon or wilderness." This game is necessarily competitive because "players either compete with each other or with the DM." Simbalist understood that consequently "the DM is placed in the contradictory position of interpreter of the rules and referee, on the one hand, and active participant or Enemy on the other."

This adversarial relationship thus created an apparent conflict of interest, but not all of Simbalist's readers immediately agreed that it posed a practical problem. For example, Paul Mosher rejected in *A&E* 45 the contention that "the D/GM cannot remain impartial." But in *A&E* 47 Simbalist offered a formidable rebuttal to the claim that that it is possible to adjudicate a game without bias by letting the dice tell the story, as Gygax put it.

Simbalist argued that a referee ultimately controls the flow of events in a role-playing game and thus dictates the occasions when dice are rolled, so the decision to create situations when it is necessary to consult the dice is always just that: a decision made by the referee. When a referee "chooses to let the dice decide, he is just as responsible for the consequences as if he exercised personal discretion" to determine the outcome, Simbalist thus concluded (*AE* 47). A referee who pretends to the impartiality of dice while driving characters into deadly situations resembles the fictional assassin Anton Chiurgh of *No Country for Old Men*, whose willingness to spare victims if they win a coin toss—a metaphorical representation of the utter randomness of life—lets Chiurgh fancy himself as impartial while he gleefully hunts and slays his targets. The immediate tactical matters resolved by chance, for Simbalist, are entirely overshadowed by more overarching fundamental choices that no referee leaves to chance.

But, more importantly, letting the dice tell the story struck Simbalist as an inherent contradiction: How can rolling dice against tables of probability based on some model of simulation result in a story? "If one could tell stories through the application of random factors alone, the greatest novels, etc. would be written by computers," he mused in *A&E* 47. "The dice are idiots," and "the idiots of randomness will blindly apply mathematical formulae, and that's the end of it." Simbalist insisted that "they cannot have

an awareness, a feel for action unfolding in an FRP adventure as a sensitive, thinking, aware human being can."

As in Michie and Roos's earlier thinking and in Lortz's contemporary essays, the referee's responsibility for the flow of events seems, for Simbalist, to extend beyond the common definition of the term *referee*. In his first "Kismet" essay, Simbalist noted that the role-playing game referee "does not stand aside from the game like a referee in football or hockey," one who will "intrude only when an infraction of the rules occurs." Rather, "the DM dominates the whole proceedings." Simbalist enumerated the many powers that a referee has in the role of an adversary—knowledge of the world and the characters as well as control over when dice are rolled, if not their outcomes—and urged "that DMs should face the reality of their positions. To pretend complete impartiality in an adversary mode of play is to let in all the evils and abuses that make for bad role-playing." Whereas Gygax characterized the referee as "the arbiter of fortune," Simbalist portrayed the referee as the embodiment of fortune itself, as the role of fate, and as such a referee necessarily takes sides and steers the course of the game in a considered direction.

Only in the second "Kismet" essay did Simbalist unpack his "role-playing mode" of refereeing and what he believed the responsibility for fate truly means in a role-playing game. He spoke from his personal experience, in language similar to that used by Tom Filmore, explaining that "role-playing to the crowd I game with is literally slipping into the persona of the character and acting as he would. It's a form of acting and I'm expected to provide the stage for their performances. They really get into their parts too." In the course of role playing, a character "will from time to time be faced with CERTAIN death. At that point the skill of the GM as story teller is put to the test. A good story will not end before its time. So also might be said of a good role playing campaign scenario."

When faced with this situation, Simbalist argues that the "story teller" referee "accepts his role as Fate and responsibly works out a solution which does not result in the character's death." What Simbalist envisioned here goes far beyond the "shade" that a *Bunnies & Burrows* referee should cast over a lethal saving throw. It may include all sorts of quiet changes to the game situation that the system generates: a random encounter roll that calls for six skeletons instead delivers only two, or a crushing damage roll might

be reduced to a glancing blow. "Where," Simbalist elaborated, "the game systems thwart my view of the truth of the moment and deny me the goals I have set for the particular scenario or for the campaign as a whole, I IGNORE THE RULES."

With this dictum, Simbalist went well beyond his "Gamer's First Law" of fixing a design that is "silly" in implementation, as even a sound design could sometimes yield a result incompatible with a referee's goals for the story. Simbalist justified this intervention on the grounds that "a story has to be going some place. There is a structure known as the plot. Characters have a role to play in the unfolding of that plot" (*AE* 44). Here Simbalist, like Lortz, directly confronted the core dogmas of the wargaming tradition. Lewis Pulsipher had urged referees never to tamper with events, recommending that "the referee must think of himself as a friendly computer with discretion" and that "referee interference in the game must be reduced as much as possible" (*White Dwarf* 3). To ensure no bias creeps into play, Pulsipher even counseled that "the referee should not make up anything important after an adventure has begun" but should instead rely only on the notes and systems devised before playing in a session.

Pulsipher's vision was perhaps stricter than even Gygax's—the latter back in the day at least acknowledged that sometimes "Divine Intervention" should be used to save a character's life, though he reserved this latitude only for cases "when fate seems to have unjustly condemned an otherwise good player" (*SR* 2 (2)). Gygax permitted the ignoring of a deadly die roll to prevent unfair punishments, whereas Simbalist allowed it for a different purpose, to preserve the overall narrative that the referee intends for the campaign, which trumps all other concerns for him. But like the "shade" in *Bunnies & Burrows*, this must be done tacitly, behind the figurative referee's screen, because the referee must guide the story along, as Simbalist put it, "without lessening the tension and anxiety felt by the player whose character is threatened by a certain death" (*AE* 44). Simbalist stressed that "players should never know when GM discretion is being exercised" and that they "cannot be allowed to count on Fate to step in and save their characters from the consequences of stupidity or miscalculation" because that would spoil what *Bunnies & Burrows* calls the players' "illusion that they determine their own fates."

By centering role-playing games on the campaign story, Simbalist moved the focus on system execution radically away from players and even designers and instead onto a management of the flow of events hinging on the referee's dramatic skill. His emphasis on preserving the story anticipated but vastly exceeded the sentiments that would appear in the *Dungeon Masters Guide* a few months after Simbalist's "Kismet" essays in 1979: where Gygax would invoke Conan's narrow escapes in his explanation of saving throws, Simbalist talked about the more formulaic tale of Sinbad. Simbalist related that "Sinbad is destined to triumph over the evil Mage who has usurped power in Baghdad and holds the nation in bondage. He will rescue the princess, marry her, free his people, and engineer the downfall of his enemy. Kismet. Fate" (*AE* 44). For Gygax, the system is obligated only to provide "a chance, no matter how small," of survival, whereas Simbalist looked to the referee rather than to the system and assigned the referee the responsibility for casting any "shade" necessary to drive the story in a satisfying direction, all the while performing any sleight of hand necessary to convince the players that the referee is impartially executing the system—to preserve Pulsipher's "sense of control by the players of their own fate," though here it is an illusory sense.

But would players really retain the necessary state of dramatic uncertainty? Curiously, Simbalist concluded his second "Kismet" essay with a note about one of his own characters, a certain Erik Bloodaxe, whose "Wyrd (destiny) was to die after a great slaying of enemies. His sole goal is to attain Valhalla." It seemed as if Simbalist's character had some "purpose" in the sense that Mark Chilenskas assigned to characters in his campaign, but it was not a hidden purpose—as a player, Simbalist was fully aware of it. He expressed confidence that the referees would never deprive Erik of this destiny: "Wyrd has decreed and the GMs in our campaign respect that fate and will not give him an ignominious death." Apparently, his certainty about the preordainment of that character arc did not diminish his own satisfaction with the game; it instead became the game's premise. "So far I have been denied my destiny, and I still live. I will have my fate! . . . This I know because the GMs in our group will not let it be otherwise. I await only the manner of it."

How a player could know and to some degree dictate his character's destiny in a game where referees maintain the illusion of simply executing

an impartial system, rather than steering a story, posed an apparent paradox. But Simbalist's "Kismet" essays provided the most considered defense of the philosophy criticized in Pulsipher's *White Dwarf* 1 essay which had divided *D&D* players into "those who want to play a game as a game and those who want to play it as a fantasy novel." Without doing any great violence to the argument, we can map Simbalist's "adversary mode" and "role-playing mode" onto Pulsipher's two respective extremes. It would be hard for Simbalist to deny that he advocated for games that permitted "manipulation of the situation by the referee, however he sees fit," a great sin in Pulsipher's eyes. Anticipating a backlash, Simbalist preemptively volunteered, "I realize these are only my opinions, and I know there will be objections. Some prefer the adversary approach, and that's all right. It works, and it is fun too" (*AE* 44). He stressed that his more story-driven style is "best suited to ongoing campaigns in which friends gather week after week to enjoy themselves" rather than to solitary scenarios with strangers. Through long experience developing their collective play style, his local group had grown a bond of trust that convinced Simbalist that the referees were responsible caretakers of his fate. Simbalist refused to limit the story to wondering what lies beyond "the next turn of the corridor" when instead you could look "to the time when a character is revealed as the true King, exiled in his youth to save him from the evil uncle who has slain his father and usurped the throne." Such epic character arcs become possible for "the players who submerge themselves in the reality of our fantasy."

Simbalist's philosophy did indeed meet significant resistance from a community that sharply disagreed about the proper approach to role-playing games. As he was to discover in *A&E*'s public forum, all of this talk of destiny was difficult for the community contributors to countenance or even comprehend. John Strang complained, "I would hate to be in a campaign where my play was scripted in advance by the GM; further some of the best campaigns I've been in were ones wherein all my characters got killed off in various ways" (*AE* 45). The strongest pushback in that same issue came from Bill Seligman, who put his foot down firmly: "Now, this design philosophy business has gone too far. It is one thing to discourse on the adversary relationship between a DM and his/her players, but this business about character destinies and the GM supporting them unbalances the game enormously." Seligman saw a wide gulf between an author's story-forging

work and a game referee's oversight: "In a story, the hero has to win and bed the heroine to satisfy the readers. To satisfy the players, the DM has to reward the players when they are clever, destroy them when they are stupid," and mete out similar consequences appropriate to the characters' in-game actions. "Your vision of destiny playing should be left to the scriptwriters of B movies," Seligman told Simbalist. "Come and play with us human beings!"

But in his *A&E* 44 arguments, Simbalist had stressed that "Kismet is unpredictable from the perspective of mere mortals" and that "while he lives his charmed life, the hero is not immune to misfortune, only to death itself." So, in a rejoinder to Seligman in *A&E* 47, Simbalist recommended distracting players with an in-game punishment that does not obstruct the progress of the story toward "the destiny which the GM and players are working out for their characters." He enumerated a number of such circumstances: "I have seen magic swords dissolved in the blood of a fearsome monsters (cf. Beowulf) as the price paid for Fate stepping in to dispatch a nasty and so save an otherwise dead, dead, dead character. Characters have ended up in the game limbo of a galley for several years before escaping—the price of being captured instead of killed outright. Fortunes have been paid in ransoms." He gave an example that would resonate with *Chivalry & Sorcery* devotees: a mage whom the dice would have bumped into the certain death of a lava-filled chasm but who, through Simbalist's invention, "managed to grab a handhold some feet down the face of the cliff. Kismet. Fate. Only he had to drop his focus to save himself —and any C&S player knows the anguish that loss brought." When the dice fail a player, Simbalist counseled that the referee interpret that failure not as something that prevents the arc of the story from moving forward but instead as a consequence distractingly negative enough that players will never suspect fate is playing favorites. This clarification might not resolve Simbalist's paradox, but it could at least obscure it.

For Simbalist, these techniques were in the service of a higher calling: he insisted that "FRP is an art form" and that "only the DM/GM can tell the story of an adventure," not the dice (*AE* 47). But although the referee tells the story, this is not to say that players are disenfranchised because "the player ultimately chooses the destiny of his character; insofar as he provides a viable and reasonable story line, the GM's task is to assist the character to realize his destiny by providing experiences which logically and honestly

test the character's worthiness to attain it." It is the player's responsibility to provide that fundamental premise for his or her participation in the game, and it is the referee's responsibility to nurture that premise. But a game design itself can never substitute for a referee because a referee "can note and process data no game system could handle—the numerous intangibles that are the hallmarks of FRP gaming like personal interaction between the participants, character motivation, or the success of a line of action that arose spontaneously during the adventure." In Simbalist's view, the referee has the foremost place in the implementation of role-playing games, something far beyond the reach of mere system design.

No one familiar with *Chivalry & Sorcery* could fail to notice that its rulebook contains nothing like the principles that Simbalist expounded at such length in his essays on kismet, story-telling, and the idiocy of the dice. This discrepancy perhaps points to a deeper paradox that helps explain why designers and players lavished such attention on role-playing game philosophy: as able as Simbalist was to explain in an essay what he believed a role-playing game should be, a system translating those principles into rules proved elusive. When the *Bunnies & Burrows* rulebook enshrined the principle that referees should modify the situation to serve the story without alerting the players, did its text not alert the players? Perhaps only David Feldt's game *Legacy* at the time truly tried to resolve that contradiction, with its system of Intentionality enabling the referee to influence and steer events. But translating story structures, something like Lortz's dramatic sequences and motivation questions, into a system presented greater difficulties. If simulating the fatefulness of stories is essential to role playing, which system would best encourage that?

Rather than bake these principles into rules, Simbalist instead planned to publish his guidance on running and playing role-playing games separately from his game designs, in a multivolume set to be called *The Compleat Role-Player's Handbook*, the first book of which he promised would be available at GenCon in 1979, to be released simultaneously with the *Chivalry & Sorcery* supplement *Saurians*. From his mentions of the series in *A&E*, we know that he was writing it with Backhaus and Wes Ives and that it was to have a chapter about referees who "slide into an obsession" with their own fantasy worlds and who "resent any serious penetration into" them by players, leading them to deprive players of any real freedom of decision. But no installments of the *Handbook* series ever seem to have

appeared, and what we know of Simbalist's philosophy survives largely from his fanzine essays.

The Generation Gap

Although the community had trouble establishing an agreed-upon definition of role playing, it was easier for commentators to agree on what role playing was not. Early in 1979, Glenn Blacow warned of a growing schism in his circle at MIT. Happily, he believed there were some players who were able to "engage in true role-playing: living within an unfolding world-story and abiding by the (generally unwritten) assumptions by which it was run" (*WH* 39). But other players remained defiantly disinterested in the role-playing dimension and instead obsessed over finding "minimax strategies that ignored the alleged personalities of their characters." Linking this latter tendency to a background in wargaming, Blacow called that group "Ego-Trippers," a pejorative designation Simbalist had already used in *Chivalry & Sorcery* in 1977.[18] Blacow observed of this dreaded faction that "their existence has become more and more evident over the past year." We can hear in his description of those "Ego-Trippers" their obsession with participating in the system, observing and controlling the numbers, but in the true role-players, Blacow argued, there is instead a trust and acceptance of "generally unwritten" principles that govern the game.

In the summer of 1979, this apparent divide in the role-playing game community was dramatically exacerbated by a sudden change in the hobby's composition. James Dallas Egbert III disappeared from his university that summer, an event widely presumed to result from his participation in fantasy role-playing games—which it did not. But the resulting media attention paid to *D&D* ignited a fad that would attract millions of players to the hobby over the next couple of years.[19] The crush of new, often younger players surfacing at tabletops marked a generational shift: many were too young to have previously participated in organized science-fiction or wargaming fandom and thus numbered among the first generation of "native" role-playing gamers.

The new demographic attracted to *D&D* upended the long-standing constitution of the two cultures, with a marked rise in participation by girls and women.[20] In the aftermath of the Egbert incident, Bill Seligman watched

with interest when a reporter from *Seventeen* magazine attended a meeting associated with a New York City fanzine to ask the young women present why they played this controversial game. For *A&E* 53, the final issue collated before the end of 1979, Seligman wrote his own "Essay on Role-Playing," which was inspired in part by the interviews he had witnessed and no doubt by his prior exchange with Simbalist about the storytelling approach to refereeing. His initial question was not "Why do people play a fantasy RPG?" but rather "When we play an FRPG, what do we expect? To have a good time? Yes, but this is a very subjective matter."

Seligman perceived a division among his players very similar to that noted by Blacow: between those interested in seeing their characters advance in power and those who seemed more satisfied with games that offered compelling experiences rather than lavish rewards. In their early encounters with role-playing games, Seligman explained, "many players, and I admit that at one time I was one of them, had no other goal than to become as powerful as possible no matter what the means." After he attained further experience with the potential of role-playing games, new vistas opened to him. "But is this sort of ultimate search for ultimate power the only form of interesting experience one can find in an FRPG? I feel the answer is no."

Rather than casting role-playing games as a competition pitting the players against the perils devised by the referee or a story curated by the referee to lead characters to their destinies, Seligman argued, "As I see it, the best kind of Role-playing/Dungeonmastering relationship (for yes, a relationship it is—it is people playing with people, not dice playing with spaces on a piece of cardboard) is one where the players, through the persona of their characters, explore the creative abilities of the referee, through the fantasy world the DM creates, supports, and maintains" (*AE* 53). In a manner reminiscent of Michie, Seligman saw something essential in the relationship between the players and the referee, a relationship fueled by players adopting characters and interacting, through the game's interpersonal dynamic, with the imagination of the referee. This is a starkly different emphasis than Simbalist's assignment of the impetus for the story to the referee; here Seligman held that the impetus begins with the players and emerges naturally as they "explore" the situation the referee conceives.

Seligman believed that such exploration requires that the players be unencumbered by the operation of the system. He took exception to the proposition, recently touted by Lewis Pulsipher in *White Dwarf* 3, that players should roll their own attacks and saving throws. Seligman insisted instead that "the players should be as divorced from the *mechanics* of playing D&D . . . as possible" (*WD* 5). If referees take responsibility for any necessary dice rolling and computation, they can simply report results such as "You hit him, and now he's down to half the strength he was when you first encountered him." Seligman believed this "forces the players to consider the situation in a more realistic way, and increases the enjoyment of the game. Nobody except math nuts like to sit around a table and fool with numbers all day—the idea of the game is medieval adventure, not statistical numbers."[21]

These views clearly fell within the longest-standing tradition of critical thinking about the relationship of players to systems, extending back to Eisen's vow in 1975 and earlier to "free" *Kriegsspiel*. But Seligman's twist was that separating players from the mechanics of executing the system during play did not bar players from collaborating with the referee in the design of the rules. Seligman's own system, which he circulated through the fanzine *Dungeoneer*, provides an example of how this might be achieved. As early as 1978, Seligman proposed a magic and skill system that dispensed entirely with a system-driven list, instead staging spell and skill invention as a joint venture between players and referee.[22]

But in "Essay on Role-Playing," Seligman had to concede that this creative opportunity did not appeal to a certain demographic in his local group.

> A couple of my players, partly to test out my system to the limits and partly because that is their playing style, are "minimax" players. For those of you who don't know what that means, a minimax player is one who looks for and takes every possible numerical advantage the system will give him, regardless of what he has to have his character do to take that advantage. Since I feel my system has to take the minimax players into account as well as the players who primarily role-play, I raised no objections to this."

This description may go some way to explaining why Seligman was so eager to distance players from the execution of the system.

Blacow had already complained about "minimax" players as "Ego-Trippers" who "ignored the alleged personalities of their characters" out of an overriding desire to become as much of a superperson as possible. Seligman similarly portrayed the "minimax" player as someone who exercises the system with no regard for its implications for playing a role. This must strike us as the flip side of the view Kevin Slimak expressed when he bemoaned those players who treated "role-playing as an excuse for not thinking, or worse, thinking of ways to do the wrong thing." Seligman was struck by how players who came from a nonwargaming background, especially female players, took more naturally to the role-playing style that he championed—but it was an era when participation by women in the community was conservatively estimated at single-digit percentages.[23]

The minority presence of women in the community resulted partly from the lingering effects of wargaming's demographics but also in part from the inherent misogyny in sword-and-sorcery fantasy literature, which carried over into role playing.[24] As wargamers turned to role playing, what they found in the fantasy canon did not lead them to a more inclusive stance. Nancy Jane Bailey, exploring the question of "why more women do not play FRP"—and prefacing her remarks with the warning that "this tirade will be sort of feminist"—emphasized that the source literature of *D&D* consists of "macho type stories" where "the women in them are either recreational only, or some stereotypical scheming sorceress type."[25]

There is ample evidence that fantasy role-playing games at the time followed these literary precedents. For a period look at what women might have found even in a female-led effort such as *A&E*, Dave Nalle's contribution to issue 52, which features commentary from members of his local gaming circle, including Tom Curtin and Nick Knisely, opined broadly about the problems of including female players in games. Nalle spoke unfavorably of how "the passivity of the female player is contrasted with the aggressiveness of the mature male player." But that is merely a warm-up for the abusiveness of Tom Curtin's piece, which singled out another *A&E* contributor, Deanna Sue White, for her previous narrations of her campaign, describing the violation and death of her character and her children in graphic terms, snickering "Have you ever been in a real dungeon?" Lee

Gold, for her part, threatened to fine these "insulters" on a per paragraph basis. A widespread backlash—one response suggested that Curtin "missed getting his rabies boosters shot" (*AE* 54)—ended Curtin's contributions to *A&E*. In *A&E* 58, Bob Traynor judged that "he is branded anathema forever."[26]

Jean Wells, a TSR staffer, wrote openly in *The Dragon* about the "discrimination and prejudice" as well as the "unfair and degrading treatment" that women could face in the community (*DR* 39). Kathleen Pettigrew described the main problem facing women entering the hobby was "the cliquish, 'club' attitude held by a majority of gamers (i.e., men)," such that "the majority of gamers (men) still react with at least hostility and/or contempt when they have to play with or against a woman" (*AG* 1 (1)). As a champion of several tournaments, she found the preconceptions she encountered intensely frustrating. Convinced of the futility of fighting the prevailing culture but refusing to quit, she felt the best response was simply to ignore it. "To all of those who have quit or never even started because of this attitude problem, all I can do is ask that you give gaming another chance—it's worth it."

