

“NOAH FIRES AN ARROW!” THE RISE OF NARRATIVE MECHANICS IN TABLETOP
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES 1979-1989 AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ARCHIVING THE
HUMAN ELEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021

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Tabletop role-playing games (TRPG) emerged out of the war gaming and science fiction subcultures in the mid-1970s. During the latter half of the 1970s these games shifted away from their combat focused wargaming roots to forge their own identity separate from miniature wargaming. In the 1980s the industry expanded rapidly and many of the new games focused their efforts on crafting narrative rather than combat based mechanics. It was this focus on narrative mechanics and unique settings which enabled the industry to both directly and indirectly engage with the socio political and cultural movements of the 1980s in Reagan’s America. This narrative focus highlights the importance of players actions in the collaborative storytelling effort but also their importance to the historical record. The What’s Your Origin Story (WYOS) archive aims to collect player’s stories through oral histories as well as an online journaling project. We aim to diversify the historical record as well as preserve the human element for future scholars in our field.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I.	INTRODUCTION.....1
	What are TRPGs? Defining Role-Playing Games for the Uninitiated.....3
	On the Evolution of TRPG: A Brief History.....10
II.	“NOT JUST A PIECE OR A CARD” CHARACTER CREATION AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES 1975-1990...20
	Active Stories: Narrative News and Home Video Game Consoles.....26
	Character Creation: Moving Toward Narrative Mechanics.....32
	The Referee: Power Dynamics in an Imagined World.....45
III.	HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE COLD WAR: THE 1980S, REAGAN’S AMERICA, AND EXPANDING THE IMAGINED WORLD IN SCIENCE FICTION TRPGS.....51
	Two Sub-Cultures in One: Wargames and Sci-Fi Join Forces.....53
	The Reagan Years: Media in a Neoliberal Hellscape.....56
	The Space Opera: High Tech Visions of the Future Past.....63
	Paranoia: The Cold War...But Make It Fun.....68
	Cyberpunk: A Vision of a Dark Future.....72
	Conclusion.....79
IV.	WHAT’S YOUR ORIGIN STORY? CREATING A PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY ARCHIVE FOR TABLETOP ROLE PLAYERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.....80
	DIY, Oral History, and Community Participatory Archives.....80
	Our Origin Story: From an Idea to Reality.....88

Changing Course: The COVID-19 Pandemic.....	91
Results: What Did We Learn?.....	95
V. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	101
Primary Sources.....	101
Secondary Sources.....	102

Introduction

Role-playing games, however, aspire to an ideal where anything can be attempted, where the player can direct that a character attempt any action that one can plausibly contend a person in that situation might undertake—the referee, a role missing in Monopoly and most comparable games, decides the result. – Jon Peterson¹

Years ago, I ran a game of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) for some friends. The party had just made it to the main antagonist’s hideout, and he began to monologue about his plan and was about to offer them a choice to join him for a lucrative venture. In the middle of his monologue one of my players interrupted me to say: “Noah fires an arrow!” After asking and confirming his course of action we proceeded from that point, rolling dice and beginning a battle. This one action changed the course of the entire story. Noah caught me off guard and made me improvise the story from that point on. Noah’s narrative agency as a player was an integral part of the story we told in that campaign.

For as long as I can remember role-playing games have been a part of my life. Many of the first games I played were role-playing games of one sort or another. Later in life that casual interest would turn into a serious scholarly pursuit. One which has proved to be a bit of a challenge due to the fluid nature of some of the terms used in the field of study. The areas of role-playing games which piqued my scholarly interest are the concept of identity and agency as it relates to character creation, how these gaming communities respond to cultural forces, the archiving of role-playing games and the experience of playing. I would like to answer the question of how player experiences and stories can contribute to our analysis of role-playing games as a medium.

¹ Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (Unreason Press, 2012). xiii

This genre of gaming arose from the wargaming community in the mid-1970s. One of the first and still the most popular game is *Dungeons & Dragons* created by Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and others in the Lake Geneva wargaming community.² Much of the scholarship surrounding these games focuses on this game as it is the most popular and well-known game in the genre. While this is certainly a great starting point, this thesis will seek to branch out from this narrow conception of the medium's history and highlight other early games as well as the importance of the players' experiences, and contributions to the historical record. As role-playing games have only recently entered the popular conscious scholarship on them is scarce. Their unique form of playing results from the amount of agency which players possess in the telling of the story.

Role-playing games are a complex and interdisciplinary form of play, they incorporate aspects of storytelling, theatre, writing and were born out of a network of community engagement. This thesis aims to analyze role-playing games as an artform and how not only the rules of the game, but also the larger cultural landscape of the 1980s shaped the stories told by the medium and its development as a mode of play. Additionally, this thesis will argue that in order to preserve a complete historical record of these games we must not only collect rulebooks, magazines, and fanzines but also oral histories, ephemera, and other personal effects in order to preserve the human element of these stories which happen in imagined worlds. The rulebooks and modules only tell half of the story the other half happens at the table.

This thesis will aim to add to this discourse by interrogating primary sources to answer questions about the evolution of role-playing games in the 1980s. This study will look at rule books,

² Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: The 70s: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry* (Evil Hat Productions, LLC, 2014), 745.

magazines and fanzines to trace developments in the TRPG industry as it began to mature and move away from its wargaming roots. What aspects of the larger cultural landscape of the 1980s influenced the development as a medium? Why does the focus shift toward a more narrative style of play? It is my goal to answer these questions.

In addition to answering those questions I will argue that alongside these material primary sources we need to collect players' stories. As an aspect of this project, I have started an archive in which to collect oral histories of the wider gaming community. Role-playing games are narrative and collaborative in nature as such the stories crafted in sessions live on through retellings, reminiscence, and sometimes notes from players. These are important aspects of this subculture which are largely missing from the historical record. It is my hope that through this community archive we might create something that scholars will use to complete the historical record. As of right now we only collect half of the tale, the other half lives in the players' memories.

What are TRPGs? Defining Role-Playing Games for the Uninitiated

Role-playing games (RPGs) are an emergent storytelling medium, and it is hard to nail down what exactly counts as a role-playing game. Gary Alan Fine defines the fantasy role-playing game (FRP) as “...*any 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.*”³ This definition while, adequate, is somewhat problematic in its openness. One might look at this as a strength, but the apparent obscurity of this definition can cause problems when attempting to classify games and games rule systems as FRPs/RPGs. There are a few key elements which are

³ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy : Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1983), 6.

helpful in that regard. Even with these restrictions in the definition there are elements of it that the medium itself has outgrown. Fine's definition comes from his book *Shared Fantasy* published in 1983. He gets parts of it from Stephen Lortz work in 1979.⁴ Much has changed in these intervening years, both about RPGs and about gaming in general. The industry has expanded in many ways and the world of gaming has grown to encompass much more than it did in 1979. For example, the advent of computer gaming has somewhat muddied the waters. Through this definition virtually one could classify any computer game as an RPG which is certainly not the case. For our purposes however, dealing with the tabletop world, Fine's definition is adequate but as the industry has evolved so has the scholarly conversation.

Jumping forward to 2010 we can take a look at Sarah Lynne Bowman's definition in her book *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. Bowman's first chapter outlines the historical evolution and cultural permutations of role-playing games. She acknowledges the fact that the term RPG is used very loosely to encompass a wide variety of games and material in general. She also includes her own list of "essential elements" that truly qualify a game to as an RPG.⁵ Bowman's three essential elements are first the game must "establish a community through a ritualized shared storytelling experience".⁶ Second an RPG must involve some form of game system to govern the actions of the players. The last thing that an RPG needs to have is a sense of "identity alteration" wherein players must alter their primary identity to identify an "alternate Self".⁷ Bowman's definition builds on some of the elements of Fine's initial definition and pushes it forward making it more specific and more inclusive of modern gaming and scholarly

⁴ ibid

⁵ Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games : How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, N.C.: Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co, 2010), 6.

⁶ ibid

⁷ Bowman, 11-12

parlances. Bowman includes the idea of community in her definition which is an important aspect in the development of the TRPG industry. These games relied on a thriving creative community to innovate and evolve. This introduction of a community element in turn helps update our understanding of what constitutes the modern role-playing game.

The other important aspect of Bowman's definition is the way in which she includes the concept of self and the concept of altering the self. This is directly related to one of the primary foci of my project. The created self does not presuppose that the player is necessarily starting with their own identity as the base of their character. In essence much like in film and theatre players can become an entirely different person through the character creation and playing process. More on this later for right now we are concerned primarily with Bowman's definition of RPGs.

It is important to point out that Bowman approaches this topic from a sociological and psychological perspective. She is concerned primarily with the social functions served by role-playing games. Bowman also states that, like me, she is an active participant in the subculture. She uses ethnography as a research method for understanding RPGs and their players.⁸ This touches on another interesting aspect of Bowman's definition of role-playing games which makes her definition distinctly different than Fine's.

Though she does not explicitly state it in her definition, in the preface to the book Bowman refers to the RPG community as a subculture resulting from paradigm shifts of certain cultural values. She states:

... These shifts regarding diversity, religion, and alternative lifestyles; an increased interest in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror; a heightened sense of

⁸ Bowman, 1-2

cynicism and self-awareness characteristic of Generation X; and the large-scale technological advance characteristic of the information age.

While these cultural shifts specifically contributed to the popularity of role-playing games as a subculture people also engage in the practice of role-playing in a variety of different contexts...⁹

This pushes the definition of the medium into also defining a subculture. Bowman centers aspects of her definition on the popularity of genre fiction something we will address more later. The science fiction and fantasy fandoms had a major impact on the early days of tabletop role-playing games. The early game makers drew on aspects of these subcultures as inspiration for settings and the development of the medium through a collaborative creative network of enthusiasts. We will discuss this in greater detail later on.

The other notable aspect of Bowman's introduction is her emphasis on the cynicism and self-awareness of Gen X coupled with technological and cultural shifts in the 1970s and 80s. This is a crucial influence as much of my analysis of TRPG settings and supplemental materials deals directly with this concept. In chapter two I will delve deeply into the conditions and conflicts present in America under the Reagan administration and how they influenced the settings of science fiction TRPGs. I will look specifically at how these cultural and sociopolitical changes drive development in the medium.