One female player who regularly contributed to *A&E* was Margaret Gemignani, and she articulated that worth through a very expansive, almost mystical view of role playing. "If your game does not include an extensive amount of role playing," she advises in issue 57, "you are cheating yourself." She explained, "When you role play in fantasy, you open new worlds to yourself," as "in all of us is the gift of the dreamer, the song of the bard, the joy of living a dream." Gemignani advocated for designs where players can advance through role playing as well as through the more traditional *D&D* paths of slaying monsters and accumulating treasure: "Fantasy role-playing should earn as much experience as hack and slash operating." However, even Gemignani must concede that these are known points of contention in the community. She cautioned, "Don't assume that you know the One True Way, that your way of playing makes the most sense and everybody else is mixed up and should get lost." But for people who valued role playing the way she did, it was easy to see how the situation could quickly devolve into an "us vs. them" polarization.

The drive to become a superperson reportedly dragged down role playing in many groups, and commentators linked it especially to recent adopters. A

report from Carl Groppe in 1980 complained, "I have noticed a tendency for Fantasy Role-Playing not to have any role-playing. This distresses me" (*AE* 57). Groppe laid the blame for this at the feet of novices, and although he stressed that "they aren't all kids," that surely implied that many of them were: "a gaggle of them can stifle attempts at true play." Like Gemignani, Groppe feared that "there's no incentive for good role-playing" built into game systems, such as experience earned for role playing. But even if there were, competition "quantified in my character vs. yours" missed the point for him: "Nobody wins at a good role-playing experience alone; everyone works together to produce a favorable experience."

Where Blacow had seen the influence of wargaming over the minimaxers plaguing MIT, Groppe encountered similar tendencies in younger players with little prior experience, those who first encountered role-playing games as part of the wave cresting the end of the 1970s. It was around this time that the pejorative term *munchkin* entered the role players' vocabulary. *The Wargamer's Encyclopediac Dictionary* (1981) defines a *munchkin* as "a young wargamer, generally under 14 or 16 years of age," in contrast to the *grognard*, "a wargamer who has been in the hobby for a very long time." Seligman called out the "Munchkin Hordes (crowds of D&Ders less than 15 years old)," noting that in the post-Egbert world, these newcomers "give us some idea of what the hobby will become if popularized" (*AE* 58). By 1980, he could already allude to restrictions in place in New York groups "to hold down the number of Munchkins" because the problem they posed was "a severe one." Describing the Origins convention in 1979, Sapienza would remark, "As I looked around the hall, I was rather startled to realize that the average age of the audience was 20 years younger than my own—too young to drive in most states. It appears that the biggest influx into FRP is in the high school (and younger) crowd."[27]

The fact that the term *grognard* already existed at the time hints that the generation gap was a recurring phenomenon, another inheritance from the legacy of wargaming. *Strategy & Tactics* defined *grognards* in 1974 as gamers "who have been in for nine or more years" (*ST* 47). Four years earlier, when an editorial in *Wargamer's Newsletter* 95 (1970) mentioned that a Leicester wargaming club had disbanded due to the disruption caused when many younger members joined, it had unleashed a heated debate over ageism in the hobby. One commentator wrote that "the truth is, there is no place for the immature among a club that otherwise consists of serious

minded adults," complaining, "I've seen wargames degenerate into a fiasco when boys of 17–22 years of age have started chasing each other, fighting, kicking bits of paper around and so on."[28] These sentiments inevitably triggered a backlash from letter writers identifying themselves with asides like "Indignant 18 Year Old," who insisted that age is no sure indicator of maturity. They argued that "unless younger players are allowed to mix with older players (and do not form the bulk of the club) the experience of the older players will never get the chance to rub off on the younger player so that he can mature accordingly" (*WN* 99).

It is unsurprising that a similar debate about ageism coursed through the role-playing community late in 1979. Gary Reilly, a *D&D* player from upstate New York, complained in *The Dragon* 29 that he had trouble finding like-minded players in his area: "Most of the campaigns (and there are mighty few to begin with) consist of younger adults (??) whose personalities, motivations, approaches, etc. do not mesh with mine." He was eager to "make contact with other 'mature' (in the sense of sophistication) players." *Dragon* editor Tim Kask replied, "You know, a good deal of the younger players play the way they do because they don't know any better," as if it were the older players' responsibility to take the young under their wing rather than to shun them. Kask would expand on this theme in an editorial the following year on "age chauvinism" , where he observed that "one side, older players, wants nothing to do with 'kids' whatsoever. The other side, younger players, wants to know why they are being discriminated against and looked down upon" (*DR* 36).

Whether the blame fell on munchkins or grognards, ego-trippers or minimaxers, the reaction against practices that impede role playing had an impact on how role playing defined itself. Sandwiched between an aging generation weaned on wargames and an emerging generation not yet jaded by the rush of progression, the original "clique" of *D&D* players began to circle its wagons, in the process excluding people they saw as not like themselves. Seligman was quick to call others "munchkins," but when he first contributed to *A&E* in 1976, he was only 17 years old, barely outside the age range of this hated demographic. Many of the earliest adopters of *D&D* had begun playing as teenagers and were by the end of the decade college graduates. We inevitably lash out most harshly at the failings in others that we know we have exhibited ourselves. With sufficient exposure to the game and with the maturity of age, the early adopters of role-playing

games fervently renounced the desire for power that many readily confessed had motivated them when they first began playing. But the perception of a generation gap connected with "ego-tripping" would become another factor that served to delimit the practices of role playing from other, putatively less-mature activities.

Just a Game?

Simbalist's insistence in 1979 that "FRP is an art form" was a step beyond M. A. R. Barker's realization in 1974 that *D&D* is "not strictly a war game" because it challenges whether the term *game* is an adequate description of it. Jack Harness had compared *D&D* to "impromptu improvisational theater" all the way back in 1975, and Dave Hargrave had proposed that we should consider "character role playing and living theater as an art form in fantasy gaming" back in 1977 (*AE* 28). Earlier that year, *Superhero '44* agreed on the fourth page of its rulebook that "somewhere along the line fantasy games began to resemble improvisational theater." By the time Simbalist chimed in, Steven Lortz had recently observed that "nearly everyone is aware of the fact that RPGs are an art form being born in our time" (*DW* 2). The promise that consumers could partake of an exciting breakthrough in the arts even became a talking point for marketing, as the Chaosium's founder Greg Stafford would say to *White Dwarf* 17 in an interview the following year: "This is the birth of a new art form and we intend to continue leading the field in innovation and quality."

Thus, we should not be surprised that when Clint Bigglestone's article "Role-Playing: How to Do It" appeared in *Different Worlds* 3 in 1979, it prominently featured a section called "Art of Role-Playing," which defined role playing as "the art of being that whom you are not." As advice to prospective players, Bigglestone shared some techniques for successful role playing, beginning with principles familiar from the commentary of the time: for example, he urged players to "work out a relationship (in terms of both conscious and sub-conscious thought processes) between the character's characteristic scores and what impact they have had on the character's life." He stressed the importance of playing flawed characters rather than shallow superpeople: "it's the limitations you have to work with, and work around, that make role-playing so much fun."

For Bigglestone, one honed the craft of role playing by experimenting with diverse roles, which he compared to the task of a method actor. He urged players to select a cultural background for a character, a set of motivations, and potential inhibitions that drive their behavior. The "diversity of cultural values is one of the things which makes role-playing fascinating," he argued, and he recommended researching different real-life cultures and social classes to inform performance. For more advanced role playing, he proposed that players explore characters very different from themselves, with an unfamiliar "moral orientation" or a diametrically opposed personality: "if you are an introvert, play a loud-mouthed extrovert." He was most careful about suggesting that players experiment with characters of a different gender or sexual orientation, advising them to engage with people different from themselves: "Don't go it alone. Talk to your spouse, lover, sibling, parent, friend, etc. about what it's like to be of their sex." Similarly, "for those of you who are straight/gay, take the same steps with regard to communicating with your gay/straight friends and relatives." Bigglestone strongly cautioned players not to "rely on stereotypes (not even from comedy) for your models. They're seldom accurate, and almost always demeaning."[29]

For Bigglestone, the distinction between a player and a referee is less a qualitative difference of function than one of degree. The article's section on the role of the referee is called "Playing a World," and Bigglestone explained that "being a GM isn't too different from being a player, except it's about two orders of magnitude more work" because a GM controls not only a character but also "an entire world, and every sentient being" in it. A secondary responsibility is "making sure that the players role-play their characters," which may mean advising "players in handling the reactions of their characters if the players are unsure of themselves."

In addition to "how to do it," Bigglestone had strong feelings about how not to do it. In italics, he stressed, "*You must remember, at all times and all situations, that it is just a game*!" The characters in role-playing games "exist to entertain you and your friends and expand your experience horizon." So he advised that "if you become too attached to a character, to the point that it would emotionally affect you if something happened to that character, then get rid of that character!" Once players take their characters' situations personally, all sorts of emotions can bleed over into real life.[30] Bigglestone concluded, "It's a wise player and GM who knows when it is

time to stop playing and re-enter the 'real' world. That should be done whenever a player, or players, have stopped being able to distinguish between the actions of other players and the actions of the characters of those players." This is a corollary to a sentiment that Hargrave expressed in 1978 in the second installment to his *Arduin* series, *Welcome to Skull Tower*, where he justified referee intervention by observing, "It seems that this type of game makes people truly identify with their characters, which is as it should be, but it also seems to make some people think that *their character* being killed is a personal attack on *themselves*."[31] Simablist saw this distance from characters as a mark of sophistication: "I submit that hardened role-players are capable of divorcing themselves from their characters to a degree often unsuspected by most GMs."[32]

In a rebuttal to Bigglestone, Sapienza did not find the distinction between player and character so simple to draw. Sapienza rejected the notion that role playing can be reduced to simple theatricality: "I don't RPG in order to stretch my acting skills" (*DW* 5). He furthermore refused to treat his characters as if they were "no more than a tiny square of cardboard, whose death or psychological mutilation is of no concern to anybody." Emotional attachment for Sapienza was crucial to his engagement with the character. "RPG is a psychodrama; your character is yourself, in a number of deep and not-fully-understood ways, regardless of the ways in which it differs from the real-world player." He elaborated that "RPG characters are people, and you should hurt when they hurt, if only a little, or you aren't really playing a role, it seems to me." Sapienza had argued as early as May 1978 that "FRP is a form of psychodrama" (*AE* 34), and even before Kanterman and Eldsen's essay "Introduction to Yourself" in 1977 we can find players insisting that they "like to play D&D as psychodrama for some of our characters" (*AE* 13). Simbalist would also echo that sentiment in the first issue of *Different Worlds*. Steven Lortz's essay "A Perspective on Role-Play" three issues later included a brief prehistory of role playing, beginning with the therapeutic psychodramas of J. L. Moreno and covering various modern uses in the behavioral sciences.

Treating role playing as psychodrama implied that it might not be, as Bigglestone insisted, just a game. Eric Holmes, a professor of neurology at the University of Southern California, wrote the article "Confessions of a Dungeon Master" for *Psychology Today* toward the end of 1980, which gave his own take on what role-playing games really deliver. As he also

happened to be the editor of the *Basic Set*, the introductory *D&D* product TSR released in 1977, Holmes spoke with some authority. "The world of *Dungeons & Dragons*," he posited, "is produced by its *social* reality. It is a shared fantasy, not a solitary one." A group of players "agrees to accept that world," and when they do, "the fantasy has become a reality, a sort of giant *folie á deux*, or shared insanity."

The "deep and not-fully-understood" psychological relationship between players and characters was the subject of some speculation in game designs. *Bushido* cryptically advises that "the nature of the PC is subtle and his relationship to the player is a curious one."[33] As Steve Jackson humorously wrote in his introduction to *Monsters! Monsters!* in 1976, "Be warned: these games have a tendency to take over your mind. At least, they do if you play them right."[34] But that sentiment would carry a weightier connotation in 1979 than it did in 1976. The private detective investigating James Dallas Egbert III's disappearance was memorably quoted saying of *D&D* that "in some instances when a person plays the game 'you actually leave your body and go out of your mind'" (*DR* 30).

Just months before Egbert disappeared, Gygax presciently downplayed the relationship between players and characters, claiming in *The Dragon* that *Dungeons & Dragons* "provides a vehicle which can be captivating, and a pastime in which one can easily become immersed, but is nonetheless only a game" (*DR* 26). Unsurprisingly, the Egbert incident provoked TSR to reiterate this more emphatically: Tim Kask wrote in *The Dragon* on September 11, 1979, "Games are simply games, meant to be amusing diversions and a way to kill time in a fun fashion, and nothing more" (*DR* 30). Denying any deeper reality or significance behind the fantasy of *D&D* became a constant refrain in TSR's publicity. Gygax in particular would insist in *The Dragon* 33 that "heroic fantasy has long been one of my favorite subjects, and while I do not believe in invincible superheroes, wicked magicians, fire-breathing dragons, and the stuff of fairie, I love it all nonetheless!"

Yet, despite the disavowals, the community remained uncertain about the relationship of real-world players to these fantastic situations. Larry DiTillio submitted a curious article called "Painted Ladies & Potted Monks" to *The Dragon* 36 which describes his experience as a referee at the GrimCon convention in San Francisco in the fall of 1979. DiTillio reported,

"As we all know, a large percentage of those who enjoy fantasy gaming are youngsters between the age of 12 and 16. They appear in gargantuan hordes at every con, madly seeking games in a fashion that is best described as True Chaotic." Older referees, he related with chagrin, either "shun these kids as players, or patronize them contemptuously."

DiTillio for his part welcomed younger players: he ended up refereeing for a group that included some of his older friends as well as five young players, "the oldest about 14." In the first level of DiTillio's long-standing dungeon, there was a certain room called the Inn of Ootah, where behind a series of shimmering portals "exotic women and men . . . beckon seductively." A character could render payment and pass through these portals to be "left quite alone with the delicacy of his choice." When the GrimCon party discovered this dungeon, DiTillio reports of his five younger charges that "it was painfully apparent that not one of them had ever encountered a dungeon room where outright sensual activity was offered." This resulted in "nervous giggles" and one younger Paladin averting his gaze.[35] When DiTillio's older friends opted to sample the fare, however, the younger Paladin inquired of the referee "if partaking of the 'delicacies' would be against his alignment."

"The question floored me," DiTillio recalled. "For one frightening moment I was in a situation of responsibility that related to more than just a game of D&D." He continued, "Think about it, you adult DMs. Think how your fantasy activity touches your real life, then consider yourself at 14. . . . If you'd been a D&D fanatic at the time, I would guess that many of your attitudes toward right and wrong would have been molded by your game experience, even if only subconsciously." DiTillio eventually gave the young Paladin an answer that "wasn't profound but it was honest. I told him if he considered sex evil it was, though in my opinion it wasn't." The young Paladin opted not to pay for those services. At a later time in the same adventure, however, the party encountered a monk smoking a hookah, and after posing a similar question about the potential alignment penalties for drug usage and receiving a similarly permissive answer, the Paladin did inhale that mild-altering substance.

"I fully realize that my Paladin friend is intelligent enough to make his own decisions in these matters," DiTillio acknowledged; "nevertheless, I can't help feeling that our role-playing interaction will have an effect on

those decisions. In D&D we play a character, but invariably that character contains elements of our own selves." The weight of these interactions, DiTillio believed, depended largely on age: "For adults, those selves are already firmly fixed; for younger players those selves are still being shaped by every experience they have, including D&D."

Surely DiTillio understood this sudden responsibility in the context of recent events. James Dallas Egbert III was only sixteen years old, still within the dictionary definition of a "munchkin," when he disappeared from his university that summer of 1979. Never mind that his disappearance had nothing to do with role playing, the possibility that it might have was more powerful than the reality. As the game became more popular among younger players, did its design or implementation incur some moral responsibility toward those players, if only not to warp them? Community opinion was unsurprisingly divided on the subject. Margaret Gemignani wrote in *A&E* 49 that "FRP is not supposed to be kid's stuff. The players are supposed to be adults." But others called for trying to help indoctrinate the youth. Dan Nolte decried the elitism of the role-playing community in the face of the game's popularity, noting that "FRP has seen its greatest growth in this younger age group because it is less set in its patterns and thus more receptive to new ideas" (*AE* 60). Nolte thus counseled outreach: "Do FRP a favor!! Take a fugghead munchkin to lunch" and help him improve his craft: "we have, though our example and attitude, the ability to influence the attitudes of an entire generation of FRPers."

But DiTillio's article elicited a very different, and very singular, response from Douglas P. Bachmann in "The Problem of Morality in Fantasy" in *The Dragon* 39. Bachmann noted that DiTillio had "raised some interesting questions which touch the deeper dimensions of role playing. In short, he suggested that we are doing a bit more than 'playing'; we are forming attitudes towards real life." Bachmann politely but firmly insisted, however, that DiTillio had mishandled the young Paladin's inquiry. "The point here is that the question was not about right or wrong; it was about the appropriate response of a character. The question was: Do Paladins engage in such activities? The question was not: Is it right or wrong?"

Bachmann's objection initially appears to concern the conflation of the Paladin's "in-character" or "in-game" alignment quandary with DiTillio's "out-of-character" moral judgments. But then Bachmann took a stranger

turn. The Paladin's question "that was actually asked was straight out of Faerie," he claimed. Bachmann then engaged in a short digression on the subject of Faerie, which, he said, "is a strange world. It is not familiar or comfortable to us. It is weird, awe-ful, wonder-ful . . . the art of Fantasy is not concerned with real-life evil, or science, or quickies or getting high. It is concerned with the profound mystery behind and within life, nature, and the human soul." Bachmann challenged DiTillio on a far more fundamental question about the nature of role-playing games: he argued that "fantasy will not tolerate teaching or preaching. Nor will Faerie accept the imposition of moral concerns from 'real life.'" DiTillio's error was in presuming any connection between human morality and the morality of fantasy.

Bachmann's argument built on an article that he had written the previous autumn for *Moves* 47 called "Fantastic Reality." In that earlier piece, Bachmann explained that "'Fantasy' is an art form designed to enable Man to enter Faerie," regardless of whether we encounter that fantasy in a story or a game because, for him, "games are acted stories." And, significantly, he argued that "there is a very close relationship between Fantasy, mythology, religious experience, and ritual."[36] Bachmann saw a role-playing game as a tool for self-discovery, much as Kanterman and Elsden had expressed in their essay "Introduction to Yourself" in 1977. In the first issue of *Different Worlds*, Kanterman took this notion a step further, arguing that "the original *D&D* brings one amazingly close to the archetypes of Jungian psychology (the wise old man, the young hero), and may help us peer into our 'collective unconscious.'"[37] Bachmann thus saw a dungeon adventure in a very different light than Simbalist: where Simbalist deemed it "a juvenile and limiting activity," Bachmann quoted Mircea Eliade on the meaning of such adventures: "Descending into an underground chamber is ritually and symbolically equivalent to . . . a *descensus ad inferos* undertaken as a means of initiation" (*MV* 47). The idea that people return from such an experience with greater power and wisdom is, for Bachmann, an explanation for the intrinsic appeal of the original game, but it achieves its true purpose only when players are "channeled" by the system in the right direction.

Bachmann's rebuttal to DiTillio represented role playing as a tool that allows access to "Faerie." He cited Joseph Campbell's work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as evidence that the "assumption underlying all Fantasy

is that a character is going to become a hero or heroine" and that with this assumption comes "an inherent morality," but it has nothing to do with the sort of morality that DiTillio congratulated himself for espousing (*DR* 39). Bachmann bluntly asserted that "if someone uses a fantasy game or novel as a soap box or a pulpit, that person has . . . turned a form of art into a form of propaganda or pornography." By way of conclusion, Bachmann expressed his belief that "as we struggle to discover the reality of Faerie and the proper forms of Fantasy, as we design game mechanics which are true to those realities, we will discover our souls, we will make ethical decisions . . . we will be transformed."[38]

But barely pausing for breath, in the very next issue of *The Dragon*, Bachmann resumed his argument in a lengthier article, this time pivoting from DiTillio to a new target: Gygax himself. Titling his essay "Believe It or Not, Fantasy Has Reality," Bachmann immediately attacked Gygax's disavowal of fantasy. Pointing to Gygax's proclamation that he did not believe in the "stuff of faerie," Bachmann countered that in that case there would be "no way to justify any game system" because "if all fantasy is just make-believe, *all* fantasy game systems ultimately are based on designer prejudice, arbitrary choices or game balancing needs." He insisted instead that "we play fantasy games because we at least hope that we are doing something more than playing make-believe."

It is one thing to talk about all this in theory and another to show through a design how it might work in practice. Bachmann concluded his article with his promised vision of "game mechanics which are true to those realities"—a short role-playing game system, just a few pages of material but enough to illustrate his vision. When Lortz had shown earlier how to develop "motivational questions" necessary to transform role-playing games into dramatic sequences, he had based his example on characters satisfying their desire for power—which might not strike everyone as compelling or "dramatically significant." Bachmann substituted for that aggression and acquisitiveness the Quest Pattern from the *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which supplies a very different dramatic motivation for games: "The first object is the transformation of character into the hero, and the second is the restoration of life in the hero's world." Bachmann explicitly stated that his system offers "coherent mechanisms which provide an adequate structure for playing out this Quest Pattern and for achieving High Fantasy."