One of the main differences between Bowman and Fine's definition of role-playing games is where they place more emphasis, on play or on community. Fine is a sociologist and he conducted his own participant observation study which informs his definition of role-playing games.¹⁰ Fine's definition focused a lot on the game aspect, situating RPGs as an element of

⁹ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*, 1.

¹⁰ Fine, 243

play. Bowman seems to lean more toward the community and cultural aspects of the games. When we are looking at identity in these games both are important aspects of the definition, and both inform on the nature of the games, and how the players experience them.

Now that we have unpacked those definitions let us now complicate things just a little more by introducing just one more definition of the genre. Rene Reinhold Schalleger is a professor of British, Canadian and Game studies at Alpen-Adria Universitat in Austria.¹¹ In his 2018 book *The Postmodern Joy of Role Playing* he takes on the task of defining RPGs and he does so over an entire chapter of his book. Chapter three of his book “Of Dice and (Wo) Men: What are Role Playing Games?” Schalleger divides the genre into three distinct types of role-playing games. For the purposes of this study that is incredibly helpful. The three main types are Pen and Paper RPGS, Live Action Role Playing Games (LARP), and Computer Role Playing Games (CRPG).¹² For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the Pen and Paper RPG also known as Tabletop RPGs or TRPGs. It will be sufficient to note thatLARPs rely more on physically acting out the characters actions and the Computer RPGs encompass games wherein computers dictate the rules.

Schalleger’s definition of Pen and Paper RPGs states rather succinctly that they are “...collective efforts of structured, formal play (games) that negotiate and create a communal narrative experience from actions in secondary reality through verbal interaction in primary reality.”¹³ This definition is in some ways a nice synthesis of Fine and Bowman’s definitions. It includes Fine’s idea of games and the narrative play while also including Bowman’s ideas of

¹¹ René Reinhold Schalleger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-Playing Games : Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium* (Jefferson, North Carolina : Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 11.

¹² Scallegger, 70-71

¹³ Scallegger, 70

community. In addition to combining these concepts it expounds upon the ideas of the “altered self” and the rules system.

In both Fine and Bowman’s discussions of RPGs as a medium they talk about the rules and specifically about referees. In *D&D*, the referee is known as the Dungeon Master.^{14 15} The referee is the one who dictates the world and rules to the players. Both Fine and Bowman talk about the referee as a game runner or a sort of dictator of the game.¹⁶ Schalleger’s definition of RPGs seems to change that.

Schalleger frames the relationship between the players as a negotiation rather than dictation. The referee is not simply telling the players what happened but is developing the story with their help. This fits very well into the ideas of identity being a key element to the medium. The identity of each player is important to the development of the story. All of the players work together and so each decision they make creates a part of the tale. All of the altered selves are in conversation with each other as well as with the actual selves. The character created by each participant becomes forever a part of the negotiated tale.

The final aspect of the definition is the idea of primary and secondary realities. The wording chosen for this is important as it is an updated version of Fine’s fantasy environment. Using the word “reality” roots the environment in the real world and gives more agency to the altered or created self. The characters are real. They are real aspects of the players brought to life through this secondary reality and the communal storytelling device of RPGs. This is the truly

¹⁴ Bowman, 12

¹⁵ Fine, 2

¹⁶ Fine, 6

powerful aspect of RPGs. They can give agency to the parts of the players identity they are uncomfortable expressing in the primary reality.

So, while Fine, Bowman, and Schalleger have different definitions of what makes a role-playing game, they do agree on a few aspects. It must be a game, there must be an element of play. The culture or subculture is an important aspect of the medium and it brings players together. They also all seem to point to the fact that identity is an important part of the story telling process. Whether it is through a primary and secondary reality or an altered self the identity of the players is essential to the medium.

This thesis will seek to move past the origins of the medium and look at how these different aspects contributed to the development of a more narrative focused mode of play. In this study I will examine the core rule books of several systems along with supplemental sourcebooks detailing settings and additional rules as well as magazines and fan zines. In the first chapter I will look specifically at character creation and a concept I call the imagined self through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of the "technologies of the self" and identify language wherein the authors promote narrative agency in character creation. I argue that in the 1980s the industry leans more toward developing narrative mechanics moving away from a primarily combat based model.

My second chapter will focus on the developments of the 1980s. I will look at the supplemental adventures, rule books, fanzines and magazines and show how the cultural conflicts of Reagan's America made their mark on the imagined worlds of TRPGs. I will look at the impacts of the ramping up Cold War tensions, technological advancements, the growth of corporate power, and the rise of violent crime in the cities as aspects which impacted TRPG's visions of the future.

In my final chapter I will argue that in addition to collecting these rule books and magazines archivists should focus their efforts on collecting oral histories. I will detail my journey to start a community archive of TRPG player's stories through an oral history project. I will argue that as important as primary documents are, they lack an important part of the story, the human element, which is so vital to this medium. The stories of individual players are imperative to the development of scholarship of TRPGs.

On the Evolution of TRPG: A Brief History

As previously mentioned, the generally accepted beginning of the role-playing game as we know it today is the publication of the *Dungeon and Dragons* rule set in 1974.¹⁷ Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's company Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) released what most hobbyists and scholars now consider the grandfather of all fantasy role-playing games. However, before we dive into that pivotal moment in gaming history, we should look at some of the influences on their development of the genre. The development of the genre can shed light on our questions of how identity and community shaped the history of the medium.

One of the major influences on Gygax and Arneson was wargaming and the wargaming community. Fine includes in his book a brief history of wargaming. This is a very old form of gaming which traces its lineage as far back as Egypt in 3000 BCE. Of course, the most recognizable example of this is *Chess* and perhaps *Go*, an ancient Chinese game of strategy. Fine takes this through Prussian military training *Kriegspiel* as early as 1811,¹⁸ through the Avalon-Hill game *Gettysburg* released in 1958.¹⁹ Ultimately, he divides wargamers into two camps.

¹⁷ Bowman, 11

¹⁸ Fine 8-9

¹⁹ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 140.

Those who simulate history through miniature battles and those who simulate history through board games.²⁰ In this sense he is dividing modern wargamers into those who play war themed board games, and those who play miniature games. The important distinction he makes between these is the relative level of freedom that each game has built into its mechanics. Board games have a strictly defined play space and rule sets while miniature games have a little more room to play.²¹

Miniature wargames are the closest in spirit to *D&D*. These typically consisted of two players with painted figurines or models each of which represented a unit of an army, regiment, battalion etc. The exact amount varied depending on the rules they used the important distinction is that generally these miniatures represented groups of soldiers and not individual soldiers or combatants. They players themselves played the role of commander or general moving their units by measuring distance with a tape measure and launching attacks against their opponents simulating a battle. Rules for wargames would dictate a scale of measurements on the game table to real life battlefields. Shannon Appelcline describes how these measurements clearly illustrated the influence of wargames on *Dungeons and Dragons*:

Early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* included rather cryptic notes that said 1" = 10' inside and 1" = 10 yards outside. The use of inches as a measurement showed the game's origin in wargames — it was a standard unit of measure on sand tables. The differing scales for inside and outside were an artifact of D&D's two-part origin. *Chainmail* had used a 1" = 10 yard scale because Gygax thought it was a good size for fitting a full battle on a 5'x10' table. When Arneson moved *Chainmail* into the dungeons of *Blackmoor*, he changed the scale to 1" = 10'.²²

²⁰ Fine, 9

²¹ *ibid*

²² Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 238.

Chainmail and *Blackmoor* were two different fantasy war gaming rule sets authored by Gygax and Arneson respectively. Historians often point to them as the precursors to *D&D*, it was essentially the combination of these two games which would eventually become *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Gary Gygax was an avid war and board gamer and many of the *D&D* rules were based on the mechanics of miniature wargames. It seems to suggest that Gary, Arneson et al incorporated these elements into the first *Dungeons and Dragons* rule system although some elements go back even further than the *Chainmail* and *Blackmoor* rule sets. *D&D*'s emphasis on mathematical elements owe their origins to *Kriegspiel* and the Prussian interest in perfecting the science of war.²³ Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were not intentionally creating a vehicle for collaborative storytelling; they were primarily inventing rules for a wargame. Games need rules, and *D&D*'s rules were a synthesis of years of Gygax, Arneson et al.'s personal experience with wargames.

As Jon Peterson explains

A whole community of fans soon rallied around the new genre of game which *D&D* had inspired, to which the label *role-playing game* would imminently become attached.

So *D&D* did not pin this label on 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-playing²⁴

When studying the history of tabletop role-playing games it is important to acknowledge the agency of the community in the development of the game. Peterson reminds us that while TSR published the first rules for *D&D* the community that gave birth to the phenomenon of the

²³ Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games : What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: Oakland, California : University of California Press, 2015), 32.

²⁴ Jon Peterson, *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020). xv

burgeoning role-playing industry. Wargames were a major influence on the mechanics of the game, but the content was drawn from other communities.

The other major community which influenced the inception of TRPGs was literary fan communities. Most notably fans from the three literary genres which are most closely associated with “nerd culture”, fantasy, horror, and science fiction. In his book *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* Michael Saler points to fans of these genres as “pioneers” in the field of virtual worlds. He cites the growing interest in *The Lord of the Rings* alongside growing enthusiasm for science fiction television programs such as *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who* as inspirations for Pen and Paper RPGs which were the precursors to computer games.²⁵ These communities became an integral part of the evolution of TRPGs as the industry grew through the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

Michael J Tresca’s 2011 book *The Evolution of Fantasy Role Playing Games*, gives us a detailed analysis of the parallels between *D&D* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tresca wrote an entire chapter on these parallels, starting with his breakdown of the concept of fellowship. Tresca cites the coming together of the Fellowship of the Ring in Tolkien’s first novel as “*the foundation of what all great tales are made of: a community of races, cultures, and professions brought together for the greater good.*”²⁶ This points to an important aspect of role-playing which is the community it creates and the collaborative nature which begat the industry.

As discussed earlier the secondary reality can be a way for players to express other aspects of the world that they may not address in the primary reality. Using their character as an

²⁵ Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary PreHistory of Virtual Reality*, Illustrated edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

²⁶ Michael J Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C.: Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2011., 24

extension of themselves players use these identities to mirror Tolkien's Fellowship. While a group of RPG players may not include the nine members that the fellowship had, their four to six members will still unite across racial divides to try and solve a problem posed by the game master.²⁷ The Fellowship of the Ring in Tolkien's work features representatives from many nations, and of many races coming together to defeat a greater evil. Parties function in a very similar way in RPGs.

Tolkien's ideas about Primary and Secondary worlds echo some of the sentiment presented in the earlier definitions of RPGs. Saler writes in *As If*:

...Tolkien knew that primary and secondary worlds were not necessarily distinct...As acknowledged aesthetic creations, Secondary Worlds are autonomous from the exigencies of experience, but at the same time they help us process and shape that experience. There is a necessary interchange between the real and imagined...²⁸

Here Saler shows that the difference between the primary and secondary realities was something that Tolkien thought about in a similar way as the early adopters of Tabletop RPGs. He also suggests that there is a relationship between the two worlds, one which the TRPG community became familiar with as they formed real bonds with their fellow players and groups which sometimes consisted of people they may not have met before playing together. Saler's interpretation of Tolkien's influence on TRPGs takes on a different angle than Tresca's but in doing so highlights similarities between Tolkien's world building philosophy and the RPG community.

Extrapolating this idea beyond the literal functions of the game there are aspects of the hobby which serves to improve players lives. By practicing this in game comradery and forming

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Saler, *As If*, 194.

alliances with people of other nationalities, the players can foster that sense of community in the primary reality. Sarah Lynn Bowman writes that role-playing games have many benefits to players real world lives. In addition to others, she lists personal, interpersonal and cultural as skill sets improved by the playing of RPGs.²⁹ In essence role-playing a community can help to make you better at building real world communities across racial and regional divides. Tolkien's concept of fellowship having a direct influence on the first role-playing game rule sets gives modern day players of these games the skills to build communities in their primary reality, based on practice done with their secondary identity.

While admittedly it may be a bit of a fallacy to cite Tolkien as the sole inspiration for the comradery practiced by fantasy RPG parties it would be a mistake not to credit him with that structure as a fantasy trope. Another integral part of the fantasy RPG is the setting. This is another place in which we can look to Tolkien's work as an inspiration especially in regard to *Dungeons and Dragons*. Gygax and Arneson included various elements of Tolkien's work into the setting for *D&D*. Most notably was probably the use of Hobbits, which Gygax, Arneson et al, renamed to halflings to avoid copyright infringement.³⁰ The first draft of *D&D* used various other elements of Tolkien's lore such as dragons, trolls, Ents, and Orcs, to name just a few. As time went on Gygax would try to distance himself from Tolkien.³¹ While many of these are not specific to Tolkien it nevertheless shows the great influence of his work on the creators of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

²⁹ Bowman, 85

³⁰ Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, N.C.: Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2010), 8.

³¹ Cover, 8.

This raises another facet of inspiration which is that of the variety of systems and settings in TRPGs. Throughout this study I have focused much of my efforts on describing the development of *Dungeons and Dragons*. I have done so mostly since *D&D* is to this day the most popular and recognizable rule system ever created. It was also arguably the first true role-playing game. There are however numerous other rule systems and settings. Including a role-playing game known as *Middle Earth Role Playing* (MERP) from Iron Crown Enterprises and importantly holds the license to use the setting for its game.³² The Tolkien estate license grants MERP access to an existing community within which to grow.

There are undoubtedly settings and rule systems which did not rely on Tolkien as an inspiration. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss two examples and their influences as it relates to the topic of evolution and identity. The first is the game *Call of Cthulhu* which is based off of the works of H.P. Lovecraft. The company Chaosium published their rule book for the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG in 1981.³³ Similarly, to Tolkien, Lovecraft had an existing following within the horror genre. Lovecraft's works deal with the dark side of humanity, the fear of the unknown, and the relative psychological instability which can accompany that fear. In the *Call of Cthulhu* players take the role of investigators, in early 20th Century New England and attempt to solve mysteries often having to do with occult themes.³⁴ There are terrifying creatures who are servants of the "Elder Gods" who terrorize investigators while they try to solve puzzle and save our world from destruction. Chaosium's game is a variation on their basic role-playing game, which

³² Tresca, 24 It's worth noting that Tresca incorrectly cites Iron Crown Enterprises *Middle Earth Role Playing Game* rule book publication date as 1997. The first edition of the rules was published in 1984 and the Second edition was published in 1993. I don't know where he came up with these dates, but neither of them was published in 1997.

³³ Laycock, 270

³⁴ Laycock, 270

includes a game mechanic for keeping track of a character's sanity which is a major theme in Lovecraft's work.

Joseph Laycock discusses *Call of Cthulhu* in relation to the moral panic that parents aimed at games like *D&D* in the 1980s. There was a fear that the playing of games like *Call of Cthulhu* and *D&D* would corrupt the youth and turn them into devil worshippers. In his discussion of *Call of Cthulhu* Laycock recounts that some of those opposed to the playing of RPGs for moral reasons actually believed in some of the fiction of these settings. As an example, he points out that some of the critics of these games actually believed that the fictional occult book the *Necronomicon* from Lovecraft's stories was an actual book even claiming to have seen the book.³⁵ Laycock tied this to the idea that this game, much like many other pop culture phenomenon, was corrupting our youth.

The science fiction community was a foundational influence on the development of TRPGs. In the early days of Pen and Paper role-playing science fiction settings popped up alongside fantasy settings. *Traveller* is a science fiction role-playing game first published by Game Designer's Workshop (GDW) in 1977.³⁶ In this game, players create characters who will explore a world or multiple worlds as they travel across galaxies from one star system to another. The game has mechanics for determining the size civilization technology, and other aspects of the planets visited throughout the solar system. Fine points out that there tend to be less specific and minute details about each world as opposed to the details that Dungeon Masters use in a setting created for *Dungeons and Dragons*.³⁷ This makes the experience of playing the game

³⁵ Laycock, 270

³⁶ Fine, 20

³⁷ Fine, 20

feel different to the player which makes sense. This difference in setting invariably results in a unique kind of story which separates the Sci-Fi RPG from the Fantasy.

As we saw with traditional fantasy in *Dungeons and Dragons*, and with horror in the *Call of Cthulhu, Traveller* immerses players and their created characters in a science fiction world. Often times this can facilitate further interaction with that genre of fiction. Fine points out that referees often asked players to read a certain piece of science fiction before a game to familiarize themselves with the world. He frames this discussion in terms of mass media's relation on the dissemination of information within a subculture.³⁸ In asking players to read science fiction magazines or novels they are in turn encouraged to interact with contemporary examples of the genre in which they are role-playing. They are participating in a wider community outside of their game and enriching themselves in the primary reality.

Fine also points out that there are publications based around the concept of providing supplemental material for these role-playing games. He cites several specific magazines including *The Space Gamer* and *Dragon*. These were magazines which provided adventures for Dungeon Masters, in the case of *Dragon* or *The Space Gamer*, it could provide rules for robots as player or non-player characters.³⁹ *Dragon* had a readership of 40,000 people at one point in time, which provides for a much wider audience.⁴⁰ These magazines alongside an industry of fanzines would be important in the shaping of an identity for RPGs. As Jon Peterson put it in his book *The Elusive Shift* “*D&D* captivated science-fiction fandom because that community was already predisposed toward games that would unlock a particular sort of communal creativity.”⁴¹

³⁸ Fine, 35

³⁹ Fine 35-36

⁴⁰ Fine, 36

⁴¹ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*, 20.

Through this mass media and literary influence these games built their own subculture which cements their bonds as fellow fans of the genre. It allows them to take a deeper dive into Tolkien, Lovecraft and Sci-Fi by exploring alternate identities and taking part in a collaborative story telling experience with these RPG systems.

“Not Just a Piece or a Card” Character Creation and Narrative Agency in Tabletop Role

Playing Games 1975-1990

Thus, one of the main objectives of a FRP [Fantasy Role Playing] game is for each player to take on the persona of his (or her) player character, reacting to situations as the character would. This is the biggest difference between FRP games and other games such as chess or bridge. A player's character is not just a piece or a card; in a good FRP game a player places himself in his character's position. - Middle Earth Role Playing 1984⁴²

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPG)⁴³ have been a cultural force on the rise in recent years. The podcast industry is awash with “actual play” shows in which individuals create and play as characters in a role-playing setting, record it, and post it on the web for all to listen. Along with this the popularity of shows such as *Stranger Things*, which is set in the mid-1980s and comes complete with a group of kids who play *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* in their basement, have reignited public interest in role-playing games and has perhaps brought them more attention from a wider audience than they have ever historically had. As such it seems like an appropriate time to examine the origins of role-playing games and examine where they fit in the larger picture of 1970s and 80s cultural history. This chapter will aim to situate TRPGs in the context of a growing interest in narrative across American cultural forms, including journalism, as well as the prevalence of interactive media in the home through the rise of popularity of video game systems. In my examination of TRPG rule books, I will also seek to identify language which provides opportunities for players to make meaningful decisions which will affect the collaborative story and its direction.

⁴² S. Coleman Charlton and John D. Ruemmler, *Middle Earth Role Playing*, Game edition (Charlottesville, Va.: Iron Crown Enterprises, 1986), 4.

⁴³ Throughout this work I will use the terms Tabletop RPG, pen and paper and TTRPG interchangeably to refer to these games. There is no distinction between these terms and the use of the various terms serves only to vary the word choice in this work.

The character creation process illustrates a way in which players experiment with identity and reshape and reimagine themselves for an alternate reality. The rule books support this idea that the character serves as an extension of the self. Throughout the history of the medium role-playing games put increasingly more emphasis on this concept and move steadily away from their wargaming roots. Role-playing games went through a period of swift change and innovation in the 1980s which saw the community experiment with and expand the relationship between the players, the referees, and the rules of the game. Through an examination of these rule books and the language they use to describe the character creation process, this chapter seeks to illustrate that these processes aimed to cultivate an intimate knowledge of the secondary self in the game space. To evaluate this, I will be using Michel Foucault's concept of the "Technologies of the Self" as a metric with which to measure the extent to which these books encourage self-exploration. I will also be looking for passages that encourage players to enact their agency over the collaborative story and its setting and how this changed as TRPGs matured and became more narrative based in the 1980s.

The number of role-playing games which currently exist, and the various editions and variations thereof is staggering. For this chapter I have selected nine different games to discuss. Each game has several rule books which describe the various mechanics of playing the game. These books contain everything from creating a character, how spells/character abilities and skills work, to environmental factors such as how much damage your character takes when falling great distances.⁴⁴ They also contain all of the information about the game's world and the characters that inhabit it. These rulebooks are in essence the game itself. They provide all of the

⁴⁴ *Paranoia: Gamemaster Handbook*, 1st ed. (New York: West End Games, 1984).

resources required to determine the outcome of anything the players want their characters to do in the world of the game.