Bachmann did not propose merely to delineate a system *simulating* some spiritual process—his was a design intended to guide participants through an actual spiritual process. To achieve that, with a show of easy fluency in the designs of the day, his rules weave together many elements familiar from the innovations of the 1970s. In place of alignment, Bachmann included a variable quantified attribute for "Character," which ranges from "Abhorrent" (1) to "Illustrious" (20), anchored somewhat in *Chivalry & Sorcery*. As in *Heroes* and *Bushido*, high Character bestows a bonus to experience awards, and low Character exacts a penalty. It is not easy to progress as a character in his system if your actions are vile in the eyes of Faerie; violating oaths, say, can result in significant reductions in Character. It is this morality, the morality inherent to Faerie as he saw it, that Bachmann's system guides its players to honor.

The transformation into a hero that Bachmann hoped to achieve is not an endless road to becoming a superperson: in his system, you can lose experience by simply making it home from an adventure because "the power one gains on an adventure can, in reality, be easily dissipated when returning to the Primary World." Following the Quest Pattern, Bachmann devoted much attention to this "Home Area" and the boundary that exists between it and the world of Faerie; returning to the Home Area is the seventh step in the pattern. We might even say that Bachmann saw the eight steps in the Quest Pattern as a series of dramatic sequences, each with its own motivating question, which form a sort of flowchart for the story of an adventure.

To steer characters on their destined journey to heroism, Bachmann provided acknowledged adaptations of the Information and Intentionality mechanisms of *Legacy*, rebranded here under the names "Legends" and "Doom," respectively. A referee uses them in concert to steer players along the Quest Pattern and into the resolution of motivating questions; "The combination of Doom and Legends has the potential of really opening fantasy games up to the rhyme & reason of Faerie." Bachmann gave the "Legend of the City of Gold" as an example of a Legend topic that players might investigate over the course of a campaign, and for a Doom proposed that a character "will someday come to the City of Gold and find that he was born to be the New King." His phrasing here must remind us of Simbalist, who wrote in his second "Kismet" essay about the moment "when a character is revealed as the true King," and there is considerable

overlap between the flavor of fantastic realism that Simbalist aspired to implement in his games and the one systematized by Bachmann's design. When a character's actions relate to her secret Doom, she receives considerable bonuses on actions such as making ability checks, influencing nonplayer characters, and using key items. For Bachmann, Doom is an expression of the fact that "the world is *not* a vacuum into which players step and do anything that pops into their heads." As in much of Bachmann's system, the Doom Modifier is also tightly bound to his version of alignment, Character: high Character earns a bonus to the Doom Modifier of 50 percent or more, whereas the lowest Character inflicts a one-quarter penalty to the Doom Modifier.

In "Fantastic Reality," Bachmann even followed Simbalist in quoting Tolkien regarding the "inner consistency of reality" and cited the importance of generating an inhabitable and credible "secondary world." Although he recognized that *Chivalry & Sorcery* admirably attempted to depict the fantastic, in his opinion "the result was unfortunate," failing to deliver an "Other World" and instead giving us a detailed historical setting: "Can a society which is dead be a means to that which is forever alive and timeless?" Crucially, Bachmann showed how the tools pioneered by *Legacy* could be applied to the contradictory incentives of managing a character's destiny without turning the exercise into the linear implementation castigated by Pulsipher, where the players are merely "told a story by the referee, in effect, with themselves as the protagonists." Bachmann carefully noted in "Believe It or Not" that though these mechanisms may steer players, they do not deprive them of free will: "You can choose which Legends you will pay attention to, and your Doom Modifier still leaves you plenty of freedom."

Bachmann had his system model not just players and their destiny but also the impact of the players' decisions on the secondary world. He developed a measurement he called the "World Pattern Balance," which quantified the susceptibility of the very fabric of reality to distortions resulting from immoral or disharmonious actions, such as theft in the former case and magic use in the latter. Although this mechanic surely derived from the Cosmic Balance in the Chaosium's board game *Elric* (1977), Bachmann retuned it to the purposes of a role-playing game as an instantiation of the Quest Pattern. Battles especially upset the order of Faerie. As the World Pattern Balance value trends higher, various

perceptible consequences will reverberate through the campaign. At low values, this may just take the form of seeing comets shooting through the sky at night; later, the moon may turn green. At higher values, perpetual winter, crop blights, plagues, and even earthquakes may follow, decimating the land. The arc of the campaign story and the character's journey permeate the rules of Bachmann's game, providing an interworking of system and setting tailored to his own ritualistic conception of role playing.

Whether Bachmann succeeded in granting the mundane world access to the realm of Faerie is a question best left to players of his game. But in Bachmann's system we find a convergence of theory and design that had eluded Simbalist and earlier commentators. If Gygax's dismissal of the reality behind fantasy made his design choices arbitrary, Bachmann's rules were anything but: for all their brevity, they cohered to direct a specific experience for players, one that expressed the underlying meaning Bachmann found in role-playing games. Although Bachmann's goal was a rather esoteric one, his curated anthology of rules for steering characters and worlds marked a sort of culmination of the first five years of design energy invested in role-playing games. *Bushido* had shown in 1978 how to tune a system to drive characters into a setting, but in 1980 Bachmann pointed the way to systems tooled to channel players into very specific experiences.

If we line up Bachmann's vision next to Sapienza's, next to DiTillio's, next to Bigglestone's, next to Gygax's, the radical pluralism of approaches to role-playing games demonstrates the futility of trying to define or optimize such a diverse practice. Was fantasy role playing a ritual, or a psychodrama, or a teaching tool, or an art form, or just a game? To all appearances, a role-playing game is such a plastic thing that it can assume any of those shapes. We thus inherit the difficulties in defining what is artistic, or therapeutic, or tutelary, or mystical, or even ludic, when we hazard charting that labyrinth.

Any definition broad enough to encompass activities so diverse would have little explanatory power. The core problem was that *D&D* inspired this genre through a "framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity." What the philosophy of role-playing games required was not a pithy definition but a theoretical framework to house its limitless possibilities.

6

Maturity

Douglas Bachmann positioned his system as a variant for *Chivalry & Sorcery,* but he concluded his piece "Believe It or Not" with guidelines for adapting the rules to *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. Surely he could have grafted his ideas onto any number of other contemporary designs. There is some irony in Bachmann's second choice, though, because Gygax positioned *AD&D* in a very different way than the original product. As its three books started to roll out in 1978, the *AD&D* system heavily downplayed the latitude of the referee and the use of variant systems in favor of a strict adherence to the core rules disseminated by TSR: *AD&D* was not meant to be just a starting point but a complete system, in stark defiance of the Gamer's First Law and virtually all of the latitude that existing role-playing games offered to referees.

The preface to the *Players Handbook* stresses the degree of "uniformity" of experience Gygax intended the system to convey. In *The Dragon* 43, responding to a fan who expressed reservations about the rigidity of the *Advanced* system, Gygax wrote, "You seem to have D&D confused with AD&D. The former promotes alteration and free-wheeling adaptation. The latter absolutely decries it, for the obvious reason that *Advanced D&D* is a structured and complete game system aimed at uniformity of play worldwide. Either you play AD&D, or you play something else!" To borrow Costikyan's terminology, Gygax represented *D&D* as an open-ended role-playing game but *AD&D* as a closed system. This new uniformity surely aimed to counter claims such as Costikyan's that the diversity of house rules meant there really was no such game as *D&D* and to eliminate the widespread incompatibility of playstyles.

In a review of *D&D* in *Games* magazine in the summer of 1979, Jon Freeman opined that "*D&D* is, in fact, less a game than a design-a-game kit."[1] This is true in the obvious sense that the original rules did not provide a game playable out of the box but instead a set of instructions for a referee to construct dungeons and run adventures: some assembly was required. But in a more fundamental sense the invitation in the first rulebooks to

extend and modify the system can make the product seem like a toy requiring much more assembly than just dungeon architecture, something that would not work unless referees thoughtfully filled in the blanks in the rules—especially compounded with the versatility of the dialogue, which might force referees to improvise system on the spot in response to unexpected statements of intention. The *Advanced* system sought to rectify the design gaps in the original game and, in concert with modules as accessories, to form a consistent and standardized game that worked more or less out of the box.

But was it really possible to standardize the play of a role-playing game? Freeman knew well that "TSR and other companies grind out prefabricated dungeon diagrams, monster lists, and encounter charts by the bushel," but he had little hope this would create genuine uniformity of experience across games. "Since there is no limit to the other ingredients that may be steeping in the DM's cauldron," he stated in his review of *D&D*, "it is scarcely surprising that no two of these sorcerous brews are alike." The players around the table exercising the rules always bring something with them that will make every game unique.

Gygax hoped that by expanding the system into plump rulebooks and outlawing variants he could narrow the game into a closed system. When TSR first began to telegraph this strategy at seminars during the summer conventions of 1977, Scott Rosenberg worried in *A&E* 26 that the community had something at stake in this decision. Rosenberg held that "the errors, inconsistencies, and general lack of coherence of the original TSR rules were a blessing in disguise" because without them people would always have treated the *D&D* rules as gospel rather than guidelines. "For usually, no matter how much a game designer tells people that his game is open-ended and that they should design their own rules, there will be a great majority of people content to play exactly the way the rulebook states." But "TSR's books forced everyone to improvise, and thus we have the magnificent diversity of systems and ideas prevalent in the D&D gaming field," Rosenberg wistfully continued.

The incompleteness of the original rules forced early adopters to design their own game, as Freeman would have it: now Rosenberg feared that "they won't have to once the spiffy new revised D&D comes out. It'll all be there, in cold type." Despite Gygax's intentions, Rosenberg predicted the

result would not be that "all DMs will suddenly abandon their own carefully-worked-out rules and adopt the revised TSR set." Rosenberg prophesied that instead "a rift will develop in the D&D playing community between a large group of 'standard' players who will comfortably play TSR's game, and a much smaller group of truefen." This last word, *truefen*, a borrowing from science-fiction fandom, here for Rosenberg denoted the dedicated fans who would continue to hack the system no matter what proclamations came out of Lake Geneva, ignoring *AD&D* in favor of their own homebrews, unconcerned with being branded as outlaws, or at least outliers.

Throughout the 1970s, the sheer preponderance of optional rules available in fanzines and commercial products let practitioners substitute out virtually any component of the system. As Simbalist attested, referees would "pick and choose and adapt whatever systems they wish from whatever role-play rules they find to their liking and which satisfy the needs of their campaign." Even the core system of abilities and combat could be replaced while leaving the rest unchanged, as the *Infinity System* (1979) demonstrates: its rules are restricted to "character attributes, combat, weapons, skills, and vehicles," and as such "it is easily inserted into any other system."[2] The modularization of systems into such components became part of their identity; in 1979, it could already be remarked, "Do you realize any FRP game is in reality a hierarchy of smaller games? For example, in *D&D* there is a combat game, a magic game, a guess the magic item game, a role play game, an experience game, a create character game, a find your way out of the maze game, an alignment game, etc." (*AE* 51). Anything potentially could be swapped out. The genie would not go willingly back into the bottle.

The ineluctable fungibility of rules was not just a problem for Gygax and for *D&D*—it was a problem for the dozens of other commercial products that struggled to establish their own identity in the role-playing game marketplace as mature, second-generation designs. Charlie Luce observed in *A&E* 47 that not only had the fan community generated "enough variant material . . . on *Runequest* to rewrite half the booklet over again," but "other people are melding systems from D&D, AD&D, C&S, RQ, Warlock, and sprinkles of *Bushido*, *Gamma World*, and *Space Quest*." Luce agreed with Rosenberg that the community had learned to dump these systems into a melting pot because originally "*Dungeons & Dragons* was published with a

great deal of unclear, ambiguous, contradictory, or just plain missing material," and, as a consequence, "now, every DM or group of DMs that runs 'D&D' has a set of house rules, often to where the points of contact with [D&D] Books I–III and *Greyhawk* are tenuous at best."

In the introduction to *Adventures in Fantasy,* no less an authority than Dave Arneson pessimistically surveyed the state of *D&D* a few months before the release of the *Players Handbook*. Arneson could only helplessly conclude that "the basic original spirit of the Role Playing Fantasy game has not been well looked after" and that "there have been few real improvements to that less than perfect original system." The "added dozens of additional rules" put out by TSR and others constituted only "a chaotic jumble that buried the original structure under a garbage heap of contradictions and confusion." This led to a situation where "any person without the aid of an experienced player was hard pressed to even begin to gain an understanding of the rules and even with aid it sometimes still proved to be impossible." He positioned his own *Adventures in Fantasy* as the solution: a game spread across three rulebooks filled with complex calculations. But contemporary reports cast doubt on the degree to which he himself played by these rules and instead favored a more free-form approach to system resolution.

Jim Thomas's prediction in 1977 that "nothing's ever going to be more than a starting point" was apparently coming to pass. Charlie Luce believed that many of the "second-generation FRP games" on the market exhibited more "clarity and completeness of the rules" than the original *D&D*, but he feared that these second-generation titles were rarely given a fair trial as works independent of the existing *D&D* tradition (*AE* 47). As he put it, "A new game can be looked at by a FRP player in two ways: either as a new source of ideas for his very own lovingly hand-crafted campaign, or as a new game to play and enjoy." But because of "the impulse to jump in and modify" the system, which was "nurtured and built up in the days of first-generation FRP," there is a great deal of "carry-over of old prejudices" that inevitably returns play to familiar patterns rather than the exploration of new ideas, steering gamers toward adaptation rather than adoption. Luce sympathetically concluded, "I don't think it would have been a very nice thing to take someone's dream, that they took time and trouble to fit into a rulebook so that I could enjoy it, and chop it to pieces, to shove my own dream into it, without even bothering to try and enjoy it for what it is." Luce

positioned game designs as works of art that deserve to be encountered on their own terms rather than as collections of tools from which referees and player can extract implements one by one as a situation demands.

Some designers would be content even to see their tools tested instead of simply being ignored. In the second volume of his *Arduin Grimoire* trilogy, Dave Hargrave practically has to beg his readers, "Please try some of the rules that you have doubts about *in game situations and game play*. Only through actual playtesting can a rule or situation be fully explored." His tone carries no small frustration about the state of game criticism when he complains, "Anyone can pontificate on rules and worlds that they have never tried and can never be proved wrong because the proof is only in the play."[3] When he wrote those words in 1978, Hargrave had not yet attempted to situate *Arduin* as a system independent of *D&D*; it was effectively just an anthology series of variant rules—and even those could and would be dismissed untested, or dismantled and reshaped by the community.

Because *D&D* originally trained people to approach a role-playing system not as a game but as a "design-a-game kit," because it is such a plastic thing, because, as the "Gamer's First Law" would have it, a referee is free to ignore or change any unsatisfactory rules, no closed system could immunize itself from the contagion of a compelling idea, nor could any unwanted practice insinuate its way into a resilient campaign. Whether we deem a design first generation or later, open or closed, it conforms in play to the receptiveness and prejudices of the referee and the players. Some designs openly embraced this quality or even heavily depended on it. The *Commando* rulebook explains that "role-playing games, more than any other type or genre of games, *are intended to be suited to the individual Player's tastes by that Player*." As such, Eric Goldberg, designer of *Commando*, does "not expect Players to play by my rules, but to use them as guidelines in structuring the game to their preferences. This process may take a couple of years, but the synthesization of the designer's and Player's views by the Player allows role play to achieve its purpose."[4] The system that results from the synthetization of the design with play, in all the myriad manifestation that entails, is the intended system of *Commando*—indeed, a system that can necessarily never be published because the system is actually a process delegated by the design to the players sitting around the table. But perhaps *Commando* simply acknowledges and anticipates the reality described by Luce: that any published set of rules is doomed,

willingly or not, to undergo such a synthesis with existing practices of its players—as unfair to designers as that might be.

At the end of the 1970s, a confluence of circumstances—the James Dallas Egbert III incident, the appeal of the mass-marketed closed-system *AD&D* to teenagers, and the collective aging of the original role-playing gamers— led to a predictable discussion about "maturity" in role playing. This meant emotional maturity more than anything else: in his article "Whither the Munchkin?" in *Abyss* 13, Dave Nalle would note, "Fantasy Role Playing is being overrun by a new generation of players ranging in age from 7 to 70, and no matter what their chronological age, they all have a playing maturity age of 11 or so." Foremost among the sins Nalle attributed to the "munchkin" was "strict adherence to *AD&D*."

For someone like Bachmann, who believed that role-playing games should follow the pattern of the Hero's Journey as laid out by Campbell, differences in play style similarly raised questions about maturity. In his *Moves* piece, Bachmann wrote, "In any case, when players complain about others who spoil a game by 'ego tripping,' they are feeling the frustration of not playing within this pattern. The pattern seeks to transform infantile egos into mature selves." Without the benevolent steering of the Quest Pattern, players may drift into mindless, indigent criminality, what Bachmann called the "Grand Larceny/Aggravated Assault syndrome of gaming," which he reduced to the handy abbreviation GL/AA. But attempting to behave that way on the Hero's Journey is simply self-defeating, he argued: "the ego tripper in the Initiatory Pattern ends up dead, or a slave, or insane—just as he should."

If Bachmann's idiosyncratic perspective on maturity represents one extreme, there is ample evidence of how its opposite manifested. In another piece describing the benefits of role playing, "The Therapeutic Aspects of D&D," Tom Curtin recounted the game's efficacy in resolving depression and anxiety—though his argument is for the salubrious comfort found in self-indulgent and often sadistic diversion (*AB* 10). After describing the many difficulties he faced in real life as a senior in college, he reported, "I really feel rejuvenated after frying some deserving and obnoxious hobbit. It's my favorite sport." He described a session where his party viciously tortured a captured orc, repeatedly healing it with a gem of regeneration to

forestall its well-earned death, and admitted, "It was cruel, but we relished the poor Ork's trauma. This episode was a great way to work off the tensions of an Astronomy quiz." How could Curtin and Bachmann be playing the same genre of game, even?

In the community's public forums, this divide took on a darker and more vitriolic tone than the previous bickering familiar from the long-standing schism between story people and games people. Nalle stressed the need to repel the munchkin "menace" but conceded that "very few people can bear to just tell someone to 'fuck off'" (*AB* 13). In *A&E* 59 , Sapienza related that this censure was a two-way street: "Recently I have received abusive letters from some young gamers. All I can say is that when they are older they may look back and realize it was precisely that kind of behavior that banned them from rapid welcome by more mature gamers."

As the schism grew more pronounced, the need grew ever more urgent for a framework that accounted for the stark differences in the community. The umbrella of role-playing games covered too many practices and too diverse a set of philosophies to admit of any useful definition, but any accepted framework that could cordon off areas of disagreement would at least permit critics to assess the value of a design or an implementation for an interested subset of the community. In that light, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first landmark in the theory of role-playing games was a framework for understanding what assumptions and expectations players brought to the table.

The Blacow Model

By the time the fiftieth issue of *Wild Hunt* came out in the spring of 1980, Glenn Blacow had been playing *D&D* for about five years. In his contribution to that anniversary issue, he included an essay called "A Consideration on the Subject of Fantasy Role-Playing." It presented a synthesis of the various attempts to reconcile different incentives in play going back to models proposed for wargamers in the early 1970s by early commentators such as Steve Thornton. Blacow's "Consideration" is particularly elucidating because it defines *role playing* as one component of a broader model, as a property that exists in a tension with conflicting or complementary practices, thereby delimiting it from other things people do

when they sit down to play at a game of *D&D*. The model of role-playing games Blacow presented would instantly become the most influential of the era.

Blacow did not presume to classify published designs or even to propose a player typology, though his categories would later serve those purposes as well. Following Simbalist's notions that "role-playing games take on the flavor of the group playing a campaign" and that "no two campaigns are alike," Blacow instead focused on the "feel" that emerges from play. He postulated that "the 'feel' of a game is determined by the interaction of four elements." He clarified that, practically speaking, any given campaign or session involves some blend of the four "forms," but as a means of introducing them, he first explained them in isolation, as "pure" cases.

The first form is *role-playing*. Blacow identified this form of game as one "wherein the PCs are by far the most important thing in the game." All considerations about tactics or accumulation of power are secondary to letting the players inhabit their characters. It is a game form where "killing PCs isn't just pointless, it's counter-productive." This type of game "tends to show a considerable degree of 'cooperation' between the players themselves and the gamesmaster," where character actions have a significant influence over the flow of events. We might say that this form accords most directly with the philosophies expressed by Simbalist and, to some degree, Bill Seligman.

Blacow also added that "a 'pure' role-playing game is also the type most likely to develop the idea that the players have 'fates,'" citing Simbalist's "Kismet" essays, though he might also have drawn on Chilenskas's "purpose." He gave an example of a referee spontaneously altering a game situation, tacitly turning a magical axe into a nonmagical one, to preserve the life of a character set aside for a later fate. The "kill ratio" is low in such games because no one will kill characters in which the referee and "the players have invested much time, imagination, and love." But in the pure forms of "role playing," the world in which characters explore their destinies is only as developed as it needs to be to serve the characters: it "only develops background to any great extent if the PCs get interested/involved in it."