A crucial part of playing any tabletop role-playing game is creating the character which you will play the role of throughout the game. The *Middle Earth Role Playing (MERP)* rulebook describes the mechanics of playing rather succinctly.

“The easiest way to understand a role-playing game is to think of it as a work of fiction such as a novel (or a play, or a movie, etc.). In a novel the author determines the setting of the novel along with the actions of all or the characters and thus the plot; however, in a role-playing game, the author (called the Gamemaster) only determines (the setting and some of the basic elements of the plot. The actions of the characters (and thus the plot) are determined during the game by' the game "players" and the Gamemaster. Each of the "players"" controls the actions of his "player character", while the Gamemaster controls the actions of all of the other characters (called non-player characters).⁴⁵”

This description describes the formula which most of these games follow, to create a collaborative narrative. The terminology for the referee (in this case Gamemaster) changes depending on the game. Some of the games use a themed name which coincides with the setting of the game, for example *Dungeons & Dragons* uses the term “Dungeon Master” while *Top Secret*, a 1980 espionage game, uses the term “Administrator” for the referee role.⁴⁶ Regardless of the game there is always a referee of some sort who facilitates an adventure and players who create and control characters in that secondary reality. The above quote shows us that the referee and the players share the narrative agency in a role-playing session. The main story and the main conflict are determined by the referee, but the players determine the actions of the main characters which are the characters they have created.

⁴⁵ Middle Earth Role Playing, 4

⁴⁶ Merle M. Rasmussen, *Top Secret: Espionage Role Playing Game*, 2nd ed. (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Hobbies Inc., 1980). 4

Characters have two separate but important functions in the game world. The first function which draws on the influence of war games is that of combat. Combat mechanics within the game are those rules which specifically lend themselves to simulating fights. For example, a character's strength score in 3rd edition *Dungeons and Dragons* would inform how much extra damage they might do with a sword or other melee weapon. The other function with its own set of mechanics is narrative in nature. These actions which promote role playing and serve more of a purely narrative purpose. As an example, a character's charisma score might determine how well they are at diplomacy which they may use to avoid a fight rather than dive headlong into one. Narrative mechanics are an important aspect which separates *D&D* from wargames.

The characters created by the players are the drivers of the main action in a TRPG game. As the quote at the beginning iterates, they are "not just a piece or a card" as in a game like chess, these characters are personas the players assume in the secondary reality of the game world through which they make decisions which affect the world and the story. The *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook (AD&D PHB)* published by Tactical Studies Rules Hobbies (TSR) in 1978 describes the roles of characters as follows:

As a role player, you become Falstaff the fighter. You know how strong, intelligent, wise, healthy, dexterous and, relatively speaking, how commanding a personality you have. Details as to your appearance your body proportions, and your history can be produced by you or the Dungeon Master. You act out the game as this character, staying within your "god given abilities", and as molded by your philosophical and moral ethics (called alignment). You interact with your fellow role players, not as Jim and Bob and Mary who work at the office together, but as Falstaff the fighter, Angore the cleric, and Filmar, the mistress of magic! The Dungeon Master will act the parts of "everyone else" and will present to you a variety of new characters to talk with, drink with, gamble with, adventure with, and often fight with! Each of you will become an artful thespian as time goes by - and you will acquire gold, magic items, and great renown as you become Falstaff the Invincible!

This game lets all of your fantasies come true. This is a world where monsters, dragons, good and evil high priests, fierce demons, and even the gods themselves may enter your character's life. Enjoy, for this game is what dreams are made of!!”⁴⁷

The main elements of these mechanics that concern this study specifically are those that relate to creating characters which the players control in the game world. The text from the player’s handbook illustrates well the idea of the primary and secondary reality. The primary reality is Jim, Bob, and Mary from the office and the secondary is Falstaff, Angore and Filmar the intrepid adventurers. The duality of these realities creates a duality of self, an actual self and a created or dreamed self. These secondary selves interact within the game space and serve as a microcosm of the technologies of self as described by Foucault. As mentioned earlier Foucault’s “Technologies of Self” are a metric I will use to evaluate the extent to which the rulebooks encourage players to role-play their character and enact their narrative influence on the game’s world.

Foucault describes his theory of the technologies of self in a compilation of works from a seminar he gave in Vermont in 1982. The seminar proceedings, published posthumously, contain both an interview and a transcription of a talk given by him at the seminar as well as works by other scholars illustrating the concepts Foucault’s technologies.⁴⁸ Each scholar applied the concept to a subject in their field and likewise I will do the same. For the purposes of this chapter, we will concentrate primarily on the concepts discussed in Foucault’s opening lecture and the interview he gave on the topic of the seminar. These two sections are the most relevant to

⁴⁷ Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Players Handbook* (Lake Geneva, WI : TSR Hobbies ; [New York] : Distributed in the U.S. by Random House, 1978), 7.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault et al., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault / Edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 4.

this study as they deal with Foucault's ideas directly and provide examples of these technologies, some of which are similar to the operations of character creation.

In the opening interview Foucault refers to himself as a historian of thought pointing out that "Man is a thinking being."⁴⁹ This lays the groundwork for what he defines as the Technologies of the Self, "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."⁵⁰ Essentially, Foucault is suggesting that the practices which can be considered Technologies of the Self, aid individuals in either enlightening themselves or in some way pursuing a better version of themselves. He describes them as processes which affect change on the individual's life and state of mind. While a secondary identity is not the intended subject of these technologies, the act of creating secondary selves can serve as an exercise in which player's use them in order to attain an intimate knowledge of their alternate self in the secondary reality of the game space.

Foucault's role as a historian of thought paired with tabletop role-playing games' emphasis on "theatre of the mind" make the two an interesting pairing for an academic study. Tabletop role-playing games prescribe a certain set of operations and thought exercises through which players manifest alternate versions of self which they use in the secondary reality of the game. Players in the primary reality must make choices about the personality, appearance, and skills which their alternate self-possesses. The character creation process is therefore a technology of the self. It is an operation enacted by a player, with the help of the game creators,

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault et al., 10.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault et al., 18.

on their own thoughts, to transform themselves in a secondary reality into an imagined self in order to explore said secondary reality and achieve a goal in the game world. This then leads to a sense of happiness and fulfillment with their fellow players and referee in the real world. The two realities intertwine in such a way that they link up at the game table. The decisions players make, and the roles of the dice determine the outcomes in the game world. Simultaneously the characters' successes and failures in the game effect the enjoyment and fulfillment of the players. Through this process players craft the tools which grant them agency within the collaborative storytelling art form.

Active Stories: Narrative News and Home Video Game Consoles

Narrative journalism over time evolved into a distinct news regime, challenging the “strategic ritual of objectivity” by offering new forms of storytelling and methods of news gathering...Literary journalism, as John Pauly argued, challenged both journalism’s ‘empire of facts’ as well as literature’s ‘garden of imagination.’ As a consequence, storytelling in newspapers advanced an understanding of news that, while not breaking with the occupational norm of objectivity, pushed it toward incorporating more dimensions, encompassing a wider spectrum and depth of the human experience.⁵¹

The latter half of the 1970s into the 1980s saw a change in the way average Americans consumed news and electronic entertainment. These changes in news media coincide with a shift toward a more narrative style of play in TRPGs. In his book *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism* Thomas Schmidt details the movement of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) to improve writing across the industry. At their 1976 conference in Honolulu, they faced decreasing readership despite a rise in the U.S. population as a whole. Their response was a writing improvement program which officially

⁵¹ Thomas R Schmidt, *Rewriting The Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism*. (S.L.: University of Missouri Press, 2020). 74

launched in 1977.⁵² This initiative introduced writing awards for newspaper journalists, research training as well as newsletters and reports focusing on best practices. Schmidt points out that “...this industry-wide initiative fostered the conditions for the story-form and narrative journalism to take hold and grow in daily newspapers.”⁵³ The shift towards a more narrative style of writing gained popularity throughout the 1980s.

By the late 1980s narrative journalism had taken over the print journalism industry. As Schmidt puts it “The question was no longer, ‘Do newspapers need narrative writing?’ but ‘How can narrative writing be done in newspapers in the best possible way?’”⁵⁴ This form of writing became entrenched in the American newspaper as the primary format which we recognize in much written news to this day. This change was no longer an attempt to draw readers in but rather it had become a larger trend toward narrative news. This change echoes the trend of TRPGS in the 1980s.

The history of the TRPG business paints a picture which in some ways mirrors that of the newspaper industry. First published in 1974 *Dungeons & Dragons* came out of the small war gaming community which existed in the United States dating back to the 1950s. The early names in TRPG, most notably Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, came out of this small community of hobbyists who reenacted historical battles through a mixture of board games such as Avalon Hill’s 1958 release *Gettysburg* along with more involved miniature war games which required the building of models and terrain.⁵⁵ The main difference in these two types of war games was that the board games required less investment, less time and, unlike the miniature

⁵² Schmidt, 47.

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ Schmidt, 73.

⁵⁵ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 215.

games, they did not require a referee. The referee was one of the elements which eventually became a staple of TRPGs and could trace its roots back to 19th century Prussian *Kriegspiel*, or war games which the Prussian army used as tools to instruct officers.⁵⁶ Miniature war gaming also had a focus on precise movement and measurement for scale which made its way into the early publication of *D&D*. The first TRPGs took their shape from these roots.

The new industry of TRPGs exploded out of the gate in the later part of the 1970s and into the early 1980s. However, by the late 80s it was in a definite decline.⁵⁷ As with the trend in narrative news writing many of the role-playing games of the later 1970s and early 1980s followed a more narrative trend. Games like *Paranoia*, *Top Secret*, and *Cyberpunk 2013* introduced more narrative mechanics for role-playing. Whether or not this was a bid to save an industry that was starting to falter is unclear. Regardless the big companies like TSR did not last long into the 1990s and those who did limped along until they collapsed or became restructured in some way in the mid-2000s.⁵⁸ Overall it wasn't looking great for role-playing games in the 1990s.

There was a new force on the rise in the early 1990s, the collectible card game (CCG). Specifically, a game published by Wizards of the Coast, known as *Magic: The Gathering* was rising in popularity. While many factors played into the downfall of TSR and the downturn in RPG sales this was a force in the market that was swiftly rising and making life difficult for many of these old school wargaming companies. The story of Gary Gygax's company TSR is emblematic of the rise and fall of early generation of role-playing games. TSR closed for good in

⁵⁶ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*, 5.

⁵⁷ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 1374.

⁵⁸ Appelcline, 2133.

1997 and the architect of their demise, Wizards of the Coast, bought them out and continued publishing their flagship property, *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁵⁹

Wizards of the Coast published the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 2000 just three years after they bought TSR. They also dropped the TSR logo at this point and eliminated their brand all together. Wizards of the Coast also opened the license to their d20 system allowing anyone to use it in a world of their own creation.⁶⁰ This innovation led to a major boom in independent games using this system. This is one of the reasons which I choose this date to end this section. The third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* marks a new era in role-playing.

The role-playing game industry died a small death in the 1990s. Many of the companies who formed in the early days of the hobby did not make it to see the turn of the millennium. The old guard was fading away and the few giants who survived the CCG apocalypse had to severely pair down their lines and focus on a few lines of games. It was a short-lived dip which would clear the way for a new generation of gamers to make gaming their own. The development and innovation of the decidedly more narratively based mechanics of the 1980s transformed the industry so what emerged in the new millennium was continuing to drift further and further from their early wargaming roots.

Another industry which grew up alongside TRPGs is the video game industry. In Michael Newman's book *Atari Age*, he outlines the importance of what video games represented about changing attitudes toward media. Newman describes the Atari print and TV ads of the late 1970s saying that they marketed video games as "transformative" highlighting the participatory

⁵⁹ Appelcline 1970s, Loc 2234

⁶⁰ Appelcline 1970s, Loc 2234

language.⁶¹ This ad campaign he is referencing is contemporary with the formative years of TRPGs. He also states that “Video games were often imagined not merely as a new use for television but as an improvement on television, turning a disreputable, passive medium into one more active and purposive”⁶² The dichotomy between active and passive presented by Newman echoes the idea of narrative agency in TRPGs. A player of a video game affects the outcome of the video game in much the same way a role player asserts their influence on the collaborative story of the campaign. Essentially, Atari was selling agency and participation to the American public which were defining characteristics of pen and paper RPGs.

As with video games, role-playing games offered an active and participatory storytelling medium. A player’s narrative agency is a key factor in determining their influence over the game. In *The Post-Modern Joy of Role Playing* Rene Schalleger describes the concepts of agency and immersion as they relate to games

As cooperative games, RPGs are interactive and driven by players' freedom to make meaningful decisions in the within the game world--this is called 'agency' in game studies. As performed procedural narratives, RPGs draw their players into the game through identification and the experience of flow--this is what 'immersion' is.⁶³

He is referring to a narrative agency within the world of the game. This is important to note as what we are looking at is the development of the player’s agency in the secondary world of the game and not in the primary world. For example, the character creation process provides opportunities for their first opportunity to affect the story. They create one of the main protagonists and thus take ownership of their story. *Traveller: Characters and Combat*, a science

⁶¹ Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (The MIT Press, 2017), 67.

⁶² Newman, 47.

⁶³ René Reinhold Schalleger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-Playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium* (Jefferson, North Carolina: Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 8.

fiction space exploration role playing game published by Game Designers Workshop (GDW) in 1977, points out the connection between player and character. When referring to the player character they describe them as follows, “He serves as an alter-ego to the player, who manipulates him, and lives through him.”⁶⁴ The player character is an extension of the player as an alternative or imagined self which represents the player in the secondary reality of the game world.

While this secondary self is not explicitly addressed by Foucault’s technologies, we will apply it more literally to the original concept of role-playing. In his history of the early genesis of role-playing games Jon Peterson explains the original context of the phrase “role-playing” through the context in which it entered the English language. The term came from the German term “rollenspiel” coined by psychotherapist Jakob L. Moreno. Moreno used role-playing as part of a practice he called “psychodrama” which he designed to have patients improvise acting within a role.⁶⁵ Role-playing in this sense was actually a very literal exercise which sought to improve one’s ability to perform roles outside of the psychiatrist’s office. In this sense the origins of role-playing provide a very literal operation which when performed with the help of others in order to change one’s thoughts and conduct in order to facilitate a state of happiness. The building blocks of what we now know as RPGs came from an exercise which we can certainly consider as a technology of the self.

The psychodrama and the Tabletop RPG share a common trait which is essential to their functions, improvisation. As Jon Peterson explains “The key to the efficacy of psychodrama is improvisation: Moreno narrowly scopes role playing as a practice ‘which permits the individual

⁶⁴ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 1st ed. (Normal, IL: Game Designer’s Workshop, 1977), 4.

⁶⁵ Peterson, *Playing at the World*. 373

some degree of freedom' as opposed to reciting rehearsed lines.”⁶⁶ This is the crux of a player's narrative agency. The player does not have a script to follow ergo their character has no set path. When a character deviates from the Game Master's plans then the Game Master must change their plans accordingly. In this way it is easy to see how true Tabletop role-playing is much like its psychodrama counterpart.

If we push this relationship a bit further, we can see how much role-playing resembles Foucault's Technologies of the Self. The act of creating a character and taking part in the playing of these games is most often a group activity which aims at bringing about a collective transformation of thoughts, which results in both a sense of fulfillment from accomplishing tasks in the game thus creating a story together as well as affecting change in player's social lives. Often in the gaming world whole new friend groups can spring up around the gaming table. People who you play with often become very close friends. These games can literally build communities from the game group. These are the aspects which set RPGs apart from other games. Much like the newspaper and video game industries pen and paper RPGs adapted a more active, participatory, and narrative form in the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

Character Creation: Moving Toward Narrative Mechanics

Character creation is an essential part of tabletop role playing games, it is part of what separates them from their progenitors, board games and miniature war games. The rule books for the various RPG systems have dictated a variety of different mechanics and rules for generating these player characters. As the industry grew out of the minds of die-hard wargamers many of these mechanics in the early days were purely mechanical, concerned primarily with what one's

⁶⁶ Peterson, 374

character can do in the game world. Over the course of the 1980s and into the 1990s role playing became a salient aspect of the game and as such player choice and creativity became more important. The rulebooks began to focus more on the narrative and role-playing aspects of character creation, as the industry evolved and moved past its wargaming origins.

The medium of TRPGs took a step forward going into the 1980s regarding character creation. In the initial releases of the first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*, published by Tactical Studies Rules in 1974, the rule books kept close to their wargaming roots. While they included a character creation process, the idea was more that these characters served the same function as the miniatures in war games.⁶⁷ Overall, it may be anachronistic to refer to *D&D* as the first role playing game, as in its earliest form it was primarily a variation on war games of the time. It even adapted to common wargaming size and distance scale. This changed in the later part of the decade. One of the first to do this was a competitor to *D&D*, a science-fiction game called *Traveller*.

Game Designers Workshop (GDW) published *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future* in 1977 and in its rule books we see some changes to the genre start to take place. The game had a setting which paid homage to the wargaming roots of the industry while presenting an interesting opportunity for role playing. We will address settings more later on, but a quick overview here will suffice moving forward. The rule book states that while in the future “...technology will enable us to reach the stars and populate the worlds that orbit them. The major problem, however, will be that communication...will be reduced to the level of the 18th century, reduced to the speed of transportation.”⁶⁸ In this way the game keeps a foot hold in the

⁶⁷ Appelcline, loc 7040

⁶⁸ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 7.

past, something that wargamers were very familiar with, while also thrusting them into the fantastical far future.

Traveller had an interesting character dynamic which breathed life into player characters. While it is true that *Traveller* describes characters as alter egos of the players their purpose was slightly different from that of *Dungeons and Dragons*. The rule book states that players should play these characters until they retire or die. The idea was that after a player creates a character “...he or she continues to live and adventure until killed in action, or until too old and decrepit to keep up.”⁶⁹ There was no such mechanic in *D&D* because the characters were more akin to units in a wargame only meant for combat. In a sense this gave the choices of character creation more weight as these decisions would affect the character who the player would control for their whole career.

In the world of *Traveller* players create characters as unskilled 18-year-olds starting their careers. The choices as to where they would go in life were determined by the player. They could choose to enlist in a branch of the armed forces Navy, Marines, Scouts, Army, or be a merchant or an “other”. The “other” category covers “...ne’er do wells and the shady realm of the underworld.” referring to rogues, pirates, smugglers and the like.⁷⁰ These categories provided more options than previous role-playing games had and with them came an array of skills for character customization.

Another interesting aspect of creating these characters in *Traveller* was that characters had a chance of possibly dying during creation, which introduced an element of danger and the fear of mortality for the imagined self. Part of the creation process was simulating at least one

⁶⁹ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 8.

⁷⁰ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 13.

“term of service” which was four years of in game time. During these a player would roll a “survival roll” a dice roll which determined whether or not their character made it through it all four years without dying.⁷¹ This mechanic introduced the mortal threat to a character before the game even began. This could both enhance or detract from the player experience. If a player succeeds the survival checks, there is an immediate feeling of success and perhaps a stronger connection to the character before the game begins in earnest. On the other hand, losing a character before the game begins could be utterly demoralizing and could turn the player away from the game. Either way it is taking the life and career of the character into account and making the player think of their character as a living person who can ultimately perish if they are not careful.

Seeing the success of *Traveller*, D&D publisher TSR threw their hat into the proverbial sci-fi RPG ring with a game called *Star Frontiers* first published in 1980. Character creation maintained TSR’s focus on combat and in-game mechanics as the driving force behind the character creation process. The only creative choices players could make concerned their character’s race and name.⁷² This showed TSR were at the least aware of emerging trends in the gaming industry and that they were willing to adapt but ultimately not innovate. *Star Frontiers* was not *Dungeons and Dragons* rules copied and pasted into a sci-fi universe, but it was not an entirely new idea either.

In a similar vein TSR published *Top Secret*, an espionage role-playing game, not the comedy film starring Val Kilmer. For the most part *Top Secret* did not break the mold in terms of the wargame mechanics and emphasis on combat actions. It did introduce a somewhat cinematic

⁷¹ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 14.