The second form is *wargaming*. Blacow considered this the explicit inverse of the role-playing style because "the most important element here

is the rules and mechanics of the game," the systems that simulate a world —these are the incentives that Thornton associated with the "simulator." Blacow stressed that players in this form must participate in the execution of the system, making "knowledge of every detail of the rules a vast help," which results in "much searching for loopholes by the players, and eliminating them by the DM." Because players understand the system, they have a reasonable expectation of how their intentions will be interpreted by the referee. Blacow characterized this form as one where "encounters are tactical problems to be solved by the players," and in that sense the game is "a mental contest between the GM and the players" of the sort frequently discussed by Gygax, Slimak, and others at the dawn of the hobby: when players encounter monsters, their "tactical expertise . . . tallies remarkably well with that of the DM." As such, these games are lethal, where "killing PCs is a large part of the point of the whole affair." Lewis Pulsipher advocated for very much this understanding of *D&D*.

In this pure wargaming form, "the roleplaying aspect of the game tends to be minimal," and, indeed, "developing a character's personality may result in it doing things dysfunctional to its survival." Again, this recalls early remarks, like Blacow's own, on how in certain dungeons "rolled intelligence must be ignored to survive" and trying to play within the constraints of abilities or alignment will prove a career-limiting decision. Blacow stipulated, "This is probably the most challenging of the pure forms."

The third form is *ego-tripping*. This term is familiar from Bachmann and from Blacow's prior comments; Blacow explained that he chose this name to "avoid the dread term m*n*m*x." As pejorative as *minimax* might have seemed, commentators on his model would quickly point out that *ego-tripping* is little better, and we would be hard pressed to identify anyone contributing to the critical literature who openly advocated for this form as a proper approach to role-playing games. Perhaps something like the self-indulgence espoused by Tom Curtin as he tortured imaginary enemies to blow off real-life steam effectively represents it. Blacow noted that in this form "the average PC is simply the player's personality decked out with a few labels that purport to be such things as profession, alignment, etc."

"The major drive of these games is the search for power for the characters," Blacow explained. "The PCs strive for levels, magical devices,

special abilities, divine favor, etc.," even if they have to "murder one another for these." Competition among players can motivate violent exchanges between party members: they may resort to assassination "just to keep other characters from being as powerful as their own." Blacow observed that "the DM often joins in the ego-tripping and competition, just to prove to the PCs that he can be grosser than they are." He called ego-tripping "the most competitive form of the game," and this surely corresponds to Thornton's "competitor" archetype.

Intriguingly, although Blacow disparaged "pure" ego-tripping, he would go on to argue that it is "probably the most common form of the four." Indeed, he maintained that it was the intended original form of role-playing games and that it remains a vital ingredient of play, even for mature gamers.

The fourth form is *story-telling*. Blacow observed that "some degree of story-telling is needed for running almost any successful FRP campaign" but that "purely story-telling games are rare indeed" as they are games in which players effectively lack what *Pellinore* calls "freedom of decision." In their "pure" form, Blacow wrote, where "everything in the story is pre-written by the Gamesmaster, then there will be little flexibility in what happens. In such games, there is a distinct feel of the PCs just acting out an unwritten script." This recalls Pulsipher's disparagement of playing a game as a way of enacting a fantasy novel, which lacks "a sense of control by the players of their own fate." Or, as Blacow put it, the realization of player intentions "depends on how much control over the game the GM is willing to allow the PCs." However, in less pure forms, what Blacow called "more free-form versions," the players and referee "cooperate in writing the script" as the referee provides a "steady input of events, history, and background, and what the players can manage to do affects the fabric of the universe."

He stressed the world-building dimension of the story-telling game, its rich histories and backgrounds, vivid nonplayer characters, and the "believable reasons for things" that happen in the game. Although few would advocate for a "pure" story-telling game, Blacow ventured that Mark Swanson's campaign, "if not 'pure' story-telling, certainly inspired that aspect" of Blacow's own games. For this form to be playable, he emphasized that "it is an FRP form requiring a good deal of GM/player interaction and cooperation."

By articulating these four forms, Blacow effectively summarized the critical discussion of role playing that transpired in the first five years of the hobby. But the explanatory power in the Blacow model did not reside so much in its consideration of these pure forms, which different voices had championed over the years, but instead in the observation that the dominant practice was "combined-aspect games." Particular campaigns or gaming groups, he explained , tend to have a form that serves as the "original basis for the game," but then they may "flower out" and add more elements.

Blacow maintained that "given the original rules available"—that is, *D&D*—the "Ego-Trip " form is "what will develop from most attempts at starting a game." Early players did identify progression as the objective of the game, a view that Gygax corroborated, and, indeed, when Gygax bandied around the term *role playing* at the time, it was in the context of that wish fulfillment. That a campaign would follow this ego-trip form, rather than what people later came to call *role playing*, echoes Peter Cerrato's remarks in *Wild Hunt* 22 about how "the direct cause of the lack of role-playing is how the D&D level system is set up." Blacow reiterated that "an attempt to run a straight by-the-book D&D or AD&D game usually results in a campaign of this sort," as if to stress that the very design of *D&D* encourages the ego-tripping form of game, whereas other systems might not. Then Blacow's argument becomes almost teleological: although games typically start with ego-tripping, "older games tend increasingly to grow more and more into other aspects of role-playing." He tied this growth to the maturity of the game and, indeed, of the gamers, acknowledging that "mature may not be the best word, but I confess myself hard up to find a better one." But as wary as he was of ego-tripping's influence over play, he nonetheless acknowledged, "Nor is it likely that any game can operate without this element. People like feeling important, and FRP is one way of doing so." Although he clearly felt ego-tripping must be kept in check, he argued that it contributes a considerable part of the original and indispensable allure of fantasy role playing. Blacow confessed that he, like Seligman before him, began playing with an emphasis on ego-tripping and even admitted that he still did some ego-tripping because "it's kind of hard to avoid if one plays FRP."

But ego-tripping alone was not sufficient to sustain his interest: "I will not play in some of the full-blown ego-tripping AD&D games available." Blacow stressed that "I like to 1) role-play, 2) have some sort of challenge

to it, and 3) do so in a world which has logic and consistency to it." As a referee, he is "trying to balance the role-playing, wargaming, and story-telling aspects of the game so that it's both playable and enjoyable." Ruefully, he had to report, "I don't always succeed." By acknowledging the tension created by, say, the countervailing requirements of role playing and storytelling, of enabling player agency and keeping the player "isolated" in the referee's game world, the Blacow model provides an account that embraces the fundamental tension and contradiction at the heart of role-playing game design.

Just as in 1972 Fred Vietmeyer, after reviewing Thornton's typology of wargamers, argued that "for one type of player to place his own viewpoint as superior to another's hobby enjoyment is simply being too egocentric," Blacow too recognized the stark relativity of his forms. He let us see how each form looks to the devotees of the other forms. In the face of the blatant divisions in the community, Blacow perspicaciously noted that "players used to running in games dominated by one aspect of the four have very different attitudes towards games centered on other aspects, and this tends to lead to friction, name-calling, and misunderstandings." He then tried out a few different perspectives by way of example. "To the role-player FRPer, the ego-tripping dungeon may seem remarkably shallow ('hack n' slash'), the wargame-oriented dungeon not only shallow but vicious, and the story-telling dungeon rather confining, restricting his character's freedom of action." Or for the ego-tripper, "the measure of the character is his level and magic supply, not what his character is (as is important in a purely role-playing game) or how skilled the player is (in wargaming-oriented groups)."

The community swiftly recognized the significance of the Blacow model. In *A&E* 59 , Sapienza announced that "Glenn reached an important philosophical insight into the nature of FRP and the reasons for a lot of the bickering that goes on in the fanzines over questions of realism, grossness, etc." Sapienza connected this insight to the "munchkin" crisis as well: "It is pertinent to the young vs. old gamer question, too, for it can be shown that most younger gamers are playing a different game, which most gamers begin with but grow out of and tend to avoid thereafter, along with those who play that way." It was, at long last, a model that let people identify the plural practices that had long hidden behind the opaque and controversial

label *role-playing game* and thus begin to address and alleviate the stress this pluralism had caused in the community.

Figure 6.1
Self-portrait of Glenn Blacow, 1977.

Blacow was not the only one to develop such a typology. At roughly the same time that his model appeared in *Wild Hunt*, Lewis Pulsipher published an article in *Different Worlds* 8 "Defining the Campaign: Game Master Styles," which reprised his earlier essay "D&D Campaigns" in *White Dwarf* 1. With a few years more reflection, Pulsipher now coincidentally identified four different campaign styles: a "simulation" style focused on emphasizing realism; a "wargame" style that stages the game as a competition between the players and the world; a "silly" style of funhouse dungeons; and a "novel" style, which he indicated is popular among science-fiction fandom, where "the referee is, in effect, writing a verbal novel with players as semi-independent characters in the novel." He sprinkled the article with other

minor subtypes and divisions. However, Pulsipher only advanced this model polemically to advocate strongly for a simulation or wargaming approach to the game, still dismissing alternatives as "silly," and it is likely for want of relativism that his typology failed to capture the same mindshare in the community as the Blacow model.

Had the Blacow model remained confined to the miniscule readership of *Wild Hunt*, it is likely it would have exerted little influence on posterity. But because Sapienza had secured an editorial position at *Different Worlds*, he recruited Blacow "to expand for *DW*" the original *Wild Hunt* essay. The revised version appeared in *Different Worlds* 10. It softened the language a bit: in place of "ego-tripping," it listed "power gaming." In this incarnation, the Blacow model reached a much wider audience and received widespread citations in commentary from that point forward.

By the end of 1980, we see Dan Nolte report in *A&E* 64 that "in recent issues of A&E several contributors have taken to using Glenn Blacow's categories." He felt that "enough of us have started using these terms that they might be thought of as an unofficial standard." Nolte attested that the strength of the model lay in how "campaigns are a combination of various amounts of each of these approaches." Accordingly, he recommended that "we can (should) categorize folks or campaigns only to the extent of 'mostly X', 'primarily Y', 'hardly ever Z' and so forth. In this way we might be able to avoid the stereotyping and self-righteousness (One True Wayism) that seems to plague nearly all categorizations." And, of course, Nolte and others in the community proposed all manner of tweaks and corollaries to the model as well, in terms of both how it was both structured and applied.

Applying the Model

The success of the Blacow model no doubt owes much to its resemblance to a game system. Commentators quickly treated it as an attribute that modeled campaigns and players in the same way that game statistics modeled characters. It became, in short, alignment for players and games themselves. The question was, however, did it also delimit a confined space where "mature" players could move without losing the equivalent of their Paladinhood?

The Blacow model's connection to alignment became apparent once the community began to visualize it in a manner similar to the two-axis alignment system of *D&D*. Jeffrey A. Johnson, a contributor to *Wild Hunt*, produced the first version of this in *Different Worlds* 11, hot on Blacow's heels, in an article called "The Fourfold Way of FRP." Blacow hinted that role-playing and wargaming stood as effectively opposing forms because in the former the character is indispensable and in the latter the character is disposable—so Johnson positioned them as two ends of a "realism" continuum on the x axis of his graph, where the wargaming side also represents "simulation" and the role-playing side delivers "pure fantasy." For the y axis, representing "goals," Johnson positioned story-telling against power gaming, as the former extreme indulges the referee's will, or the "campaign goals," at the expense of player agency, and the latter extreme indulges the players' will, which Johnson glossed as "personal goals," in a near-solipsistic fashion. The forms favored in any campaign can thus be plotted as a dot on this graph; Johnson suggested that this graph unified both Blacow's and Pulsipher's perspectives.

The two-axis model naturally led fans to identify their preferences by quadrant, just as players located their characters as "lawful good" or "chaotic evil." Contributors to *A&E* would thus refer, in the shorthand that quickly appeared, to "St/Rp" and "Pg/Wg" to classify the opposing sides of the most prominent schism in the community. Most *A&E* contributors situated themselves and their campaigns in the mature St/Rp quadrant as advocates for story-telling, whereas the disreputable Pg/Wg quadrant was presumably home to boisterous, ego-tripping "munchkins" and dull minimaxing "grognards" alike.

Scott Bauer proposed an alternate visualization of the Blacow model, which is dated Christmas Eve 1980 in *A&E* 66. Bauer rejected Johnson's "Fourfold Way" representation of the forms as extremes of bilateral opposition that "would introduce distortions." Bauer explained, "While there is some truth in the notion that Power Gaming interferes with Story Telling, and Role-Playing interferes with Wargaming, it is incorrect to look upon these as opposites which never meet. Almost all games include something of all four orientations." With this in mind, Bauer drew the same two-axis picture, plotted four points showing how far into each of the four forms a particular "playing style" goes, and then connected the dots and shaded in the resulting shapes.
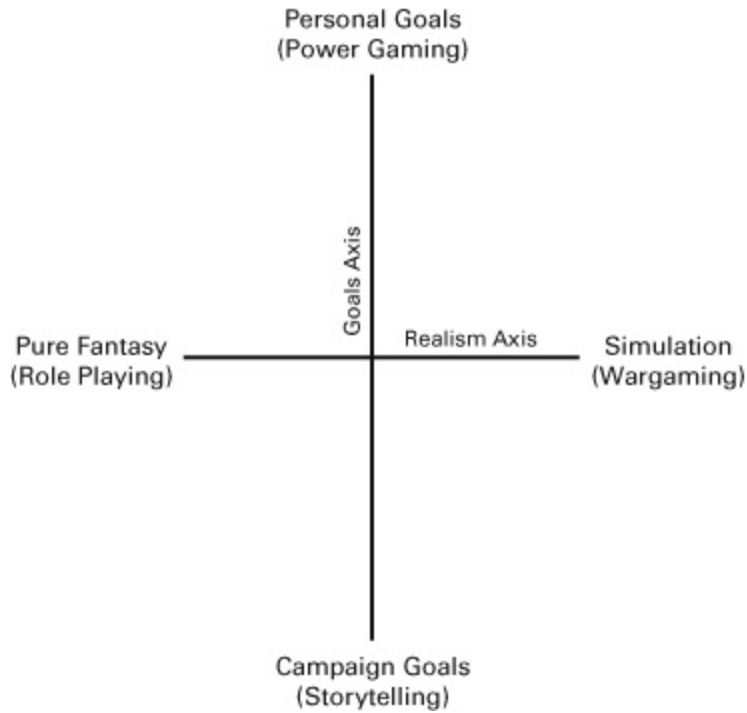
Figure 6.2

The "Fourfold Way" gaming-orientation graph, after *Different Worlds* 11 (1981).

In addition to avoiding the "distortions" Bauer mentioned, his visualization permits us to measure overlaps between playing styles as a metric of compatibility rather than simply to compare the proximity of points. Ultimately, Bauer leveraged these illustrations for a polemical purpose, to make the argument that in order "for FRP to continue to progress," it must move toward campaigns emphasizing role-playing and story-telling over wargaming and power gaming. He happily conceded that he subscribed to a "One True Way" of approaching role-playing games and that "the cutting edge of FRP lies in the direction of Story Telling and Role-playing."

In *A&E* 68, Bob Traynor objected that just as "alignment is rather inadequate to express PC/NPC philosophy, so is a campaign difficult to reduce to XY graphing." Thus, he criticized Bauer's model, pointing out that its shapes could not adequately represent games that emphasize both power gaming and storytelling simultaneously while downplaying the other forms, which he proposed is true of campaigns based on *Empire of the Petal Throne*. Rather than trying to visualize the Blacow model, Traynor wanted to understand how the community felt about its forms. In a "census" he

conducted in that issue of *A&E*, Traynor posed 21 questions to *A&E* readers, covering not only topics such as favored systems, classes, power levels, and so on but also questions relevant to the Blacow model.

For example, Traynor inquired, "Do you prefer to have a wargaming campaign or a storytelling/emphasis on the role-playing aspects?" He also wanted to know, "Do you strive for detail in your campaign or do you prefer to streamline your world and not get bogged down?" He asked about the lethality of sessions, about how frequently characters are resurrected, and about both the average level of characters and the speed of advancement in local campaigns—all of which served as indirect indicators of power gaming, since bluntly asking "Are you an ego-tripper?" would likely yield no useful responses.

The next issue of *A&E* contained a logical extension of Traynor's census: Don Miller's "Inventory of FRP Orientation," a questionnaire of nearly 40 statements that respondents were to rank from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The assertions encompassed the spectrum of views previously articulated by combatants in the community schism; Miller explained that the inventory "has been developed to measure (attempt to measure) a person's orientation in the game of FRP." The fourth statement, for example, reads, "The GM controls fate, and may manipulate events any time; no dice roll necessary." This is followed immediately by "The PCs are the most important aspect of the game." Miller tried to identify every interesting or controversial statement that the community had entertained: touching on Slimak's complaint about role players rolling dice to decide what to say, Miller posed proposition 22, "Players need to roll dice to determine their characters' reactions," which contrasted with 25, "Acting the part of a character is crucial to the game; even if it would mean the character's death or the party's capture." For Simbalist's concept of direct storytelling, Miller postulated, "A GM needs to preplan the campaign, develop an outline to follow; in essence, create a story for the characters to enjoy."

Miller also endeavored to provide reasonable statements of opposition to the philosophies of role-playing and story-telling. "Encounters are tactical exercises wherein the players must outwit the enemy" serves as proposition 39. It is preceded by "A PC's advancement in power is crucial, and should not be hindered by race, class, or by the GM." For those who felt strongly

that the system should be exercised as designed, proposition 34 reads, "Knowing the game rules is important if PCs are to survive." Wargamers would likely endorse the impartiality of proposition 9, that "GMs should never refrain from killing off PCs, as they failed to survive the adventure."

These questions ultimately served to measure the respondent's attitude toward Blacow's four forms. Although Miller expressed some early reservations about his sample size, by *A&E* 76 he was willing to summarize the data culled from the community. "The average of my results so far is as follows: R-P: 41.6; P-G: 24.6; S-T: 29.5; W-G: 32.9." In his methodology, results higher than 40 are significant, so the readership of *A&E* at the time showed a disposition toward role playing. Power gaming scored lowest, though perhaps not as low as one might expect. It is noteworthy that wargaming scored higher than storytelling—readers were wary of sacrificing their "freedom of decision." Miller gave an example of one respondent who scored "Role-Playing—40; Power-Gaming—12; Story-Telling—34; War-Gaming—27," a more decisive rejection of power gaming and an elevation of story-telling over wargaming.

Blacow had revealed that the crisis in the role-playing game community owed to fundamental differences in the preferences and expectations of the people assembling around gaming tables. Although he suggested that player preference will (and indeed should) evolve with time and maturity, he made no attempt to get everyone on the same page. He instead assumed that the schism would endure but argued that, by recognizing the schism and its root causes, players could identify and acknowledge the opposing preferences of others. But if the Blacow model could not help players avoid incompatibility, then it would offer little beyond Kevin Slimak's broad assessment in 1975 that "different people prefer different types of games." Unsurprisingly, once the community saw the kinds of measurement that Miller could perform, they naturally began to look at preferences in the Blacow model as an indicator of compatibility. David Nalle would call for measuring "campaign compatibility" in this fashion through questionnaires similar to Miller's (*AE* 80).

But the Blacow model also had applications beyond just measuring compatibility. In "Theory on FRP," written as Miller studied responses to his "Inventory of FRP Orientation" questionnaire, he put forward the hypothesis that "players and GMs are influenced in their FRP playing

orientation by the particular set of rules they are exposed to," and that players "may be permanently prejudiced by their first indoctrination to FRP" (*AE* 74). This suggests that the particular designs that introduce players to the hobby have an unusual responsibility—and that those who came from prior traditions such as wargaming might carry baggage that would prove difficult to shed. Miller thus proposed a corollary to the Blacow model, a typology of systems rather than of campaign forms, which opposes complexity against simplicity and abstraction against reality. "Simplicity" emerges as roughly equivalent to the "playability" incentive familiar from wargame design, whereas "complexity" is its opposite, a deep breadth of simulation. In simple, free-form systems, referees have tremendous latitude and spontaneity; in complex, rules-heavy games, the mechanics determine outcomes rather than referee discretion. "Reality," for Miller, meant attempting to present the game world as a detailed and articulated world in terms of its culture, history, laws, inhabitants, and so on, whereas he defined "abstraction" more loosely as "leaning toward a game atmosphere" or "a quality of reality simulated in ways which are fun or original" and ultimately "consistent with the game designer's values and perspective of reality."

Miller visualized his systems within a two-axis graph along the same lines as Johnson and Bauer, though he plotted a single point in the coordinate space for each game in a manner closest to Johnson's diagrams. He located *D&D* as an abstract and simple game, though this must be understood in contrast to a title such as *Chivalry & Sorcery*, which he deemed to be complex and realistic. He stressed that the aim of this graph is not to identify some essential aspect of how these games must run but rather to show "how the game system will influence a player," as "novices will tend to be oriented in their style of gaming according to the graph."[5] For example, he explained that "complexity distracts from role-playing, attention to the PC's personality, inter-party interactions, and accomplishing a PC's goals," so players who cut their teeth on overly complex games may not favor campaigns of the role-playing form. Miller submitted that "designing a game system can be aided with the theory," as designers who appreciate the implications of system design for the Blacow forms can tune their games to serve particular interest groups.[6]

Styling his contributions to *A&E* the "Journal of Aesthetic Simulation," Miller saw that the "creative vanguard" of the hobby had achieved a zenith

of sophistication. "I think we is growin' up! I believe our hobby is entering a second age. Soon the days will be gone when rules were designed with an arbitrary sense of what 'sorta seems right.'"[7] His "Theory on FRP" extended principles previously articulated by Simbalist, how "a game's underlying philosophy affects everything that the game's systems do or fail to do," into actionable guidance for designers to follow in yielding systems to deliver particular results.

Once Blacow had isolated the forms of role-playing games, the community began to pose crucial questions about how designs could encourage or discourage them. Although Bauer agreed with Simbalist's earlier statement that "FRP is an art form," he disagreed about which art it most resembled. Just as Miller related running a game to the vocation of directing a film or a play, Bauer maintained that "FRP is one of the performing arts, and so is closer to film and the theater than to literature," even though fantasy literature served as the most direct inspiration for *D&D* at the start (*AE* 60). But although role-playing games are "closer" to movies and plays, Bauer found them a unique phenomenon worthy of its own identity, and this became his rallying cry for a revolution in role-playing game design: to "throw off the shackles of literary tradition and create a new form of FRP which will be true to the spirit of FRP gaming instead." In this new form, storytelling must come in moderation, as Miller would put it: "GMs should also realize that the theme should not be rigid, and the story pliable enough for players to change it by their subsequent actions. Players come first, then the story!" (*AE* 78). Bauer argued for a game narrative negotiated between the players and the referee. In its ideal incarnation, which Bauer acknowledged "is probably impossible to achieve," this design would transform the most fundamental relationship in the game: "the collaboration would be so successful that the distinction between GM and player would cease to exist" (*AE* 60).

Bauer knew well that the seed for his "new form of FRP" had already been sown in the implementation of existing role-playing games; he attested that it is "already present to large extent in games run by most good GMs" as "a sharing, a collaboration, between the GM and the players" (*AE* 60). When he wrote those words in the middle of 1980, one could point to a number of examples from over the previous five years: Michie's practice of delegating the description of the world to players; Seligman's spell-and-skill systems that let the player invent parts of the system; Simbalist's

philosophy that "the player ultimately chooses the destiny of his character," whereas the "GM's task is to assist the character to realize his destiny"; Feldt's or Bachmann's destiny-control mechanisms; and Bigglestone's contention that the referee is just a player whose job is to "play a world." Even some designs that renounced collaboration between the referee and players still offered a way to place them on the same footing. *Legacy* revels in the adversarial relationship that a properly scoped referee can have with players: "The more rules and limitations we placed on the game operator the more fun the game operator had running the game" because they had the effect of transforming the referee from "an all knowing and all powerful lord of creation" into "an extremely powerful player who could be bested or tricked if the players were good and sneaky enough."[8]

Starting from Scratch

As the Blacow model taught us, those who aspired to perfect an art form of role playing had to coexist in the community with many players committed to other forms, including closed ones. At the beginning of 1981, Owen Laurior was refereeing weekly for two different sets of players, a more mature group on Fridays and then a younger group on Sundays, both of whom explored parallel versions of the same game world. Laurior was thirty years old at the time that he wrote in to *A&E* 66 to explain the differences he encountered running the two parties. The second group, which had been active for around a year, had two players around Laurior's age, three players in their early twenties, but also a number of youthful players: Gwen, Lara, and Randy, ages 17,13, and 14, respectively. Laurior's exasperation is palpable when he talked about Randy. "Randy is a munchkin. He loves to hack & slash. He is constantly talking, doing rash things, being a nuisance." Like many subjected to the label "munchkin," Randy was "able to quote chapter, verse and page number of several volumes of rule books," and Laurior complained that "he often challenges me when I stray from the One True Way" into house rules.

From his position of relative maturity, Laurior had to acknowledge that Randy's "enthusiasm and endless wild ideas are what keeps that group interesting." This admission led him to a deeper, more introspective realization. "I remember when I was a kid, playing with toy figures—the 3"

high plastic ones. . . . Sometimes I'd play with friends, usually by myself—but always the rules were the same" insofar as "there were no formal rules." So Laurior had to "wonder if, for the munchkins who have discovered FRPG, our rules have supplanted this type of free-form playing. Despite its fantasy aspect, could it be that by forcing conformity to The Books, we and Gygax are actually conditioning a new generation to fit in, training them in the essentials of Bureaucracy?"

What purpose did the "formal rules" of a role-playing game serve? Some portion of the rules comprised combat simulation systems that might just as easily fill a wargame manual. As role-playing games sought an identity distinct from their warlike forbear, that of a new art form, the community became increasingly skeptical about the value of system: back in 1977, Jim Thomas had already predicted, "I don't think new games/rules are going to make much of a difference in the long run." Paul Mosher in *A&E* 65 would similarly question the importance of system. "What rules does the referee use? I submit it makes no difference what rules are used, but rather how they are interpreted and which rules are interpreted." Mike Dawson would propose a year later that "a DM begins to progress in D&D when he starts to abandon rules, rather than when he begins to integrate them," and, indeed, that "a good D&D DM gets to be a good DM in spite of the rules, not because of them" (*AE* 76).

Nonetheless, designers persisted in putting out rules. Jon Freeman was the first author to survey the current crop of self-identified role-playing games for a mainstream audience for a chapter in *The Complete Book of Wargames* (1980). Freeman found no dearth of published systems: he covered *D&D*; TSR's side ventures from *Empire of the Petal Throne* to *Boot Hill* and *Gamma World*; major games by other publishers, such as *Tunnels & Trolls*, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, and *Runequest*; as well as a few minor releases like *Superhero '44* and *Space Patrol*. But even Freeman downplayed the value of these rules in a reaffirmation and refinement of the statement he had expressed in his *Games* magazine article published the previous year: "Even in theory, a 'game' like *Dungeons & Dragons* is less a game than a game system, and in practice it's less *that* than a system for designing a game system."[9]

The earliest adopters of role-playing games by this point had a great deal of experience with systems for designing a game system. Bill Seligman

postulated in the spring of 1981, "The long-time contributors to the APAs have learned the metarules of FRP systems. That is, it is no longer a problem to come up with, say, a combat system: any GM worth his or her salt can design a combat or magic system in about 30 minutes" (*AE* 71). This led Seligman to ask, "What is left to an FRP campaign once the rules and metarules are tossed aside?" All that he saw remaining were fundamental questions about play, such as "How should a GM interact creatively with the players in the campaign?" Seligman's answer inevitably depended on Blacow's forms: "In a storytelling campaign, the players must be free to make their own story. Even in a power-oriented campaign, the players must have room to fail. In a wargaming campaign, one side or the other most lose eventually. In a role-playing game, the players must be given the full freedom of their roles." But Seligman saw those forms as something outside the scope of the rules or even the metarules of a game.

For his part, Freeman concluded that in practice, when people sit down around the table, "the success of a role-playing game is least dependent on the particular set of rules that it's based on." He knew well that "it is commonplace for a dungeon master to borrow bits and pieces from this novel, that supplement, the other game, and his own imagination." Therefore, what mattered most for Freeman "is the dungeon master, on whose personality, imagination, and judgment everything depends. A good DM can use the poorest set of rules to create a delightful adventure, while in the hands of an inept referee the best game will be doomed to mediocrity." Whatever the dungeon master does with the rules, "much of any RPG system is invisible to the players."[10]

Surveying the earliest role-playing games made Freeman acutely aware of a shared deficiency in their rulebooks: he observed, "With few exceptions, a role-playing game cannot be opened up, learned, and played in the normal way" that traditional board games can.[11] This may serve as a gentle reminder of what the rules of a game are supposed to be: not just a bundle of charts consulted during play, but instructions clear and complete enough that newcomers should be able to read them and begin playing. A normal board game talks about taking turns, what phases occur in which turns, and so on, but none of that seems remotely applicable to a role-playing game.

In 1977, game systems started to appear that marketed themselves specifically as "basic" or "beginner" role-playing games intended to get players off on the right foot. Back when *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was under development, TSR had in parallel reworked the original game into the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set*, edited by Eric Holmes. It reduced complexity largely by paring down the extensive taxonomies of the system to only those spells, monsters, magic items, and so on relevant to the first few levels of advancement. Many games attempted to capture the market for a simple, introductory role-playing game that would teach the uninitiated how to play. David Hargrave tried to compete with the *Basic Set* by reducing the zany charts of his *Arduin Grimoire* and its many sequels into the friendly boxed set *Arduin Adventures* (1980), marketed explicitly as "An Introduction to Fantasy Role-Playing/Adventure Gaming." Even a very minor title such as *Simian Conquest* (1978) could aspire to that beginner's niche, describing itself at the start of its 28 pages as "an introductory game to fantasy role-playing" that "has been designed to be learned in one evening."[12] Not to be outdone, both *Uuhraah!* and *Buccaneer* would detail their rudimentary systems in less than 20 digest-size pages. In his overview of the *Basic Set* in *Complete Book of Wargames*, Freeman praised the publisher for allowing the book to be edited "by someone outside the TSR establishment who knew a noun from a verb." But he also stressed that if you hope to learn how to role play, "it's still preferable to participate in an ongoing campaign" rather than trying to wring that information out of a product.[13]

Freeman likely wrote those words before the Holmes *Basic Set* included a sample module, Mike Carr's *In Search of the Unknown* (1979), which explicitly aimed to teach new referees how to run an adventure. Unlike previous *D&D* products, *In Search of* explains first principles—for example, that the game operates in a dialogue—and instructs new referees on how to deal with their players: "You describe the situation, then await their decision as to a course of action." It emphasizes the need for referees to allow the players to drive the course of the game: "It is crucial to keep in mind that this is a game based on player interaction and player choice. The game generally follows the course of the player's actions—if not always their plans!" Or, similarly, "a good DM . . . does not attempt to influence player actions or channel the activity in a particular direction,"[14] albeit that last point is curious advice to give in a module. But the return to first

principles let *D&D* speak a language that would be familiar to its staunchest critics—such as Seligman, who insisted that the referee "interact creatively" with the players.

To new players, *In Search of the Unknown* offers equally fundamental advice about how to approach a role. "The fun of a D&D game comes in playing your character's role. Take on your character's persona and immerse yourself in the game setting, enjoying the fantasy element and the interaction with your fellow players and the Dungeon Master."[15] Although Roos had used the term *immersion* as early as 1977, it would become almost boilerplate in TSR product literature at the end of the decade. Similar text appears in the revision of *Boot Hill* in 1979: "Players should strive to take on the role of their game character and fully immerse themselves in the very enjoyable fantasy aspect of the game. If they do so, they will enjoy it even more."[16] We could say these sentiments transformed *Boot Hill* from a wargame into a role-playing game—but if we did, then perhaps the *Western Gunfight* system should rightfully displace *D&D* as the first commercial product in the genre.

In perhaps the most successful attempt to challenge the *Basic Set*, the Chaosium distilled the core rules of *Runequest* into a sixteen-page introductory booklet called *Basic Role-Playing* (1980), which it would first ship with the second edition boxed set of the game, and then with many subsequent titles, to provide modular system expansions to *Basic Role-Playing* for new settings. *Basic Role-Playing* defers on any questions of setting and strips the system down to its bare essentials: a set of ability characteristics, a diced action-resolution mechanism, scales for movement rates, a progression mechanic, and a combat system. The system could be minimized so because "the actual game rules are important only when there is some question of success or failure, for the rules are the agreed-upon 'reality' which makes the game world understandable." Occasions to succeed or fail arise during play as "the players tell the referee what they wish or intend to do. The referee then tells them if they can or may do it, and if not, what happens instead." The rules only intervene "whenever there is a conflict between what the player-characters wish to do and what the game-world seems to let them do." The system makes allowances for "activities which are always successful under normal circumstances," where a statement of intention turns into an automatic success, as distinct from "ordinary actions performed under stress," which require a die roll, and

from cases where a character "is pitting some characteristic of his against something else," which require a contested roll.[17] The resulting system is spare but feels complete, offering what Jim Thomas might have deemed a "starting point," though very pointedly attempting nothing more. But even equipped as it was with a sample solo adventure, could *Basic Role-Playing* really teach someone to do what the community then called *role playing*?

When Randy would "quote chapter, verse and page number" from *AD&D* to Owen Laurior, was he deviating from Carr's guidance to "take on your character's persona and immerse yourself in the game setting"? Was he missing the point, that "the fun of a D&D game comes in playing your character's role"? If, as Miller believed, the first exposure to a "game system will influence a player" and shape how he or she approaches games in the future, then Laurior would be right to worry over Ralph and his indoctrination through *AD&D*. This recalls familiar discussions from the dawn of the hobby about player participation in the execution of the system. Directing players to "immerse themselves" into characters may imply that fluency with rules is almost an impediment to play. This philosophy positions role playing on a continuum much like the *x* axis of Johnson's graph of the Blacow model: as an extreme of "pure fantasy" opposed to the extreme of "simulation." In this understanding of role playing, the more you immerse yourself in a character, the more divorced you become from participating in the execution of the system.

Invisible Systems

Maybe a rulebook would never be the answer to teaching people how to role play. Ed Greenwood—not yet famous for creating the Forgotten Realms—took up the question of how best to introduce people to *D&D* in an article for *The Dragon* 49 in 1981. Greenwood concluded that learning the rules is indeed an impediment to the process and that it is largely an avoidable one: "Players Don't Need to Know All the Rules" is the very title of his article.

Sandy Eisen had learned *D&D* back in 1975 without reference to any system; his choices were instead "dictated by real-life considerations" in the game situation. Greenwood now recommended the same, but he had a name for Eisen's method: "How can one play a game without knowing the rules?

The answer, as D&D players know, is role play." Greenwood represented "role play" as something one can engage in instead of knowing the rules—and perhaps as a superior alternative. "As a player, state what you (the character) are trying to do, and the referee (who knows the rules) will tell you what is actually happening." The best way to introduce people to the game, he argues, is to keep them in character, so that "players know only that information which is possessed by their character as a result of upbringing, observation of surroundings, and adventuring." Greenwood even proposed that the referee not share with players quantified statistics such as abilities or hit points, thus echoing the conclusions Peter Cerrato came to in 1977. Maybe all that players really need to know about their hit points in order to role play is something like "you bleed easily."

As advice for beginners, Greenwood's guidance is a logical extension of the principles recommended by Kanterman and Elsden in "Introduction to Yourself" in 1977, an effort intended to convince wargamers to open themselves up to a new experience: "Ideally, the player should attempt to get inside his character, understand his motivations, and then react in various situations as he imagines his character would." But like Peter Tamyln before him, Greenwood appreciated that this stance was ultimately rooted in wargames. He had seen a revision of the 1972 *Strategy & Tactics* article on the history of wargames packaged into the book *Wargame Design* (1977), which led him to quote how in *Kriegsspiel* the "players were separated and given only the information they could legitimately possess." Greenwood even explicitly cited the work of Verdy du Vernois and the latitude the umpire possesses in the execution of "free" *Kriegsspiel*. He also knew of the dispute that arose in the nineteenth century over the power of the umpire, the "criticism of arbitrariness" that intensified as players had less insight into the system and how the referee resolved events. The parallel to the disputes of his day would not be lost on him: as Greenwood puts it, "'Free' *Kriegspiel* sounds something like the *D&D* game, and the 'semi-free' *Kriegspiel* sounds somewhat similar to the *AD&D* game." We might then ungenerously cast Gygax's move to close the system of *D&D* with the *Advanced* game as a retread of a century-old shift in wargaming playstyle. The legacy of wargaming cast a shadow that role playing had difficulty escaping.

Greenwood planned to use this total-immersion system only to indoctrinate new players—he hoped to introduce them gradually to the

AD&D system as many rules would become self-evident in the course of play. After all, someone did need to know the rules, and new players might someday graduate to refereeing for themselves. But he saw a practical limit in how much knowledge of the systems players should have. "The problem of players who know too much ruins the fun of play like nothing else can," especially those "who can quote chapter and verse from the *Monster Manual* (or worse, the *Dungeon Masters Guide*)." This not only gives studious players an advantage over their compatriots but also lets them, as Eisen—and Howard Mahler—knew well, "yawn their way through encounters that should be mysterious, and therefore both dangerous and exciting." Playing in an immersive style requires a "thoughtful, prepared, infallible, impassionately fair DM—as of course, all Dungeon Masters are," Greenwood knew. Only with such a referee can players be confident that what is happening behind the scenes is not simply arbitrary, free-form resolution at the whim of the referee.

But then again—what was so bad about referee whims? Robert Plamondon would capture as a principle in 1981 the maxim: "In the final analysis, all rules are arbitrary, and therefore suspect."[18] His fundamental intuition was that "arbitrary decisions can be more accurate than tables." After 1980, players increasingly positioned "free-form" gaming as a challenge to the closed and complex systems associated with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and "munchkin" culture. Blacow had linked "free-form" to his story-telling form, for cases where "the GM and players cooperate in writing the script," but in service of that goal most advocates for free form focused primarily on eliminating as much of the system as possible. Complexity reduction was one of the rationales expressed for the initial development of *Tunnels & Trolls*, but the trend came into its own in the wake of *Chivalry & Sorcery* and its exhaustive depth of simulation, which was soon exceeded by the sprawling *AD&D* system, necessarily triggering a backlash.

The runaway success of *D&D* lured countless competing commercial designs into the marketplace at the height of the fad in the early 1980s, but even the more considered efforts to invent a "new form of FRP" came up against fundamental limits exposed in the 1970s. Everyone knew the "metarules" and could devise more system, but it was unclear what value inventing new system would add—so increasingly players looked instead for things to take away. The more emphasis games placed on explaining the

nature of role playing and storytelling, the less immediate the need for system innovation became: a new idea to replace a core mechanism might fail to get a fair hearing, as Hargrave and others had lamented, but a ruleset that simply abolished such a system element without replacing it had a different appeal entirely. For a game to dispense with some element of play required virtually nothing to be published—who needs 16 whole pages of rules? *Traveller* had provided a free-form system as early as 1978 and expended only two sentences articulating it. Costikyan's tongue-in-cheek "Lord of the Dice" demonstrated a virtually free-form approach in 1979 at the cost of half a magazine page.

In the early 1980s, numerous players adopted various degrees of "free-form" games, sometimes explicitly citing "Lord of the Dice" as an inspiration. These sentiments came not just from players but also from designers: Dave Nalle ultimately had to confess that "there is no system (including YRS)," his own *Ysgarth* (1979) rule system, "with which I cannot find fault. My real aim is systemless role-playing" (*AE* 80). A truly systemless game would take free-form experiments to their logical extreme. However, it was not always clear what exactly "free-form" entailed being free from.

"Lord of the Dice" parodies the way a referee must make an arbitrary judgment when interpreting systems and die rolls, but, as its name suggests, its implementation still does require dice. Verdy du Vernois famously dispensed with dice back in the 1870s, replacing them with the referee's judgment. In *A&E* 75, Jim Vaughn announced that he had restricted the use of dice solely to combat resolution in his game because "almost everything else a player must do depends on his knowledge and powers. I only wish I could find a way to cut die rolls out completely." To this, Dan Nolte replied in the following issue that "eliminating die rolls entirely is possible." He attested that he had "given some thought" to ways that even "diceless combat" might be achieved. Despite the impartiality that dice provide, excessive dicing had long been branded an enemy of role playing: John Strang in *A&E* 32 had criticized a design as "not role-playing or even roll-playing," and many others exploited the same fortunate homonym, as Lee Gold would proclaim in *A&E* 45, "The GM's true role is to guard the suspense/excitement/terror/emotional flow of the game and keep it role-playing rather than roll-playing."

Quentin Long complained in *A&E* 76 that "FRP games may be regarded as glorified combat systems," even suggesting that *Runequest* in particular "isn't much more than a wargame on the man-to-man level." He challenged the readership, "Can't someone put together a game that doesn't place so much emphasis on fighting? If anyone does, that game will truly be different and new (in contrast to all the endless rulebooks which claim to be original, novel, new, etc. but are in fact not)." Dave Nalle would assert in *Abyss* 21 that "the next step in role-playing, now that we are crossing the frontier of real character role-playing, is to move on to role-playing in the social rather than the martial context." He cited "the vast range of non-violent adventure possibilities," among which he listed "mercantile maneuvering," "exploration and discovery," "politics and religious hierarchy," "espionage and thieves," albeit one might observe that those areas have historically not been devoid of violence. But Nalle's core message was that "force has traditionally been over-used" in *D&D* and games like it. Violence "has a proper place in the role-playing world, just as it does in the real world." But, again, referees had already explored nonviolent adventures around their tabletops. A good example is Mike Kelly's report in *A&E* 58 on how he has "for the last two years tried to run a basically peaceful game: not a game without confrontations or violence, but one wherein characters survive by their wits as often their weapons." And he observed that he was not alone, citing recent reports from Sapienza as well as from Lee Gold's husband, Barry, on campaigns that "rely very little upon violence."

British players in 1982 tested the degree to which system could be eliminated, presuming a willing and able referee. Steve Gilham, then a student at Cambridge, lighted on the principle that "the game system inevitably influences play in the way that it defines the possible," a phrasing very reminiscent of Simbalist's philosophy, and from that he drew the conclusion that minimizing system expands the possibilities in play accordingly (*AE* 83). To determine how a minimalist system could affect gameplay, "there are probably some worthwhile experiments to make," Gilham wrote, "and in FRP there isn't going to be repeatability sufficient to let some other group do the work and accept the results." The proof might be only in the play, but that would seem to entail that only the practitioners around a given table could benefit from the proof.

Nonetheless, Gilham and his local group contrived to conduct a number of experiments, which he recounted for the readership of *A&E*. In issue 85, he talked about an experimental superhero game that was "totally free form" and involved the "GM relying on written character descriptions, and whether he likes what we roll on a D20." As an influence, Gilham had to call out an unsurprising source: "There is in fact a lot to be said for the 'Lord of the Dice' system—the semi satirical 'free game this issue' in DW 2." Costikyan's system pioneered the discretion implied by the judgment "whether he likes what we roll on a D20." Gilham also shrewdly observed that superhero stories follow a narrow story arc and that "the established conventions of the genre (the good guys win, no-one dies) help in preventing GM abuse."