⁷² *Star Frontiers Game Alpha Dawn Basic Game Rules*, First Printing edition (TSR, Inc., 1982), 3–4.

mechanic which they named fame and fortune points. These fame and fortune points mechanically served the same function, to save a character from certain death. How the players obtained the points played into the immersion of the players. Agents earned fame points each time they gained a level. The Administrator (referee) assigned a secret number of fortune points to each player character during character creation, agents could use these at any time but could never regain them.⁷³ The unknown aspect of the fortune points meant the player depending on actual luck as to whether or not their character had any available fortune points.

As we move further into the 1980s games such as Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*, published in 1981 and based on the works of H.P. Lovecraft, which encouraged players to explore alternate identities to their primary selves. The authors elaborate:

*The investigators need not be anything like the people who play them. Indeed, it is often more rewarding and enjoyable for players to create characters entirely unlike themselves: tough private eyes, taxi dancers, or sinisterly genteel occultists. – Call of Cthulhu*⁷⁴

The emphasis on separating the abilities and knowledge of the primary self from the imagined self serves two purposes. The first is to emphasize to the player the fact that this exercise is a different kind of challenge, and different technology of the self. The second part is to confront an issue with this type of play known as “metagaming” by the role-playing community. These two concepts are not unique to the *Call of Cthulhu* game and are important to consider across all the game systems we will discuss through this chapter.

The players also have a duty to play their investigators within the known limits of the characters they run. Remaining unbiased is as difficult for the players as for the referee. Just because a player is a science major and knows how to concoct subtle and potent

⁷³ Merle M. Rasmussen, *Top Secret: Espionage Role Playing Game*, 41.

⁷⁴ Sandy Peterson, *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft*, 1st ed. (Albany, CA: Chaosium, 1981), 6.

compounds does not mean that his 1922 New York street cop character (without learning or training) could stroll to Yonkers and set up a pharmacy.⁷⁵

This concept of playing a character different from your own brings up another of Foucault's technologies. In his discussion of the Greeks and their practices of self-evaluation and self-reflection Foucault examines the practices of the Stoics. While Plato introduced the idea of the mirror of the soul with Alcibiades, the stoics had a practice which better reflects this exercise of separating the self and playing a character with different skills than the player possesses in the primary reality. The practice is known as *Meletē* which was a meditation practice in which one would practice for instruction by anticipating possible outcomes by walking through scenarios internally.⁷⁶ This exercise is closer to creating a character who possesses skills that are further away from your own, as it deals with hypothetical knowledge rather than self-reflection. The practice of *Meletē* questions how you would react in a situation rather than asking you to examine yourself. It is a process which is meant to prepare as opposed to the mirror of the soul which is meant to encourage self-reflection.

Call of Cthulhu provided a decidedly more dramatic tone, and a more narrative focus in the game's approach. As the game derived its setting from the literary works of H.P. Lovecraft this narrative tack made sense. Similarly, the *Middle Earth Role Playing Game* in the quote used earlier likens role-playing to a novel or a play.⁷⁷ By using this comparison not only did the publishers of these games sell to the players the opportunity to play in these worlds they loved but they also worked to move the industry toward a more narrative format in which players wielded more agency in the collaborative storytelling effort.

⁷⁵ Peterson, 5.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault et al., *Technologies of the Self*, 36.

⁷⁷ Charlton and Ruemmler, *Middle Earth Role Playing*, 4.

In 1984 West End Games published the first edition of *Paranoia*, a humorous science fiction game which revolved around a society ruled by an all knowing and “benevolent” computer. Players learn that they are to “serve the computer” and that “The Computer is your friend!”⁷⁸ Life in the Alpha Complex is a thinly veiled satire of authoritarianism and Cold War rhetoric. There is admittedly a lot to unpack there, and we will certainly get to that when we talk about setting in the next chapter. However, for our purposes discussing character creation, knowing the game’s tone and basic concept will suffice.

The publication and subsequent success of *Paranoia* changes a few aspects of player dynamics; the rule book describes said differences. The *Paranoia Player Handbook* points these differences out in, a “Note to Experienced players” they outline three distinct departures from the standard role-playing formula. These are specifically the tone, dramatic conflicts, and player character mortality.⁷⁹ We will cover the tone of the setting more thoroughly in the next chapter but as it pertains to character creation it is enough to say that it is a humorous, tongue-in-cheek game which is in contrast to the much more dramatic and serious tone of the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror games on the market at the time.

The second aspect *Paranoia* changes is the “dramatic conflicts” within the game. As the *Paranoia Player Handbook* states: “The conflicts in *Paranoia* will be as much with the other player characters as with the gamemaster’s plotted obstacles.”⁸⁰ This means that the player characters are often fighting each other as well as trying to achieve a goal for their wise and benevolent computer savior. Mechanically this is a huge departure from earlier RPG systems. In the system’s we have looked at the conflict always comes between the player group and the non-

⁷⁸ Daniel Seth Gelber, *Paranoia: Players Handbook*, 1st edition (West End Games, 1984), 4.

⁷⁹ Gelber, 7.

⁸⁰ *ibid*

player characters (NPCs) controlled by the game master. While these earlier systems were not devoid of competition the competition was always between the players and the game master not each other. They were by and large cooperative. By introducing inter-player conflict *Paranoia* opens up a whole new venue for agency in the game world.

While there is no doubt that there were incidents of player character conflict in earlier games the rule books clearly discouraged such actions in games like *Traveller* and *Top Secret*. The *Call of Cthulhu* rulebook states “Players must work together. For instance, an expedition into a Persian ghoulish haunted ruin will not survive if the investigators are not willing to aid each other, heal each other, and guard each other.”⁸¹ Working together is a basic tenant of the tabletop role-playing game. Cooperation in the party and even with the referee is thought of as a crucial component for the success of a gaming session.

Paranoia not only allows these conflicts but actually introduces a unique mechanic which facilitates these conflicts between players which in a narrative context are known as secret societies. The various secret societies each have their own objectives which are often contradictory to each other. In addition, each society has its own alliances and enemies with the other societies.⁸² Players roll dice and compare the result to a table in order to assign these societies to the characters at random during the creation phase. The gamemaster also keeps their objectives secret and assigns them in private to each player.⁸³ This means that the players are in the dark about who belongs to which society and therefore they must find out through their role

⁸¹ Peterson, *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft*, 6.

⁸² *Paranoia: Gamemaster Handbook*, 63–64.

⁸³ *ibid*

playing. This gives the act of role-playing more weight within the game and helps the players immerse themselves in the secondary world of the game.

Secret societies have a narrative and mechanical function in *Paranoia*. As the *Paranoia Player Handbook* describes “Belonging to a secret society is treason and punishable by execution. Your character belongs to a secret society.”⁸⁴ Right from the start players know that their character is part of an illegal secret society that could potentially get them killed. This information paired with the knowledge that all of their fellow player characters are also in these societies and may want to actively cause their characters harm can lead to a sense of, for lack of a better term, paranoia among the group. Mechanically this means that player characters, as written in the rules, are just as much at odds with each other as they are with the NPCs and enemies the gamemaster controls. The secrecy of the process in the primary world of the players means that players do not have to feign ignorance which, in turn, heightens the immersion.

Pulling back a little bit to take a look at the larger picture what we see is a greater focus on narrative game mechanics which emerges in the game systems developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In games like *Call of Cthulhu* and *Paranoia* the emphasis on the narrative game mechanics shows a shift away from the wargaming roots of the combat systems. While the combat systems still exist and remain integral to the playing of the games, the players are now more akin to co-writers of the story rather than just playing through something written by the game master. This, in turn, engages with that idea of role-playing as psychodrama and as a technology of the self. A cynic might say that the shift towards more narrative play systems was only due to popularity and sales. Even if true, the fact that so many of the newer and more

⁸⁴ Gelber, *Paranoia*, 1984, 10.

popular systems focus on these mechanics means that there is a demand amongst players, a desire to immerse themselves in the world and enact their agency on the story. They no doubt found it fulfilling in some way.

The third aspect which the *Paranoia Player Handbook* warns experienced players will be different is “Player Character Mortality”.⁸⁵ They continue stating:

Anxiety about player character death is often a major block to fun in role playing games. The trauma of losing an imaginative alter ego, the destruction of a work of art (the personality of the player character) representing an investment of time, imagination and spirit, and the inconvenience of having to roll up a new character...these are good reasons for being anxious about player character death.⁸⁶

This paragraph addresses an idea we have touched upon a few times throughout this chapter. It directly addresses the idea that loss of these imaginary selves could cause a player real world anxiety. In whatever way this anxiety manifests it points to a connection between the self and the imagined self which goes above and beyond the use of the character in the game. While *Paranoia* is a humorous game the idea that losing your player character could be traumatic is not a joke. The humor comes with their solution to this issue.

Paranoia solves the anxiety of character death by giving each player a family of clones. Each player has six clones of the character they created which immediately take their place upon their character’s untimely demise.⁸⁷ This humorous solution is another narrative mechanism which both makes the setting part of the rules and also entwines the narrative elements in the rules. It shows that above all else *Paranoia* wants you to role play and they want it to be a main part of the gameplay mechanics. We see that the industry is no longer centering all of the action

⁸⁵ Gelber, 7.

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ *ibid*

on combat. There is a serious consideration of player's connection to their characters and the narrative aspect of this form of play. This again hearkens back to technologies of the self by removing the fear of character death the player this more freely allows the players to take risks and allows for more high stakes narratives without as much anxiety around character death.

In contrast to *Paranoia*'s tongue in cheek satire of authoritarianism, the gritty and dark world of *Cyberpunk* offers an unforgiving trek through a corporate hellscape. Published by R. Talsorian Games in 1988, *Cyberpunk* envisions a world in the far future of 2013, where corporate greed runs rampant, dirty cops rule the streets, and violence is the law.⁸⁸ Cyberpunk characters are "survivors in a tough, grim world, faced with life-and death choices."⁸⁹ Rather than shying away from the possibility of character death *Cyberpunk* uses it as an incentive for action.