Just as Simbalist had deemed an implementation where the referee steers the story is "best suited to ongoing campaigns in which friends gather week after week to enjoy themselves," so Gilham noted that "the problem that exists with free-form gaming is one of trust. Without the cushioning effect of rules or conventions of niceness, it leaves great opportunity for personality clashes, in which what decides the outcome is not the gamelevel situation, but the various strengths of personality involved on a play level. Given a fair and trusted GM (or possibly preferably a team of two to even out any subconscious bias), this sort of gaming actually takes us full circle to the Free Kriegspiel that started off modern gaming."

Or, as the case may be, to a "semifree" *Kriegsspiel*. Ultimately, rather than going entirely systemless, Gilham still retained a modicum of fixed rules: "I have found that a semi-free style, with a simple set of rules for life-and-death matters (whenever people are foolish enough to start a fight) handles a lot of things a lot faster than actual games with rules for every eventuality, even if these are general rules like RQ." Having events depend on nothing but referee discretion creates an imbalance of storytelling that makes players feel powerless or, just as bad, all-powerful. Terms such as *script immunity* had entered the vernacular by 1981—for example, when Miller reported to *A&E* 72, "I am a GM that story-tells no doubt, but I find my players reacting in certain situations as if they realize they have script immunity." Lee Gold would push back in the next issue, "I don't believe in script immunity for PCs myself. (NPCs? Well, maybe.)" But the problem, which was as old as *Kriegsspiel* itself, was not so much the referee exercising "script immunity," but the players realizing it, or even suspecting

it. This doubt could creep in wherever referees worked their function, regardless of how much latitude the referee actually exercised, and assuaging it was more a matter of maintaining a convincing facade than specifying a detailed and rigid system.

Did even the people who knew *AD&D* chapter and verse really play it with scrupulous and exacting fidelity? The *Dungeon Masters Guide* tucked a few escape valves away in its fine print: the section called "Rolling the Dice and Control of the Game" offers referees considerable latitude. It restates Gygax's earlier guidance on dice, permitting referees to overrule a "freakish roll" when its consequences fall on a worthy player: "You can rule that the player, instead of dying, is knocked unconscious, loses a limb, is blinded in one eye," or suffers some other complication commensurate with the severity of the game situation. It moreover engages the familiar question of whether players should roll dice or even observe die rolls, asserting first that "it is correct and fun to have the players dice such things as melee hits or saving throws." But then it gives referees the authority to seize the dice and make such rolls in secret when it serves their purposes, such as preventing players "from knowing some specific fact" or in order "to give them an edge in finding a particular clue, e.g., a secret door." Effectively, this passage gives the referee the authority to ignore the system in favor of steering the story by fiat: "You do have every right to overrule the dice at any time if there is a particular course of events that you would like to have occur." Finally, the text acknowledges that game situations may arise that the printed rules give no way to resolve, which the referee should handle by "assigning a reasonable probability to an event" and then dicing for it: "you can weigh the dice in any way so as to give the advantage" to a positive outcome, "whichever seems more correct and logical."[19] We would be hard pressed to distinguish between this resolution method and Costikyan's "Lord of the Dice," which saw print a few months before the *Dungeon Masters Guide*.

So what were die rolls for, in Gygax's mind? One should not put too much stock in an anecdote, but an eyewitness's report of Gygax's well-attended seminar at the Games Fair convention in Reading, England, in 1983 included a telling aside. "Mind you—he horrified a few of the purists with one remark. Referring to the art of DM-ing, he told those assembled that a good referee only rolls the dice for the sound they make. He just *decides* what happens. You could have heard a pin drop."[20] At the table,

perhaps even Gygax strayed closer to free form than to the purported rigidity of his *Advanced* game, in a striking reversal of his call in 1976 to "let the dice tell the story." We might say that Gygax, like the wargame referee Livermore late in the nineteenth century, "was reported to disregard his own tables and charts as often as he consulted them." After nearly a decade had passed since the release of *D&D*, the propensity of players to go "full circle to the Free Kriegspiel that started off modern gaming" can make it seem as if the shift from wargames to role playing was, after all, illusive.

The Elusive Shift

So, did Scott Rosenberg's prophecy come true? Did a rift emerge in the community between the multitudes of players "who will comfortably play TSR's game" in its closed *Advanced* form and the small band of "truefen" committed to innovation and openness? In a sense, yes—but the philosophical distance between the camps might not have been as vast as it appeared.

From the pages of *The Dragon* magazine, Gygax certainly spoiled for a rift, promoting the closure of the *Advanced* game most forcefully in the essay "Poker, Chess, and the AD&D System: The Official Word on What's Official" for issue 67. Whereas in the original *D&D* "it is possible for material from outside that offered by TSR to be included in the game," so that "such a game becomes 'house rules' poker, so to speak," the *Advanced* system permits no such latitude or discretion, Gygax insisted. "The AD&D game system does not allow the injection of extraneous material." But the antibodies Gygax cultivated in the *Advanced* system repelled only unsanctioned commercial products rather than curtailing the open-endedness of play. Improvising a rule on the spot to cover some unforeseen situation meant playing with extraneous system, and in a game driven by creative players the unforeseen could be the norm. It is easier to claim that a role-playing system is closed than it is to close a system.

Gygax's words furthermore went out to a greater multitude than Rosenberg could have imagined in 1977: circulation of *The Dragon* hit 50,000 in 1981, on its way to 100,000 in 1983. Moreover, the consumers who bought these copies of *The Dragon* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* grew ever younger over this period—and this was not just a matter

of perception among the aging earliest adopters, either. Almost two-thirds of the copies of *D&D* purchased in 1980 went to buyers 17 and younger; the median age of a *Dragon* subscriber then was 16.[21] Once *D&D* became a runaway commercial success, its market demographics, which were widely studied and publicized, trended sharply to the younger. By 1981, 60 percent of all TSR products would be purchased by or for players between the ages of 10 and 14—on the younger side of the "munchkin" margin.[22]

Dave Nalle's was one voice that heralded Rosenberg's rift. For Nalle, the popularization of *D&D* marked the end of an era, a shift from the reign of a small and sophisticated role-playing community to an era when those creative voices would be lost in a cacophony of dumbed-down obedience. In *Abyss* 13, he nostalgically pined, "There was a time when FRPing was a sort of elite movement, when only the brightest, most imaginative kids and adults took to it." Now, in the grips of the *D&D* fad of the early 1980s, "fewer and fewer of them are going beyond the limits of AD&D. The result of this is the creation of a mass of D&D players who are less imaginative, less open-minded, and less mature in their playing style." The honeymoon of role-playing games had ended, Nalle believed.

But not every hardcore fan saw role playing as an elite movement pushed to the fringes by TSR's tyranny. In *A&E* 60, Dan Nolte condemned the "elitist view that we are too good for the mass population of 'fugg heads.'" He observed that "every hobby of any complexity has marginal members, semi members, full members who just follow the flock, and a creative vanguard. Don't be surprised that the last group is a small and sometimes lonely one. It always is and always has been." There needed come no *AD&D* to create such divisions. Those experimenting with their own systems—or lack thereof—in the early 1980s may well have been in an avant garde, "but to say that we should limit the hobby to just the elite simply because they do not experience it to the same extent that we do is selfish, foolish and dangerous to the future of FRP." This no doubt informed Nolte when he later argued that the pluralism of the Blacow model gave the community an opportunity to reject elitism, to "avoid the stereotyping and self-righteousness (One True Wayism) that seems to plague nearly all categorizations" (*AE* 64).

As with any insular, underground phenomenon—and you can hardly get more underground than dungeoneering—that is catapulted to mainstream

popularity, role playing lost something of its chic in the eyes of many original fans by 1981. Early adopters viewed latecomers as conformists riding a trend they could not fully understand or appreciate. But role playing proved resilient to the genericizing forces of big business, because it was not like a traditional media property that broadcasted to its consumers—it was instead a platform for people's creativity. Because role-playing games are such a plastic thing—because so much depends on the attitudes and preferences of the players sitting around a tabletop—adherence to printed rules always varied from group to group, and the creative vanguard could not restrict its membership to players who had gotten in on the ground floor in 1975.

Insofar as there was a rift, it started with the mass influx of new and youthful players untutored by the standing traditions of the two cultures. Most had never seen the original *D&D* game as published between 1974 and 1976, nor had they ever laid eyes on a gaming fanzine—they cut their teeth on the putatively closed system of *AD&D*. If, as Miller's "Theory on FRP" held, "novices will tend to be oriented in their style of gaming" by the first system they play, this had serious implications for the entire hobby. Newcomers were perceived as a threat that motivated longtime practitioners to mount a fierce defense of their "mature" open playing style, of which the free-form abolitionist movement was only one predictable manifestation. As a necessary consequence of the views of Nalle, Simbalist, and others who evangelized on behalf of their "second-generation" role-playing games, *D&D* itself became synonymous in their circles with the negative qualities that the role-playing community associated with obnoxious youngsters and pedantic wargamers alike.

It was thus not some innovation that heralded a new generation of games but instead a new generation of gamers that created the appearance of a shift in role-playing games at the end of the 1970s. Their emergence cemented an avant garde committed to openness and innovation—though the boundary between that group and the masses would always be porous. The *D&D* fad brought many thoughtful players into the hobby after 1980 who, hidden among the ranks of the dreaded "munchkins," soon connected with the community in *A&E* but simply lacked access to the fanzines and games that had captured the theory and practice of the 1970s. For example, in *A&E* 76 in 1981, Mike Dawson observed "the large switch in topics that A&E has gone through in the last 10 issues," wherein "A&E has shifted its

focus from RPG mechanics discussion to the concept of RPGs as an art form."[23] But surely no such shift had transpired; *A&E* had engaged fundamental questions about the nature of role-playing games nearly since its inception, and some simply joined the discussion late enough to misconstrue the situation.

A newcomer might even suppose that less-closed games had emerged only recently as a reaction to the supposedly ossified seminal rules of conflict simulation. The irony is, of course, that open-endedness was the cornerstone of original *D&D* play, and that property, as Rosenberg attested, granted the community the latitude needed to thoroughly explore the design space of role-playing games between 1975 and 1980. Optimizing for the qualities in the Blacow "St/Rp" quadrant had always been a matter of practice rather than adherence to "official" designs over this period. In *A&E* 73, John Prenis wrote, "We call this hobby Fantasy Role Playing, but role playing as we have come to know it was never planned for." In his view, role playing was not built in to the original rulebooks; it was instead something that "just happened, as people with imagination began to dig deeper into the worlds that they had created."

Though Prenis was no eyewitness to the authoring of *D&D*, he did have a point. Back in 1975, Gygax himself spoke dismissively about role playing as a factor in the success of the game and only came around to adopting the label after the community had thrust it upon the game. Arneson saw role-playing elements in many wargames played in the Twin Cities prior to *D&D* and even in games such as charades. But a survey of the historical use of *role playing* among early adopters provides good reason to think that role playing as the likes of Prenis understood it was a possibility that emerged in play in some places and not others, and it was largely the fan community who isolated it as a concrete phenomenon through a painstaking critical discourse that unfolded in fanzines. It may not have looked that way in retrospect, though.

For his landmark study *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), Gary Alan Fine observed the fan community of the late 1970s with a sociologist's eye and focused especially on the way players transitioned from their normal selves into characters. Insofar as Fine addressed the invention of role-playing games, he wisely represented it as a Kuhnian paradigm shift, a gradual change in attitudes and consensus rather

than any singular event. But he effectively differentiated wargames from role-playing games with three factors: wargames are primarily historical tools for "replaying battles" of the past; wargames have "structured rules," and thus player agency is "deliberately limited"; and wargames lack personal involvement, so that "one does not act as oneself in the game." Although Fine hesitated to propose an exact date for when these properties accumulated, he seemed certain that "by the time of the publication of *D&D*, fantasy role-play games were being played."[24]

No doubt all of the qualities Fine identified could be found in games by the time *D&D* came out: people had been gaming as characters since the dawn of hobby wargaming; games without structured rules harkened back to the "free" *Kriegsspiel* debates of the prior century; and any number of earlier games in the two cultures relied on fantasy and science-fiction rather than on historical settings. But are any of these features really necessary, let alone sufficient, conditions for marking the shift to role-playing games? Could one not build a *Tradition of Victory* game on replaying some historical battle? Do the deliberate limitations on player agency in *Flash Gordon* render it not a role-playing game? And what it means to "act as oneself" was a subject of ongoing controversy, where at least some understood it no differently from how one played *Kriegsspiel* or even *Monopoly*. Lortz, by way of contrast, differentiated wargames from role-playing games by pointing to the need to organize "a continuing flow of dramatically significant action" that resolves "motivating questions"—talk we would be hard pressed to find in earlier wargaming literature.

The preexistence in earlier wargames of properties such as the open-endedness of systems or acting "in character" does not entail that role playing as people came to understand it was planned for in *D&D*. The attachment of *role playing* to *D&D* was largely a historical accident; if some other term, such as *adventure gaming*, had instead dominated critical and commercial consensus, we can imagine similar difficulties around defining *adventure* to everyone's satisfaction—maybe a very different set of properties would have been highlighted. But once the bulk of the community had settled on the term *role playing*, it became a prophecy that theory and practice then had to fulfill.

The validity of Fine's assertion that "fantasy role-play games were being played" leading up to the publication of *D&D* thus has to hinge, somewhat

paradoxically, on how *role playing* was understood in the community discourse following the release of the game. When we review the way early adopters talked about role playing in connection with abilities, or alignment, or progression, or stories, there emerges a very different set of properties that offset these practices from earlier wargames: the questions about players conforming to the quantified attributes of characters, the debates between Eisen's vow to isolate players from the rules in order to trigger *immersion* versus giving them a sense of control over their own fates, or the wrangling over the degree to which the referee or the players steer the "dramatically significant action." In many respects, these unresolved questions drew the boundary around role-playing games, and it is not at all clear that these questions preceded the publication of *D&D*.

The original *D&D* was, as Freeman put it, a "design-a-game kit," and some of the games that people designed with that kit were the first things we call *role-playing games*. Those people usually identified the game they were playing as *D&D*, and it would be counterintuitive to differ with them. But Simbalist would furiously interject that it was the referees and players who actually designed the systems they were playing, at least the ones that enabled role playing—*D&D* was just the canvas on which the referee painted. Designing the system was a sort of metagame that *D&D* invited referees to join from the moment it identified itself as "the framework around which you will build a game of simplicity or tremendous complexity." The "umpty-eleven" referees and groups that exercised the kit used it to make games that suited their preferences, along the lines of the Blacow forms, and role playing became the most celebrated of those practices. Role-playing games forged their identity in the wake of the release of *D&D* in the practices and interactions of its earliest adopters. The authors of *D&D* were of course parties to that process as it evolved, and in hindsight they could represent it as their plan all along, but the reality is less cut and dry—*D&D* was a tool that could have been, and clearly was, used to run wargames, and those like Pulsipher who used the framework of *D&D* to build games of that form claimed Gygax's blessing.

Looking back at the original *D&D* rulebooks, with all their "errors, inconsistencies, and general lack of coherence," it is easy to project onto them any of the forms Blacow delineated. One may surmise that the game originally belonged solely to the "Wg/Pg" crowd and that only later, perhaps around or after 1980, did mature thinkers intervene and repurpose

the underlying principles of the game to suit their own "St/Rp" preferences —maybe even warranting the status of an art form. But the two cultures predated *D&D*, manifesting across a wide variety of activities in wargaming and science-fiction fandom, and although any given group of early adopters might belong more to one of those cultures than to the other, both philosophies coexisted in *D&D* play as far back as the historical records go. Attempts to recapture some single originalist philosophy of role-playing games more indebted to one of the two cultures than the other will therefore always be representative of only half the story of how these games were played by the first adopters.

This points to the fundamental explanatory power of the Blacow model: it shows us role playing as a possibility, one that exists in a tension with other ways that a game system can be used. In these earliest critical discussions, designing a true role-playing game was spoken of aspirationally: only people selling a "next-generation" system represented it as something solved for, usually only to meet counterarguments. The epic quest for a "new form of FRP" worthy of the name became the motivation for the existence of role-playing games as a genre, in a tradition sparked by *D&D*.

It is indeed difficult to mark any specific moment when the activities of the two cultures shifted into the thing we now call *role playing*—or even which products deserved to claim that label. Back in 1973, Mike Blake, one of the authors of the *Western Gunfight* rules, had sent an essay to the *Wargamer's Newsletter* called "Yes, but Is It Really Wargaming?," which set a marker for when the wargaming community became self-conscious that it had drifted into practices outside its original scope. In a 1982 essay called "But . . . Is It Role-Playing?" Eric Goldberg—lead designer on *Commando* and *Dragonquest*—asked in *Nexus* 1 whether products then in circulation truly "fulfill the meaning of the phrase 'role playing.'" He conducted his own review of *D&D*, *Chivalry & Sorcery*, *Runequest*, the *Fantasy Trip*, and *Adventures in Fantasy* as well as of science-fiction titles such as *Traveller*, *Space Opera* (1980), and *Universe* (1981). His conclusion was pessimistic: "These games come with instructions for doing everything but role playing, which is largely left to the players' improvisational talents."[25]

Goldberg hinted that he saw an imminent "third generation" of role-playing games that would demarcate itself "by an emphasis on the encouragement of role-playing." He cited as evidence elements such as "character records which require a player to indicate where his character lies between extremes of behavior (e.g., loyal–treacherous)," which he observed to "have sprung up in many places." Such systems could indeed be found in recent designs such as *In the Labyrinth* (1980), but cues for role playing based on quantified alignment properties like loyalty go back further to the *Arduin Grimoire* of 1977; to the Judges Guild sheets that same year, with 20 positions between "ordered/anarchist" and "pure/corrupt"; to Grant Louis-d'Or's personality traits in 1976; and to Blacow's proposed subalignment categories in 1976. As an example of a recent system that provided adequate third-generation cues for role-playing, Goldberg cited Bachmann's system in *The Dragon* 40—which had in turn repackaged the innovations of *Legacy* and other systems of the 1970s, albeit with greater clarity and, despite its brevity, arguably greater completeness. As with earlier design criteria batted around for a "second generation," the defining features of Goldberg's third generation seem less like markers of some recent shift and more like ideas that had been articulated practically from the moment *role playing* became linked to *D&D*. They lived in the state of play at some tabletops but not at others, regardless of which product the people sitting around the table would claim they were playing.[26]

Dungeons & Dragons offered us two systems in one, a game for players and another for referees. The first was a loosely defined game of dungeon conquest, one that Simbalist might have been justified in dismissing as a shallow trifle that led players inexorably to gilded holes and ego-tripping. Early adopters quickly escaped its sandbox and found goals more interesting than becoming a superperson. The second game system, what Freeman called "a system for designing a game system," was the game for referees, and once *role playing* was linked to *D&D*, fostering role playing became the goal of that game. In a sense, every referee who leveraged that system to design his or her own game for play around the table—and every member of the creative vanguard bold enough to put rules in print—played in the metagame that Gygax and Arneson had invited them to.

And no one would desist when Gygax belatedly rescinded the invitation. The monumental popularity of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* system at the start of the 1980s stimulated the creative vanguard of the hobby into a

defiant commitment to pluralism. The Blacow model, which charted fundamental tensions in playstyle, reified the community's design space. Whether we call it a rift, a shift, or just drift, this point marked a period of maturity for role-playing games, a moment when they had succeeded in forging an identity for themselves. People knew the unresolved questions—the most pressing being whether players' participation in the system helped or hindered role playing—and proposed no shortage of theoretical and practical ideas to address them, but there was no ready path to resolving the tensions, to that "new form of FRP" finally worthy of the name. Instead, in much the same way role playing lives in the state of play, role-playing games as a genre exist in the play of the metagame that *Dungeons & Dragons* started.

Epilogue

After the point of maturity reached in the early 1980s, role-playing game design and play were not frozen or stultified—quite the opposite, they bubbled in the same tumultuous melting pot as ever. But what followed were efforts that largely tipped the scales of the Blacow model sufficiently in one direction to emphasize some properties at the expense of others. This admitted of no decisive resolution—no more than did the traditional wargaming trade-off of realism versus playability. Due to the differences in the outcomes sought by practitioners, an ideal and encompassing design seemed always out of reach: every design, no matter how tooled to the needs of one of Blacow's forms, remained inadequate for others. We might indeed say that the turbulent reaction of the forms against one another has provided the primary fuel for creativity and innovation in role-playing system development from the earliest days of the hobby to the present.

Any account of role-playing games at the beginning of the 1980s must acknowledge the impact of computer role-playing games and live-action role-playing games on the identity of the genre.[1] The territory claimed by these alternative approaches to role playing helped to delineate, and perhaps to curtail, the scope of tabletop play. As a means of introducing players to the system elements popularized by *D&D*, computers would prove the genre's best evangelist. Greenwood had complained in *The Dragon* about the difficulty of "explaining totally foreign concepts (saving throw, alignment, armor class, levels)" that simply were not common knowledge before computerized adventure games made them subjects every child learns. At the risk of overgeneralizing, we might say that the more tactical "Gilded Hole" forms translated well to the computer environment, offering a solipsistic accumulation of power that would never go over well in company—which alleviated some pressure to provide the same at the tabletop. Similarly, various live-action role-playing activities, which ranged from wilderness boffer events to campus *Assassin* games to murder-mystery parties to interactive literature experiments, provided an outlet for the more theatrical dimension of role playing.[2] Both computer and live-action role-playing games downplayed the latitude of the referee: in the former case, by

effectively replacing the referee with a computer; and in the latter, by encouraging player-to-player interactions that require only light supervision, as in Stafford's pioneering "Sartar High Council." Tabletop play found its most enduring identity in the negative space surrounding these practices, emphasizing the artisanal versatility of a dialogue shared only among a small number of practitioners. If anything, the popularity of these subgenres served to intensify theoretical disputes about realizing the ideal, pure form of a tabletop role-playing game.