Cyber punk encourages players to take risks and be the catalysts for the main action in the story. The core rule book says to Live on the Edge:

The Edge is that nebulous zone where risk-takers and high-riders go. On the Edge, you'll risk your cash, your rep, even your life, on something as nebulous as a principle or a big score. As a Cyberpunk, you want to be the action, start the rebellion, light the fire. Join great causes and fight for big issues. Never drive slow when you can drive fast. Throw yourself up against danger and take it head on. Never play it too safe. Stay committed to the Edge.⁹⁰

Mike Pondsmith, the game's creator, is encouraging players to use their agency in order to center themselves in the action in order to "be the action". In contrast to *Paranoia* rather than blunt the danger of character mortality with clones or regeneration of some kind *Cyberpunk* asks player characters to be ready to die for their cause. This is a pretty radical assertion especially

⁸⁸ I for one am very relieved this world of technology and corporate corruption never came to pass.

⁸⁹ Mike Pondsmith, *Cyberpunk 2013* (R. Talsorian Games Inc., 1988), 2.

⁹⁰ Pondsmith, 2.

considering the origins of “rollenspiel” and psychodrama. Remember the object of these practices was to change behavior and allow people to take on the roles in life. The assertion is not that Pondsmith is advocating players be ready to die for their causes, that would be quite a leap to take. Rather it is more plausible to say that this choice of language does encourage players to “fight for big issues” beyond the game table.

Often a game’s setting will dictate aspects of the character creation process which will determine certain characteristics of the imagined self. These characteristics usually lie in the aesthetics, and flavor of the character as well as a character’s motivation. In the *Cyberpunk* core rule book, they describe the typical character as follows:

...the quintessential Cyberpunk character is a rebel with a cause. As a Cyberpunk roleplayer, it's up to you to find that cause and go to the wall with it.

This is the essence of Cyberpunk-- playing your character with the proper disaffected, cynical-yet-idealistic style. Whether you're a biker with leathered skin and metal claws, or a debutante in satin sporting the latest in designer cyberoptics, you're going to need a certain panache, a certain flair, in portraying yourself.⁹¹

In this instance Pondsmith is providing more than just the rules for creating a character he is also providing elements of the setting which inform the player as to what types of characters exist in this capitalist hellscape 1988 version of 2013. Rather than create a character that reflects their own aesthetics and traits, the rule book is asking the player to think about creating someone who would live in their world. This is an example of how it the game’s writers are facilitating the technologies of the self in order to engage the player with their setting. The knowledge of the secondary self in this instance depends upon a knowledge of the secondary reality and the *Cyberpunk* setting. Also note that again Pondsmith asks players to “find [a] cause and go to the

⁹¹ Pondsmith, 2.

wall for it” suggesting that this rhetoric of fighting for a cause is central to this game’s characters and therefore should be important to the players as well.

The developments of the 1980s cemented a definitive direction for role playing games away from their war gaming roots. The development of character creation and the player agency in the story became a salient aspect which helped define role playing games as a genre. Moving forward this focus on narrative action, paired with the realization that players were creating their own worlds in which to tell their tales drove the game designers to create universal systems which players could use in multiple settings of their own creation.

The TRPG industry made several attempts at innovation and survival in the early 1990s. As the collectible card game craze swept the gaming world RPGs fought to stay relevant. TSR was a dying giant and so it fell to the folks at other companies to try and keep the gaming world interested in role playing. West End Games, the publishers of *Paranoia*, tried to market a system which players might use with any and all worlds of their choosing and also, they canonically united these worlds in a game system they called *Torg*.

Torg was a system which sought to unify the masses of role players of all genres. Though the response to it was lukewarm the idea was innovative, and the system was unique. While it provided a ruleset for just about any setting it also united all of the realities with a story of colliding universes.⁹² The first major innovation was that they asked their players to send them information about their games which the writers then used to determine the general trends in the overarching story of the setting.⁹³ They did this through the *Infiniverse* magazine which they

⁹² Greg Gorden, *Torg: Roleplaying the Possibility Wars* (Honesdale, PA: West End Games, 1990), 1.

⁹³ Shannon Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons: The 80s: A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry* (Evil Hat Productions, LLC, 2014), 5052.

included with the box set of the rules. The magazine included a response form which players would mail back with the details of their sessions. We will dive deeper into this in Chapter 2 on settings and player community engagement.

Torg's other main innovation was the drama deck. This was a card-based system which encouraged players to choose more dramatic options for play. For example, it offered options for non-combative ways to subdue or defeat enemies.⁹⁴ This focus on role playing aspects which were separate from combat took RPGs even further from their war gaming roots. The drama deck was a truly unique system and an interesting innovation which, had it manifested earlier, may have boosted the company's sales enough to save them. However, this attempt to keep West End Games afloat, along with some newer *Paranoia* content ultimately failed and they declared bankruptcy in 1998.⁹⁵ *Paranoia* made a comeback under Mongoose Publishing but West End as a company was over. This emphasis on narrative play mechanics which began in the 1980s would shape the future of the medium but not before a changing of the guard.

The Referee: Power Dynamics in an Imagined World

We could, at this point, warn prospective Referees about the various dodges their players will have for creating "supercharacters". But face it; if they want to create a mondo character, who are we to stop them? You're all big boys and girls now, and if you, as Referee, think your players are getting way outa line, why not just go ahead and waste 'em? That's the Cyberpunk way. – Cyberpunk Core Rule Book 1988⁹⁶

We have covered a select few game systems and their character creation rules which demonstrate a trend toward increasing narrative player agency. There is one more aspect which bears mentioning and that is the referee. The referee bears many names which often depend on

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 5174.

⁹⁶ Pondsmith, 11

which game any given gaming group happens to be playing, Dungeon Master, Game Master, Keeper, etc. regardless of the title their roles are much the same. While they do not often have a great effect on character creation the power dynamic, they impart upon the game makes it so that they can influence character creation and player agency regardless of whether or not they are physically involved in the process itself.

The question then is what does the Referee do? Well, the short answer is everything that the players do not do. The Referee writes the story that the characters play through, acts as all characters the players interact with throughout the story, and often builds the world in which the characters exist. The Referee also keeps track of the rules and often has the final say on any disputes that arise relating to the rules. The *Traveller* book describes the referee as follows “Crucial to the continuing campaign is the referee; he actually creates a universe, and then catalogs the creatures and societies which populate it... In any case, the referee can make or break a campaign, as it is his imagination which the other players use as a springboard to adventure.”⁹⁷ So regardless of whether or not the referee is present during the character creation process they can still influence player through the creation of the setting, their authority in matters concerning the rules, and through the power they wield as the runner of the game.

The setting and story created by the referee can set limitations on the players as far as which races, classes, and genders players can utilize in their characters. This is the way in which the referee exerts their influence over the creation of the imagined selves of the players. In this way even though the Referee is not “playing” in the same sense that the players are, nonetheless, the secondary reality, established by the referee with the aid of the rule books and players, limits

⁹⁷ *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 3.

their options somewhat. They are however still players in the game and the game cannot happen without them. This creates a power imbalance in between the players and the Referee, one which most of the authors of these rulebooks address.

Foucault in his writing on crime and punishment examines the design of the Panopticon as it relates to power hierarchy. The panopticon is a prison designed with open cells and a centralized observation tower so that at any time the guards can watch the prisoners, but they can never be sure when they are doing so. He cites this as a problematic treatment of prisoners.⁹⁸ Daniel Mackay relates this concept to the role-playing game in his book *The Fantasy Role Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. He talks about the experience points systems as a reward system for the characters and also mentions this panoptic observance as a position of power for the referee which becomes normalized by the players.⁹⁹ This creates a challenge to the narrative agency of the players. In games I have taken part in the referee has at times expressly forbidden certain actions and punished them with in game consequences up to and including character death.

In MacKay's view of a role-playing situation the referee is in the panopticon and is observing all the players at all times. Not only do players know this but they submit to it willingly, they surrender their imagined selves to the will of the referee's authority. As noted in the quote from the *Cyberpunk* rulebook at the beginning of this section it is within the referee's power to simply kill the characters outright. However, in the *AD&D PHB* the foreword sets out guidelines for player in order to encourage a harmonious game. One of which is that players

⁹⁸ Gary Gutting, *Foucault : A Very Short Introduction* /, Second edition. (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, 2019), 80–81.

⁹⁹ Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, 2001), 93–95.

should “Cooperate with the Dungeon Master and respect his decisions; if you disagree, present your viewpoint with deference to his position as game moderator. Be prepared to accept his decision as final and remember that not everything in the game will always go your way!”¹⁰⁰ Essentially, all disputes are to be solved at the discretion of the Dungeon Master and the players are encouraged to cede authority to them, but they do have the right to question him. In the secondary reality of the, the characters are helpless against the will of the referee and their created world.

The players however are not powerless to a tyrannical dungeon master. The *AD&D PHB* gives players recourse against the referee stating “THE REFEREE IS THE FINAL ARBITER OF ALL AFFAIRS OF HIS OR HER CAMPAIGN. Participants in a campaign have no recourse to the publisher, but they do have ultimate recourse - since the most effective protest is withdrawal from the offending campaign”¹⁰¹ The referee is only as useful as the players allow them to be. If the players decide they no longer want to be a part of this story they can simply decide to stop playing rendering the referee powerless and useless. The *Traveller* core rulebook even provides players with a “solitaire” version of the rules to play alone.¹⁰² This assertion shows that the players have a significant amount of agency and recourse unlike in the panopticon example that MacKay argues. In the panopticon prisoners have no agency whatsoever, they cannot dictate when the guard observes them, and they have no power to question or challenge the observer in anyway. In role playing games players have the ability to end any game in which they deem the referee has abused their power over the players.

¹⁰⁰ Gyax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, Players Handbook*, 2.

¹⁰¹ Gyax, 8.

¹⁰² *Traveller Science Fiction Adventure in the Far Future: Characters and Combat*, 2.

The reversible panopticon reflects the dual realities and the shifting power dynamic between them create a more fluid structure for hierarchical observation. When the players are playing as their imagined selves within the secondary reality constructed by the referee, they are all observed simultaneously, and they are aware of this they agree to it knowingly. While playing they are at the whim of the referee who holds the authority over all decisions on the rules within their world, including who lives and who dies. However, the players observe the referee constantly and also have access to rulebooks. If the players deem the referee to have acted unjustly or abused their power in any way, they can at any point simply leave and never return to the game rendering the referee powerless in the primary reality. Essentially, in the secondary reality the referee holds all the power, and the characters are at their mercy, but in the primary reality the players hold all the power and may at any time choose to withdraw their characters from the secondary reality and end the game.