A decade after Thornton had divided the wargaming community into mainstream "fun" wargamers, "simulators," and "competitors," gamers still readily sorted themselves according to such divisions. The prevailing view in *Alarums & Excursions* emphasized the role-playing and storytelling modes, but wargamers continued to push back against the idea that the avant garde of the hobby could be found only in role playing: Nick Kinzett argued that "wargaming can also be a cutting edge of FRP" and characterized his own position as "simulationist" (*AE* 72).

Many ongoing experiments focused on achieving that ultimate goal, which Bauer had articulated as "a new form of FRP" in which "the distinction between GM and player would cease to exist." By 1983, Nick Larter was trialing something he called "inverted roleplaying." He explained in *A&E* 96 that one of the ways "in which inverted roleplaying works is that I get PCs to describe things to me, and I write them down for future reference; why should the GM have to describe everything first?" Larter would delegate to certain players responsibility for developing aspects of the game world, in a manner reminiscent of the techniques Michie recommended in 1976 to stoke the players' imagination. Larter gave an example in which the characters are on their way to an unfamiliar city: "A party meets a traveller on the road, and he's from the city they're going to." Larter would then assign the role of the traveler temporarily to one of the players. "Traveler describes the city; GM scribbles furiously, and a few weeks later when the party gets to the city it is just as described." Although Larter acknowledged that "it can be terribly difficult to get PCs to adapt to this," the advantages are clear. "Eventually," Larter explained, "I hope to have things so that the GM can nip out for a pint, confident in the knowledge that things will still be going strong when he gets back. It's a situation of creating a world by committee rather than just the GM in on the action."

Much effort also went into designs granting players control over the execution of the system that could steer the story. After the release of *Top Secret* in 1980, its incorporation of Rasmussen's Fame and Fortune points captured the attention of many referees. As with all design features, it was quickly detached from *Top Secret* and reshaped into new forms. Early in 1982, Robert Kern related in *A&E* 78 that "in a campaign where I play the GM allots what he calls Hero Points. They are awarded subjectively to characters who perform exceptionally noble or heroic deeds (and survive)." Players can then expend these points to "turn a death blow into a merely crippling one, prevent being stunned in combat, make the first hit a grievous injury, or other things of that nature." In this implementation, "Hero Points" are no longer spent exclusively to undo some harm to the character but also proactively to "make the first hit a grievous one." From there, various incarnations of "Hero Points" enabled later games, mostly following the precedent of *James Bond 007* (1983), to grant players some feeling of control over their fate, albeit at the expense of that crucial property of "isolation" from system operations.[3] Systems that bestow this authority on players inevitably feature some constraints and controls: the expenditure of these points in *James Bond 007* still requires oversight by the referee to make sure their use does not imbalance the game. But they create a greater feeling of participation in players: having what Pulsipher described as a "sense of control by the players of their own fate" does not necessarily mean that players truly control their fates.

Kern also lamented how "it has always fallen on the overburdened shoulders of the GM to create an entire environment, set up the goals, get the players moving, and maintain any continuity." No small part of the energy dedicated to eliminating the distinction between player and referee went into encouraging players to develop backstories for their characters that would shape the direction of the game, perhaps a step beyond what Mosher had intended in the 1970s when he asked players to decide on a motivation for their characters. Hacking the character-creation system of *DragonQuest* (1980), Kern encouraged players to develop a background that would give "the GM the germ of an adventure that he can place anything he wants into" and at the same time would supply players with "a reason to continue playing."

Ultimately, a shift to a "next generation" of role-playing games need not reflect any epoch-making innovation: titles could distinguish themselves by

the usability of their design. When Charlie Luce stipulated that "second-generation FRP games" exhibited more "clarity and completeness of the rules," he prized those qualities above any novelty in their system—these properties made for a better "design-a-game kit." Beloved releases in 1981 such as *Champions* and *Call of Cthulhu*, which many extolled as next-generation games, excelled in both clarity and completeness—but by this point the design space had weathered enough scrutiny that their system innovations are hard to pinpoint. The first edition of *Champions* candidly acknowledges its debt to Wayne Shaw's adaptations of *Superhero '44*,[4] and the signature sanity mechanism of *Call of Cthulhu* had many direct ancestors, of which the Rahmans's "Lovecraftian Variant" of *Tunnels & Trolls* published in 1980 was only one recent example (*SA* 7). Yet *Champions* took the concept of player-designed skills promoted by Seligman, Shaw, and others and rationalized them into a framework that made designing superheroes and their powers both balanced and intuitive. Similarly, *Call of Cthulhu* benefited enormously from its reliance on the Chaosium's *Basic Role-Playing* framework, which freed up the rulebook to focus on elements particular to evoking the gothic-horror setting it explored.

Even Blacow's forms became an element that the community endlessly engaged, repackaging or reinventing them for new audiences. Greg Costikyan took a stab at explaining the Blacow model with archetypal examples of each of the forms in "Profiles from the Four-fold Way" in *Different Worlds* 37 (1984). When that same year Bob Albrecht and Greg Stafford published *Adventurer's Handbook: A Guide to Role-Playing Games* (1984), they reduced those four to "three types of games: Power Gaming, Role Playing, and Story Telling." In the Power Gaming form, "the major interest in these games is the accumulation of power and loot through successful combat." In a Story Telling game, "the emphasis here is on participating in some sort of important action which creates a challenge for the players," so the referee must "create an interesting plot and then guide the characters as they play their parts." A Role Playing game is by contrast the type that "explores and expands the roles the players have chosen for their characters," and although the referee "exercises less control than in a story telling game," it will still "test strength of character or inner will and ability to remain in the role."[5] The book gives no explicit nod to Blacow or Pulsipher, whose theories more or less fell victim to the same melting pot

that dissolved the game systems they studied: the Blacow model became molten plastic for reshaping by later thinkers.[6]

Moreover, a lack of institutional memory seemed to doom the community to reinvent many concepts in design and theory. There simply were no robust structures to preserve and transmit these ideas to future generations of gamers, even to those "munchkins" who would grow up and find their way to *A&E* in search of a deeper understanding of role-playing games. One who discovered *A&E* early in 1988 wrote in issue 149, "I was beginning to feel as if I existed in a vacuum: I've moved away from the original crowd I started playing with when I was 14 or 15," which would have been about a decade earlier, the heyday of the generational shift that accompanied *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. "Aren't there grownups who still play?" he was asking himself, and *A&E* was the answer: "It was extremely gratifying to discover that there are other people who are interested in role-playing games who are also interested in their political/moral implications, in folklore, mythology, culture."

That newcomer was Robin Laws, who landed in *A&E* to advertise a play-by-mail campaign. Three issues after his first contribution to *A&E*, there came a similar introductory notice from Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein-Hagen, writing jointly to talk up their recent release *Ars Magica*. "We're interested in *A&E* because we want to know what thoughtful gamers think about role-playing," they wrote, though their own familiarity with discourse in the magazine went back only a few issues: "We haven't been reading *A&E* for years, and we don't know what it was like" back in the day.

Tweet and Rein-Hagen differentiated *Ars Magica* from existing titles by its emphasis on stories. In *A&E* 155, they set out the game's philosophy: "When speaking with those who are uninitiated to RPGs, we call them story-telling games. In fact, in *Ars Magica* we call campaigns 'sagas' (because the term 'campaign' is a hold-over from those 'nasty' wargames), our adventures 'stories,' and our gamemasters 'storyguides' (because a gamemaster is a ruler, too hierarchical for us). The idea that we are creating stories is very important to us." They viewed participation in *A&E* as a way to ask the community about the relationship between games and narratives, to pose questions such as "How can a group make a good spontaneous story?"

The authors of *Ars Magica* dealt their players *Whimsy Cards*, which allowed players to propose a loosely defined change to the story, such as a "Horrible Failure" that might be imposed on an adversary, although the "storyguide" retained the authority to veto such tweaks. They also understood, as Kern did, the value of players setting story direction during character creation, noting in *A&E* 155 that "we've been experimenting with having the players write up small 'personal issues' that the characters they are running could confront in the story. These little notes give the gamemaster ideas for how to ad lib an encounter that will be engaging for the characters, something that will bring out their personality." Similarly, when Robin Laws dug in to the philosophical implications of role-playing games, he posed questions such as "Who is steering this boat?" in *A&E* 157, wondering whether the players or the referee should set the direction of the story in a game and arguing for greater player agency.

In response to yet another proposed typology of playing styles, Laws cast a distinction between two forms of role playing: "NarraReal and SimuReal" (*AE* 161). As he put it, "The NarraReal style seeks to simulate the feel and structure of narrative forms, and pays attention to such issues as pacing, structure, theme, suspense, and so forth," whereas "SimuReal sets up an internally-consistent system (which attempts, not to accurately simulate life, which is impossible, but to give the illusion of simulating real life, whatever that is in a dragons-and-dwarves context) and behaves according to the dictates of that system." Laws identified the SimuReal posture with the stodgy influence of Gary Gygax, whereas he himself aspired toward NarraReal. "Adventure RPing, as far as I'm concerned, is not simulation of real life, it's simulation of adventure movies, TV shows, stories, or comics. Whatever the genre, I like to ask myself, 'What would James Bond do?'"

As a consequence of the turnover among participants in *A&E* since the early 1980s, this distinction was not recognized as ground trodden by previous generations of game people and story people, though the responses fell along a predictable spectrum. Phil Masters wrote, "I incline to NarraReal games myself, but have noticed that too much attention to such things can destroy suspension of disbelief."[7] David Pulver supported but qualified NarraReal, saying, "The thing I hate most as a player is the feeling that my character is NOT significant in the referee's story, that my PC's goals do not matter" (*AE* 162). Jonathan Tweet chimed in to cast Laws's distinction as a developmental journey to maturity as a gamer: "Good

articulation of the difference between running the game as a story vs. as real life. I used to be a 'real-lifer' all the way, and I've picked up the reputation of being a fair GM whose adventures are realistic, but I've been sliding towards storytelling for the past year or so" (*AE* 163).

When in *A&E* 159 Laws proposed an informal survey of *A&E* participants about the categories of articles they favored, he personally ranked "Gaming Theory" first of twelve—as did Tweet. "As a game designer," Tweet explained, "I read *A&E* to understand role-playing better, so I prefer essays and comments that talk about role-playing in general: playing characters better, storytelling vs. gaming, solutions to role-playing problems, and so on." For Tweet, a key question was "What rules encourage the best role-playing and how?" (*AE* 163).

A dozen years after the term *role playing* became attached to *Dungeons & Dragons*, those sorts of questions were no closer to being settled. Not that we should expect a resolution to the question of which rules best encourage role playing, any more than we might expect to settle on which music best encourages dancing. It was the attachment of the label *role playing* to this set of practices that opened the question to deliberation in the first place. Laws and Tweet would go on to be distinguished designers and theorists both, and their earliest contributions to the critical discussion set the stage for familiar distinctions to hint once again at what "a new form of FRP" might be—this recurred naturally, as the tension behind these distinctions defined role-playing games as we understand them.

Notes

Introduction

1. *Dungeons & Dragons*, 1:4.

2. Robert Lipton, *Mixumaxu Gazette* 38 (1975). The variety of interpretations of the game is a major theme of Edwards, "A Hard Look at *Dungeons and Dragons*."

3. Simbalist, among others, would attest to a third generation, arguing of *D&D* that its "rules in fact discouraged role play" (*A&E* 37).

4. In "RPG Theorizing by Designers and Players," Evan Torner discusses the difficulty of separating the "para-academic" theorizing undertaken by fans from the work of "aca-fans," who consider largely the same material in academic contexts. Gary Alan Fine's book *Shared Fantasy* marks a boundary point, as his study applied existing theory—in his case Erving Goffmann's sociological frame theory—to the study of role-playing games, a precedent followed by subsequent academic literature on the subject. Not that this impeded fans after Fine from engaging with theory outside of established academic frameworks. The present work is probably best considered a para-academic study of pre-Fine fan theorizers. For a quick guide to the post-Fine theorizers, see Boss, "Theory Round-Up."

5. Mason, "In Search of the Self," 2. Although Torner presents a more nuanced view in "RPG Theorizing," for space reasons it could not include much from drafts of the present work.

6. Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, vol. 1, is the standard reference, but it treats these games more from an industry perspective rather than from a philosophical perspective exploring stances expounded by designers and players. Most of these games are cataloged in Schick, *Heroic Worlds*. Peterson, *Playing at the World* to some degree addresses this period and the first applications of the term *role playing* to its games but covers little beyond 1976.

7. For reviews of previous attempts to furnish such definitions, see, for example, Zagal and Deterding, "Definition of 'Role-Playing Games'"; Maccalum-Stewart, "Role-play"; and Mason, "In Search of the Self." Perhaps the present study furnishes something more like a usage dictionary of the term, scoped to its time period.

Chapter 1: The Two Cultures

1. See Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 25–33.

2. *Strategy & Tactics* 42 gives an estimate of 100,000 at the beginning of 1974. In *Little Wars* 1 in the summer of 1976, Gygax suggested that the number then stood at around 300,000.

3. *Avalon Hill General* 12 (4). Note as well the contemporary remarks by Jack Greene in *Europa* 6–8 (1974), who affirmed that "this group of people called wargamers seem to be middle to upper class in background, white, male, bookish of nature" and that "there appears to be a racial split. I have met more women wargamers than black wargamers." Greene briefly interviewed a pair of black wargamers about their experience in *Campaign* 71.

4. Peterson, "First Female Gamers," gives some figures on gender diversity in wargaming and science-fiction fandom.

5. Gygax apparently complained privately in 1976 about the difficulty of participating in APA-style discussions due to way they referenced prior issues in comment threads. See Rod Burr's note about this in *Wild Hunt* 5.

6. In "The Literary Edge," Robin Laws speaks to the "unheralded moment" when the first player said, "I know it's the best strategy, but my character wouldn't do that," when "an aesthetic concern had been put ahead of a gaming one," as a crucial marker in the evolution of role-playing games.

7. A review of relevant *Kriegsspiel* literature can be found, for example, in Lewin, *War Games*, and Peterson, *Playing at the World*. A digest-size history of wargaming can also be found in Peterson, "A Game out of All Proportions."

8. *Anleitung*, trans. Leeson, 6.

9. See Verdy du Vernois's *Beitrag zum Kriegsspiel*.

10. See *Strategos*, 105f. See also *Strategos N*: "Anything which is physically possible may be attempted—not always successfully" (1).

11. *Modern War in Miniature*, 6.

12. *Modern War in Miniature*, 10.

13. *Modern War in Miniature*, 6.

14. *Modern War in Miniature*, 18–19.

15. Martin Campion and Steven Patrick, "The History of Wargaming," *S&T* 33. The account of nineteenth-century wargaming in this piece is informed by Farrand Sayre's *Map Maneuvers*. Note as well that Verdy du Vernois and "free" *Kriegsspiel* received a still earlier notice in *Strategy & Tactics* 22 in 1970, which described his game as similar to traditional wargames, "except that more attention was paid to the discussion that went on during the game (about the game) than the game itself."

16. *Setting Up a Wargames Campaign*, 17.

17. See, for example, Dave Millward's comment in *Slingshot* 37: "Basically the rules were very informal and relied on consultation ending in interpretation by the umpire. This was necessary, for we'd decided that a set of rules could not possibly cover all the eventualities so what was needed was a flexible set of principles and players and an umpire prepared to weigh up the chances in a particular case and pronounce judgment."

18. *How to Play War Games in Miniature*, 88.

19. *D&D*, 1:4.

20. *Chainmail*, 6.

21. *D&D*, 3:36.

22. Beyond sporadic references to the existence of a "party," the baseline *D&D* rules do not imply that players have any obligation to cooperate. Gygax would soon clarify that "players should begin together and for a time at least operate as a team if possible" (*Europa* 6–8). However, Gygax is aware that "Games with larger numbers of participants will also develop inter-player rivalries which soon make the game quite interesting by themselves" (*Europa* 4/5) Even if tensions never escalate naturally between the players, Gygax suggested that "at a certain point [the Dungeonmaster] will also introduce the factor of interplayer rivalry" (*SF&F Journal* 87). Arneson seemed to have favored interplayer conflict in that he wrote, "The best form of encounter would be one where the players themselves provided the opposition" (Dave Arneson to Tony Bath, October 15, 1974, private collection).

23. *Courier* 4 (1). Note that Vietmeyer brought these categories back in *Courier* 6 (1), around the time that *D&D* hit the market.

24. *Table Top Talk* 5, no. 4. Note that this Greensboro article would also be reprinted in *Courier* 3 (2) in 1971.

25. *Advanced War Games*, 160, 162.

26. *Western Gunfight*, 1.

27. *Western Gunfight*, 2nd ed., 4.

28. The battle report by Gygax in *Panzerfaust* 63 on the "Owlhoot Trio" certainly shows the influence of the Bristol descriptions. The published *Boot Hill* stresses that its rules are best exercised in an ongoing campaign "where past events were reflected as closely as possible in successive games." But it interestingly downplays "rigid scenarios" in favor of "free-form play," wherein you "set up a town, give a few background details, and allow the participants free-rein thereafter" (*Boot Hill*, 1).

29. *Chainmail*, 33.

30. *War Game Digest* 1 (4) and *Slingshot* 9.

31. Science-fiction fandom had its own traditions of participatory culture, like the sort discussed in Jenkins, "*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten." In *As If*, Michael Saler covers similar phenomena, including the Baker Street Irregulars of Sherlock Holmes fandom and the collective authorship of the Lovecraft mythos by a school of writers. In "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games," Eric Zimmerman helpfully contrasts this sort of "meta-interactivity" around media properties with "explicit interactivity": as he puts it, the "difference between a linear book and a choose-your-own-adventure book" (158).

32. Similar text would soon appear in *Empire of the Petal Throne*: "The objective is an interesting adventure, with enough danger for excitement (and also to punish the unwary and the foolhardy), but not simply to massacre the players" (104).

33. See Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 391–400.

34. See Lowood, "Putting a Stamp on Games," for more on postal *Diplomacy*.

35. Jack Harness, *Empire* 21. Lee Gold discussed playing *Revenge!* in *A&E* 20, and in *APA-L* 516 she gave an overview of *Dynasty*.

36. See Costikyan's overview of "Slobbovia" in *Different Worlds* 29.

37. Science-fiction fans even took up arms in search of a new way to interact with the storied past. The Society for Creative Anachronism, the medieval recreation group founded in California in 1966—with heavy early participation by Coventry veterans—adopted a feudal structure that influenced the medieval wargaming community behind *D&D*. Members took on a medieval persona and attended events in full costume to participate in combats and revelries

suitable for their romantic reimagining of the middle ages. See Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 418–423.

38. *Midgard* 1. Note that Patterson based his ideas on the existing German board game and campaign *Armageddon* (1967), as described in Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 443–445.

39. *CULT*, August 20, 1972.

40. *Kam-Pain*, 13.

41. *Supernova SF&F Gaming Info Sheet*, supplement 1, June 1, 1974.

42. With the hindsight of 1980, Lewis Pulsipher would suspect that "it was inevitable, as games and F&SF become more popular, that some game like D&D would appear. German and British SF fans played postal individual RPGs (Magira or Armageddon, and Midgard I) years before D&D was published. . . . If Arneson hadn't thought of it, someone else would have" (*Different Worlds* 9).

43. *D&D*, 1:3.

44. "The Giant's Bag" appears in *Great Plains Game Players Newsletter* 7, and the "Expedition into the Black Reservoir" is in *El Conquistador* 1 (12).

45. Dave Arneson to Gary Gygax, December 12, 1972, private collection.

46. Compare Masters, "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing," which defines the "GM-as-Enemy Playing Style" as opposed to the "Co-operative Playing Style."

47. With this precedent, some referees understood a die roll as merely advisory rather than authoritative, in the sense that "the referee uses the dice rolls to construct what makes sense in that situation" (Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 103). This issue is discussed further in chapter 4, "The Role of the Referee."

48. *Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes* (no page number). As Paul Mason helpfully explains in "In Search of the Self," "'Monty Haul' was a joke derived from a US TV gameshow host; in this style the referee was constantly trying to please players by distributing treasure and items within the game" (4).

Chapter 2: How to Play

1. *D&D*, 3:13.
2. *APA-L*, 511. Harness had played in Coventry and began a game anecdote with "Reminds me of when we Coventranians . . ."
3. *Strategos*, 105f.
4. According to Janet Murray, "agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck,* 126). In his take on Murray, Michael Mateas emphasizes that these actions "relate to the player's intention": "if . . . the player does have an effect on the world, but they are not the effects that the player intended . . . then there is no agency" ("Preliminary Poetics," 21).
5. *Metamorphosis Alpha*, 24.
6. *Monsters! Monsters!*, 30.
7. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 56.
8. *Strategos*, 105f.
9. *D&D*, 3:6.
10. *D&D*, 2:33.
11. *Space Patrol*, 2.
12. *Space Patrol*, 2.
13. *Sir Pellinore's Game*, 19.
14. *Metamorphosis Alpha*, 24.
15. *What Price Glory*, iv.
16. *Sir Pellinore's Game*, 19.
17. *D&D*, 3:9.
18. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 103.
19. One notable early system along these lines is the "Perrin Conventions" (1976), which provide generic resolution for physical actions based on a character's Dexterity: multiply it by five, and if players roll under that amount with percentile dice, then they succeed in their attempt. Steve Perrin envisioned this as a catch-all for actions such as "changing weapons, turning and firing, opening a box and jumping back, closing a door quickly, etc." A similar method generalized for other statistics would appear in *Basic Role-Playing* (1980).
20. *D&D*, 3:9.
21. *D&D*, 1:25.
22. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 103.
23. Fine documents contemporary superstitions about dice and the role of cheating (*Shared Fantasy*, 90–106).
24. *Monsters! Monsters!*, 5.
25. *High Fantasy*, 43.
26. *D&D*, 1:4.

Chapter 3: Designing for Role Play

1. *D&D*, 1:6.

2. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 286. The term *role playing* in isolation derived from still earlier therapeutic applications, as Lortz discussed in *Different Worlds* 4. Note as well the striking mention in the early live-action Tolkien-based *Rules for the Live Ring Game* (1973) of the "characters which those participating in the game will role-play" (3).

3. *Europa* 9. Note that Richard Berg, a primary reviewer at *Strategy & Tactics*, read and participated in *Europa* at the time and may have picked up the term *role playing* from Gygax.

4. "Role assumption game" was favored by *Legacy* and from there appeared in titles such as *Gangster*. In the 1980s, the more officious term *rolegaming* would occupy a similar niche.

5. See also *Wild Hunt* 14, where Doug Kaufman's "Demon Lair" (1977) variant rules explicitly exclude nonphysical attributes from the scope of the system: "Things like intelligence and charisma are a function of the character who's sitting down to play." *Villains & Vigilantes* (1979) would solve this with the opposite approach: by assigning to the character the quantified abilities that the referee believes the player possesses, even after only the briefest acquaintanceship.

6. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 70.

7. *D&D*, 1:10.

8. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 2.

9. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 6.

10. *Starships & Spacemen*, 1.

11. *D&D*, 1:10.

12. Players also read into these characteristics other facets of character: Lee Gold, for example, noted in *A&E* 20 that "my female characters have higher Constitution than Strength, males the reverse. Thus inspection of characteristics rolled determines gender."

13. *Space Patrol*, 2.

14. *Traveller*, 1:8.

15. *Tradition of Victory*, 2:2.

16. *Players Handbook*, 9.

17. *Dungeon Masters Guide*, 11.

18. *Superhero '44*, 21–22.

19. *Bushido*, 1:8.

20. *D&D*, 1:7.

21. *D&D*, 1:34.

22. *Greyhawk*, 7–8.

23. Davis expanded on his alignment system in *A&E* 10, giving examples from his campaign.

24. The general consensus was that committing sexual violence rendered Lawful characters Chaotic. Lee Burwasser, in a teasing piece in *A&E* 14 that began by referencing *droit de seigneur*, offered a critique of associating lawfulness with moral probity: "With our extensive history of evil laws, how much sense does it make to automatically equate Law with Good? A law that disenfranchises, dispossesses, discriminates against n% of the population might increase law'n'order—for a while—but it certainly isn't Good."

25. *Bifrost*, 1:15.

26. *Buccaneer*, 2.

27. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 6.

28. *Arduin Grimoire*, 1:13.

29. *Fire the Arquebusiers!* 1. At the heading of this piece, Costikyan prefixed his name with the title "Reverend." A broader table of 50 characteristics of personal disposition, which includes everything from being "loyal" to "revengeful" to "homosexual" appears in *Trollcrusher* 2. For a broader look at the introduction of sexual elements to role-playing games, see Brown and Stenros, "Sexuality and the Erotic in Role-Play."

30. *Tunnels & Trolls*, 15.

31. Eric Goldberg argued in "But . . . Is It Role-Playing?" that experience metrics "provide a raw measure of a character's power relative to the world in which he adventures. This is analogous to a list of salaries in this world." As Lizzie Stark sees them, progression systems "recapitulate the American rags-to-riches myth" ("We Hold these Rules to Be Self-Evident," 171). In a similar vein, progression is called a "capitalist fantasy of perpetually swelling treasuries" in Peterson, *Playing at the World* (353).

32. *Little Wars*, 34.

33. *D&D*, 1:3.

34. *D&D*, 3:14. See also *D&D*, 3:19: the system for spell memorization denotes "the number of spells of each level that can be used (remembered during [any single adventure])." And at 3:8 it states that Elves, who enjoy the latitude to shift between the Fighting-man and Magic-user class, may "freely switch class whenever they choose, from adventure to adventure, but not during the course of a single game."

35. *D&D*, 1:18.

36. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 27.

37. *Tunnels & Trolls*, 14.

38. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 110.

39. *Bushido*, 1:64.

40. *Bushido*, 1:69.

41. *Heroes*, 11.

42. Somewhat confusingly, *Bunnies & Burrows* manages the "level" of its characteristics separately from the "innate value" rolled during character generation, so a rabbit with an innately rolled Strength of 15 still starts with Strength "level" 0 and raises that level through experience rolls, while the "innate value" remains constant.

43. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 44.

44. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 69.

45. *Runequest*, 46.

46. *Buccaneer*, 4.

47. See Zagal and Altizer, "Examining 'RPG Elements,'" for a modern survey of character-progression systems, which includes examples of reverse progression.

48. *En Garde*, 8.

49. *En Garde*, 13.

50. *Pocket Armenian* 21–22. Scott Rosenberg amended the system slightly for publication in *Cosmic Balance* 3–4.

51. Wargame systems from Wells on had long incorporated the notion that forces get weaker rather than stronger after battle. *Once upon a Time in the West* (1978), a transitional game in

the *Western Gunfight* tradition, even made regression of abilities a possible result of combat: most directly, a character might lose hearing ability by discharging firearms or explosives, but also penalties can result from failures of key "reaction test" rolls, such as situations in which a gunfighter panics and suffers a permanent penalty to courage.

52. *Traveller*, 1:5, 6.

53. *Traveller*, 1:6.

54. *Runequest*, 9.

55. *Uuhraah!*, 8, 17, 6–7.

56. *Legacy*, 105–106.

57. *Legacy*, 150, 74.

58. *Legacy*, 73.

59. *Legacy*, 152.

Chapter 4: The Role of the Referee

1. *Monsters! Monsters!*, 5.

2. The term *immersion* has since had something of a controversial tenure in the vocabulary of role-playing game theory; see White, Boss, and Harvianen, "Role-Playing Communities," on some of the many meanings ascribed to it. Roos's description seems compatible with the account in Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 98. For another roughly contemporary use, see the question posed by the sociologist Manuela Oleson to wargamers in 1975: "Do you ever become so immersed in wargaming that you neglect to be courteous and/or responsive to non-wargamers present?" (*AHG* 12 [4]).

3. *Chainmail*, 33.

4. *D&D*, 1:3.

5. Note that Dan Pierson provided a similar four-level classification of the sophistication of campaign worlds a year later in *A&E* 14.

6. *D&D*, 3:15.

7. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 100.

8. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 104.

9. *Empire of the Petal Throne*, 37.

10. *Wild Hunt* 1; this article was also later reprinted in *A&E* 11.

11. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 49.

12. *E'a*, 6.

13. *Superhero '44*, 35.

14. *Villains & Vigilantes*, 38.

15. *Villains & Vigilantes*, 37–38, 3.

16. *Flash Gordon*, 2.

17. *Flash Gordon*, 2.

18. *Flash Gordon*, 2.

19. Bizar later castigated himself for his part in perpetrating *Flash Gordon*. He blamed much of the design on the onerous conditions imposed by the licensing agreement with the owner of the Flash Gordon intellectual property: "That was a project where we had no design freedom and were required, by contract, to force players to follow the adventures of Flash Gordon with little or no deviation" (*Different Worlds* 5). But an introductory note in the booklet written by Lin Carter tells a more interesting story: "I was dead set against Scott's first idea of doing a book of wargame rules and held out for adventure-scenarios instead: eventually—as any fool can plainly see—he came around to my idea" (*Flash Gordon*, 1).

20. *Tunnels & Trolls*, 13.

21. *Bunnies & Burrows*, 23–24.

22. Compare Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*: "Meaningful play occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" (34).

23. *Legacy*, 125.

24. *Legacy*, 123.

25. *Legacy*, 126.

26. *Dungeon Masters Guide*, 80.

27. *Dungeon Masters Guide*, 80–81.

28. Merle Rasmussen to Allen Hammack, October 30, 1978, private collection.

29. Rasmussen to Hammack, October 30, 1978.

30. Allen Hammack to Merle Rasmussen, November 2, 1978, private collection.

31. *Once upon a Time in the West* (no page number).

32. *The Return of: Once Upon a Time in the West,* 24.

33. *Moves* 42. Dunnigan anticipated this factor in the design of *Sniper!* (1973), which includes optional "Supersoldier" rules that "simulate the legendary courage and skill of the immortal comic book and movie characters" in the hope of illustrating "the ludicrousness of 'Hollywood' combat (and to provide the Players with a few laughs)."

34. *Commando: Gamesmaster and Role-Playing Rules of Play*, 13.

35. *Commando*, 13.

36. *Commando*, 14.

37. *Space Quest*, 14.

38. *En Garde*, 7, 8. Compare *Diplomacy* (1959), "The rules do not bind a player to do anything he says" during the "diplomacy period which takes place before each more." Instead, "deciding whom to trust as situations arise is part of the game." Instead, after diplomacy "each player writes his 'orders' on a slip of paper, usually keeping them secret," and, once revealed, those orders "must be followed" if they are legal (1, 3).

39. *Dankendismal* 1 augmented these rules for solo *D&D* play on the *Outdoor Survival* board.

40. *Strategic Review* 1 (1).

41. Philip M. Cohen, *Empire* 21. On PLATO and its early role-playing games, see Dear, *Friendly Orange Glow*, 286–305.

42. *Buffalo Castle*, 1.

43. For more on these text adventure games, see Montford, *Twisty Little Passages*, and the epilogue of Peterson, *Playing at the World*.

44. *Superhero 2044* (1978).

45. *Traveller*, 1:5–6.

46. *Commando*, 18. Note as well that Costikyan is a rare holdover from this early period of theorizing about role-playing games who remained active in discussions once they spread beyond the confines of fandom; see, for example, Costikyan, "I Have No Words and I Must Design."

47. *Commando*, 18.

48. *Deathmaze*, 2.

49. *Commando*, 19.

Intermezzo: Transcending Design

1. *Mercenary*, 35.

2. *Metamorphosis Alpha*, foreword (no page number).

3. *Wild Hunt* 13. This affirms the historical perspective given in Edwards, "A Hard Look at *Dungeons and Dragons*," that "one cannot properly say that 'D&D does this,' or that a game 'plays like D&D,' without specifying exactly which D&D one means."

4. *Superhero '44*, 3.

5. *Mythrules*, iii.

6. *E'a*, 48.

7. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 1.

8. *Runequest*, 5.

9. *Tradition of Victory*, 2:1.

10. *Mortal Combat*, 4.

11. See, for example, Arneson's essay "My Life and RP" in *Different Worlds* 3, where he characterized his attitude toward rules during his Blackmoor campaign as "Rules? What rules?", leading up to the point where (note the passive tense) "rules were actually written down" and Arneson's remarks to the effect that "applying a fantasy setting to RPG was merely another outgrowth of an already established tradition (abet one without any real rules) in various non-fantasy settings."

12. In *Wyrm's Footnotes* 7. "Sartar High Council" was later reprinted in the Chaosium anthology *Wyrms Footprints* (1995).

Chapter 5: Toward a Philosophy

1. For surveys of just how diverse this discussion has been, see Hitchens and Drachen, "The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games," and Zagal and Deterding, "Definition of 'Role-Playing Games.'"

2. *Return of: Once upon a Time in the West*, 3.

3. *Return of*, 3.

4. In the 1980s, Gamescience released a boxed set of the Bristol *Western Gunfight* rules as the "Old West Gunfight Role Playing Game," inevitably.

5. *Knights of the Round Table*, 56.

6. In 1981, Fantasy Games Unlimited bought the rights to *Elementary Watson* from Phoenix Games, the successor to Little Soldier, along with *Bushido* and *Aftermath*. Although FGU produced new versions of the latter two, *Elementary Watson* never appeared under the company's imprint. The company did, however, list it in advertisements as a forthcoming title with the description "an expanded version of this role-playing boardgame."

7. *Realm of Yolmi*, 95.

8. In an essay called "'Simulator' as Lost Soul," Pulsipher further railed against excesses of simulation, which he viewed no more favorably than Thornton.

9. Most notably, see Pulsipher's contribution to *Different Worlds* 8 "Game Master Styles." His first series of articles continued in *White Dwarf* 4 and 5, after which he wrote an introductory series on *D&D* beginning with *White Dwarf* 23; his piece in issue 24, "Dungeon Mastering Styles," clearly retreads much of his earlier work. Finally, note Pulsipher's articles in *The Dragon* beginning in issue 74 in the spring of 1983 with "The Vicarious Participator," in which he showed a more measured approach to differences in role playing. Also see his piece on the "Survivalist" versus the "Glory Seeker" in *Gameplay* 7.

10. See Masters, "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing," for a later effort to capture key vocabulary terms, including *campaign* and *scenario*.

11. One amusing example can be found in *Wargamer's Newsletter* 86 (1971), where a chess game is so dramatized.

12. Not until Ken Rolston's articles "Adventure by Design" in *Different Worlds* 30 and 31 in 1984 would the discussion return to this level in the periodical.

13. *Commando*, 18.

14. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 1.

15. Simbalist quotes from Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories."

16. This point was important enough for Simbalist to restate it in various places. "I would like to repeat that all C&S systems are designed to be optional," he wrote in *Apprentice* 3. "Players, in short, are encouraged to 'meddle' somewhat with the rules to produce the type of fantasy world they desire. When you buy a set of rules, after all, you purchase the right to use them as you wish."

17. The similar principle that gamers today call "Rule Zero" admits of many permutations, so it is difficult to pin the origins of that term to any particular source—but the most likely culprit seems to be the four metarules beginning with "Rule Zero" advanced by Carl Henderson in "Request Comments on My RPG," published in 1994.

18. *Chivalry & Sorcery*, 64.

19. For more on the resulting moral panic around *D&D*, see Laycock, *Dangerous Games*.

20. See Peterson, "First Female Gamers."

21. For his part, Pulsipher drily replied in *White Dwarf* 6, "It's a game, not a simulation, and you can't practically prevent players from thinking mathematically if it will help them succeed."

22. The Seligman system, which he often referred to as "Advanced Seligman & Sorcery," was serialized across multiple installments of the *Dungeoneer*, beginning with "A New Magic System" in issue 7 (1978). His entire 14-page player handout for these rules is reproduced in *Wild Hunt* 40.

23. Peterson, "First Female Gamers."

24. On the problem of gender inclusivity, see Trammell, "Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons & Dragons*."

25. *A&E* 63. A similar line of thinking runs through Michelle Nephew's article "Playing with Identity," which balks at the misogyny of fantasy literature and sees its shadow over "the misogyny that sometimes seems endemic to the hobby" (129).

26. The field notes in Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 68–71, give corroborating examples of male attitudes toward female gamers in the 1970s.

27. *A&E* 51. See the second chapter of Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, for more demographic data from the period.

28. *Wargamer's Newsletter* 97. A survey in *Strategy & Tactics* 28 (1971) put more than one-quarter of its readership in the age range 14–17 and another quarter between 18 and 21.

29. Although Jaako Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen's later survey "Out of the Dungeons" correctly notes the absence of homosexuality in popular rulebooks of the era, it also notes that "source books and actual practice of play are two separate issues," and in places such as Bigglestone's article "Role-Playing: How to Do It" we see more progressive approaches to the issue.

30. See Bowman and Schrier, "Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games," and other essays in the *Role-Playing Games Studies* anthology, for a more contemporary look at the membrane between player and character.

31. *Welcome to Skull Tower*, 99.

32. *A&E* 38. Simbalist also described how he handled nonplayer characters, who would ordinarily be played by the referee: "I use players to run NPCs a lot, and since my crew is largely composed of GMs, the method is effective. Most can be trusted to split their personae so completely that they can run a NPC while their own characters are present."

33. *Bushido*, 1:4.

34. *Monsters! Monsters!*, 2.

35. Compare Bill Seligman's article "Sex in *Dungeons & Dragons*" in *Wild Hunt* 24. Seligman disparaged the low quality of sexual content in games, mainly that encouraged by "the 16–22 year old GM who got into D&D somehow and is wondering why he spends his Saturday nights playing the dumb game instead of engaging in other activity." Alluding to Costikyan's article of the same title in 1975, with its description of "Sex Drive" characteristics, Seligman concluded that "to treat such things unseriously in a D&D campaign only leads to a cheapened universe." Dave Hargrave would soon note in *Abyss* 16 that "young, male GMs . . . tend to shy away from all situations of a 'sexual' nature in their games," evincing only a "snicker and ignore" response. Hargrave, however, found that female players "are a lot less shockable than their male counterparts" and indeed he lobbied for more sexuality in games: "If done without leering chauvinistic bullshit, which some people think passes for 'being grown up,' it is a valuable asset to any game or campaign."

36. Christopher Lehrich would later argue in "Ritual Discourse in Role-Playing Games," "I don't mean that RPG play is like ritual at all; I mean that it is ritual."

37. A Jungian understanding of role-playing games is the theme of Sarah Lynne Bowman's more recent essay "Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-Playing Games."

38. Note as well DiTillio's own bewildered rebuttal to Bachmann in *The Dragon* 43.

Chapter 6: Maturity

1. *Games*, September/October 1979.

2. *Infinity*, 28.

3. *Welcome to Skull Tower*, 74.

4. *Commando*, 18.

5. *A&E* 74. One form that Miller's graph does not show is story-telling, which he says is "pervasive" and "a quality of the GM." In a follow-up piece in *A&E* 78, along with an iteration of his diagram, Miller elaborated further on the story-telling quality, exclaiming bluntly that "every GM in the hobby world of FRP is a story-teller!" He argued in the vein of Lortz that "Game Masters can be thought of as Directors of a play, a movie, or a moving, expanding, colourful imaginary trip," and advised that a GM devise "a theme" and "an outline of a story" as well as develop any "stage props" necessary for the story to unfold.

6. In "System Does Matter," Ron Edwards seems to think along similar lines, especially when comparing the results of simple resolution systems against complex ones and noting the implications this has for acceptance of systems by players with different incentives and experiences—as well as in calling for designers to be cognizant of these matters.

7. *A&E* 72. Miller cited as examples of this games like *Legacy* and more recent titles such as the *Morrow Project* and the latest version of the *Ysgarth* rules.

8. *Legacy*, 151.

9. Freeman and editors of *Consumer Guide*, *Complete Book of Wargames*, 243.

10. Freeman, *Complete Book*, 248.

11. Freeman, *Complete Book*, 243.

12. *Simian Conquest* (no page number).

13. Freeman, *Complete Book*, 252.

14. *In Search of the Unknown*, 5.

15. *In Search of the Unknown*, 2.

16. *Boot Hill* (1979), 3.

17. *Basic Role-Playing*, 2, 7.

18. *A&E* 71. Note that in "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing," Phil Masters captures in its vocabulary list "Plamondon's Test," the principle that "if incidents in a game cannot be described without reference to the game's mechanics, then those game mechanics are too intrusive" (67). The original test appeared in *A&E* 113. In *A&E* 124, Robert Plamondon offered his "second test," that "if, when reading a campaign writeup, the game mechanics show up as otherwise irrational character actions or attitudes, the game mechanics are too intrusive."

19. *Dungeon Masters Guide*, 110.

20. Paul Cockburn, *Imagine* 2.

21. "Children 10 to 14 years of age bought 46 per cent of D&D game sets last year, while the 15-to-17 age group picked up 26 per cent" (*Discover*, January 1981).

22. TSR Hobbies 1983 retailer catalog.

23. *A&E* 76. The shift to a critical perception of role-playing games as an art form recurs cyclically, like much else in this history. It seems to have finally stuck with the advent of

Robin Laws's article "The Hidden Art" in 1994, though Gygax, among others, would continue to reject it.

24. Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 9–10, 14.

25. *Nexus* 1. See also *A&E* 50, where Paul Mosher wrote, "Ed Simbalist in recent issues has given us his views on FRP, different modes of play, the part of the Game Master, etc. But as yet I have not seen any publication on FRP which gives a set of guidelines for actually playing the role of a character."

26. The impulse to sort games into "generations" would continue unabated; see, for example Porter, "Where We've Been." But again, the markers proposed in that article for sorting these games are difficult to distinguish from system elements in play in the 1970s.

Epilogue

1. In "Definition of 'Role-Playing Games,'" José Zagal and Sebastian Deterding cite the divisions now commonly recognized as role-playing game "forms": computer, tabletop, live-action, and massively multiplayer online games. The last category had not yet come into being in the early 1980s. Also see Zagal's "An Analysis of Early 1980s English Language Commercial TRPG Definitions" for examples of how designers in the 1980s defined *role playing* in their games.

2. For pointers on live-action role playing, see Harvainen et al., "Live Action Role-Playing Games." For more on computer role-playing games, see Barton and Stacks, *Dungeons & Desktops*.

3. Kern, a staffer at Victory Games, received a design credit for *007* and wrote adventures to support it.

4. *Champions*, 48.

5. *Adventurer's Handbook*, 120–125.

6. Even tabulating these models would be difficult. Mary K. Kuhner's "Threefold Model" is given as the common ancestor of the modern "Threefold Model" (gamist, narrativist, and simulationist forms) subsequently elaborated by Ron Edwards in "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory" and many later essays. See also Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades," for indications of how similar typologies apply to digital-game players.

7. *A&E* 163. It is thus unsurprising that these terms made it into Masters's essay "On the Vocabulary of Role-Playing," though he does also note the Blacow forms.

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