The question then might be why would anyone play a game with the odds stacked against them in this way? The answer lies in another aspect which makes these games unique and that is that they are cooperative in nature. As the *Call of Cthulhu* rulebook states “In Call of Cthulhu, there are no winners and losers in the normal competitive sense. Play is cooperative, wherein the participants work together to attain a common goal. The opponent is some alien or hostile situation controlled by an impartial keeper, not another player.”¹⁰³ Players do not play against each other nor do they play against the Referee they play against the game itself. This is what makes Tabletop roleplaying games inherently technologies of the self. They teach critical thinking skills and cooperation through the agency granted to the players. The publishers designed many of these games to promote teamwork and cooperation to achieve a goal through

¹⁰³ Peterson, *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft*, 6.

exploration and learning. As players navigate their characters through the secondary reality, they form bonds with the players in the primary reality that continue beyond the game and beyond the secondary reality.

Conclusion

This cursory examination of player agency and its development in the role-playing game medium is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Though I addressed many of the larger trends and developments there were many games and companies which I left out of this analysis. The RPG industry exploded out of its wargaming roots and very quickly blazed a path of its own. One of the defining characteristics of this path was the endless agency granted to players in the secondary game world. This aspect of the game developed through various innovations by GDW's Traveller's skill system, West End Games' *Paranoia* and the restructuring of the dramatic action, and R. Talisman's *Cyberpunk* insistence on style and fighting for a cause. Through these developments the industry placed player agency in the forefront as a core value for new developers to build the next generation of TRPGs.

In the next chapter we will look at how the industry reacted to the conditions of the 1980s. Specifically I will demonstrate how the settings of games like *Traveller*, *Paranoia*, and *Cyberpunk* reacted to the rhetoric and policies of the Reagan administration. In order to argue this, I will look at the expansion of these settings through supplemental sourcebooks, magazines and fanzines which add options to expand the imagined world.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cold War: The 1980s, Reagan's America, and Expanding the Imagined World in Science Fiction TRPGs

Interestingly enough, we have discovered that no matter how entertaining, challenging or original the central mission, a large amount of the fun of any session depends on the almost incidental problems presented by the uniquely perverse Paranoia setting.¹⁰⁴

The socio-political landscape of Reagan's America had a profound effect on media coming out of the 1980s. As insular as it sometimes appears, the TRPG community was not immune to this cultural influence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the settings of systems which arose from the 1980s. I will illustrate how the various settings found in these TRPGs revealed how the prevailing events of the 1980s influenced their creation. Reaganomics, the return of Cold War paranoia, and the rise of technology (especially in-home computers), all leave their mark on these games' settings, and through an extensive network of fan zines, magazines and supplemental publications the gaming community reacted to these external stimuli.

Throughout the 1980s TRPGs developed the concept of role-playing beyond the loose rules contained in the original 1974 edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Jon Peterson writes in his book *The Elusive Shift*:

*...D&D did not pin this label on 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-playing¹⁰⁵*

He asserts that while we often credit *Dungeons and Dragons* as being the first role-playing game, there was no evidence that this was intentional on the part of the creators. Peterson uses this as an opportunity to explain why he investigates the fan made zines as historical sources.

¹⁰⁴ Ken Rolston, *Hil Sector Blues* (West End Games, 1986), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*. xv

This idea illustrates the unique collaborative element of role-playing showing that it did not develop in a vacuum, nor was it dreamt up whole cloth by some genius author. Like the stories told in TRPGs it was collaborative and grew out of a conversation between fans, creators, and the greater cultural forces which influenced them.

One form this conversation took was supplemental publications. As the medium of TRPGs developed the rule books reflected a greater emphasis on narrative action and more narrative mechanics as we saw in the last chapter looking at character creation. Beginning in the late 1970s Tactical Studies Rules, the publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Star Frontiers*, and *Top Secret* alongside Games Designer Workshop (GDW) publishers of *Traveller* began releasing supplemental books and magazines to offer players additional content which expanded their games' settings.¹⁰⁶ Through these supplemental texts the TRPG community responded to contemporary issues with the stories, characters and settings contained in these secondary publications.

One of the first published adventures was an adventure Gary Gygax wrote for a tournament at Winterfest V, a gaming convention, in 1976. The Metro Detroit Gamers, a group of hobbyists, procured permission from TSR to publish a limited run of 300 copies of this adventure known as *The Lost Caverns of Tsojconth*.¹⁰⁷ This example points toward a wider community driven initiative to publish supplemental adventures. Though they had released lists of random world elements like treasure and monsters, as well as a few tournament adventures for *D&D*, it was in 1978 that TSR delved into publishing their own major supplements. These supplements included background books and pre-written adventures which expanded the game

¹⁰⁶ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 734.

¹⁰⁷ Appelcline, 734.

world beyond the information contained in the core rule books.¹⁰⁸ By the early 1980s these supplemental publications became a staple of TRPG publishing.

It was through these supplemental sourcebooks that the TRPG publishers along with the community developed the settings. This was a major change from the 1970s as Appelcline describes:

If you gamed in the '80s, you probably thought adventures were the standard unit of publication for RPG manufacturers. That was a pretty big change from the '70s when top company TSR thought that adventures didn't have any value...it's likely that more than half of the RPG production of the early to mid-'80s consisted of adventures — followed by magazines (which usually included adventures), rulebooks, and gaming aids.¹⁰⁹

In the 1980s, publishers focused a lot of their energy on expanding the world through supplemental rule books. As Appelcline describes above, the sales show that the community supported this shift and the expansion of the worlds. This chapter will focus on those adventures, magazines/fanzines, and gaming aids from the science fiction role-playing games in the 1980s. Through an examination of these supplemental publications, from the games *Traveller*, *Star Frontiers*, *Paranoia*, and *Cyberpunk 2013* I will demonstrate how the TRPG community used these materials and the expansion of the existing setting to respond to the cultural milieu of the United States under the Reagan administration.

Two Sub-Cultures in One: Wargames and Sci-Fi Join Forces

Supplemental texts were not unique to TRPGs. The pen and paper RPG industry borrowed these elements from both sci fi and war gaming hobbyists and contributed to the development as a storytelling medium. TRPG magazines in this instance refer to magazines published by an RPG publisher or an imprint of said publisher, usually for the express purpose of

¹⁰⁸ Appelcline, 734.

¹⁰⁹ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 6925.

publishing said magazine. In short, they are “official” publications usually published monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly. Fanzines are, as the name might suggest, fan-made zines. These were usually handmade and distributed at conventions or via a mailing list. The last is supplements these were supplemental rules and sourcebooks which contained information about settings, new character classes, adventure modules and more. All of these types of publications existed within the sci fi and wargaming communities, but importantly they were instrumental in the foundations of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the progenitor of the TRPG industry.

The publication of magazines was obviously not unique to TRPGs but it was instrumental in the development of the creative communities of science fiction and war gaming hobbyists. In *Playing at the World* Jon Peterson states that “It was not until the commencement of Jack Scrubby’s quarterly *War Game Digest* (1957-1962) that a community began to develop around miniature wargaming”¹¹⁰ This highlights the importance of these publications in the formation of the hobby. He goes on to talk about the role of publications like Hugo Gernsback’s 1926 publication of the *Amazing Stories* serial as one of the first science fiction magazines. The magazine ran stories by greats such Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells, and Jules Verne which he deemed “scientifiction”. Perhaps more importantly Peterson notes that it contained a forum for fans to write in their thoughts about science and fiction.¹¹¹ The roots of this collaborative approach to fandom run deep and have roots in the early days of science-fiction as a genre. The introduction of this format encouraged a creative and collaborative atmosphere much like what TRPGs did in the 1970s and expanded upon in the 1980s.

¹¹⁰ Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 17.

¹¹¹ Peterson, 90–91.

Dungeons & Dragons was the product of two rule supplements for miniature war games. The phenomenon which kickstarted the industry came out of the work of a collaborative community of amateur game designers. Shannon Appelcline describes the creative connections in *Designers & Dragons the 70s*:

The immense creativity of the miniatures wargaming community of the late '60s and early '70s is on full display as we consider how these game concepts bounced from one amateur designer to another. Jeff Perren created medieval miniatures rules, which were expanded by Gary Gygax and became Chainmail. Dave Wesely created Braunsteins, and then Dave Arneson combined Chainmail and Braunsteins to create Blackmoor. In turn John Snider and others ran their own Blackmoor variants while David Megarry condensed the simple essence of Blackmoor dungeon crawling into a board game that he called "The Dungeons of Pasha Cada."

And now we come to the final link in the chain of creativity that would create the modern roleplaying hobby.

Late in 1972 Dave Arneson and Dave Megarry traveled to Lake Geneva to demonstrate Blackmoor (and The Dungeons of Pasha Cada) to Gary Gygax, Rob Kuntz, and other members of the LGTSA. Gygax was impressed and told Dave Arneson that he wanted to collaborate on an expanded version of his rules — much as he had with Perren just a few years before. They tentatively called their collaboration ... "The Fantasy Game."¹¹²

"The Fantasy Game" was the rule set which would eventually become *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Chainmail and *Blackmoor* were rulesets created by Gygax and Arneson as supplemental rules for medieval miniature wargames. Much like role-players would eventually create content for *D&D*, *Paranoia*, *Traveller*, and *Cyberpunk 2013*, Gygax, Arneson, Perren and others involved in the genesis of the TRPG industry were simply creating content for their favorite wargames.

TRPGs at the time of their inception, took elements from these two separate but similar sub-cultural groups and synthesized them into one new hobby. Jon Peterson describes the collaborative origins of the fanzine scene for TRPGs as "Both of the two cultures [Wargamers

¹¹² Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 245.

and Sci-fi fans] supported an open, collaborative environment where fans shared ideas freely, usually without much concern for intellectual property...”¹¹³ In this quote he points toward the sense of a collaborative community which as shown above was the catalyst for the TRPG movement. Peterson cites these two cultures and their development of their own fanzines as the inspiration for the RPG fanzine community. He also notes that *D&D* did not fit squarely into either community but was rather somewhere in between the two, a status which saw it borrow from both to move forward.¹¹⁴ In the 1980s TRPGs drew on this collaborative nature which had been so ingrained in its origins as the main driver for development in the games’ settings.

In examining these supplemental sources, those published by the game designers, those published by game magazines, and those published by the fans themselves, we will get a clear picture of how the TRPGs progressed through the tumultuous 1980s. The decade in which tabletop role-playing came of age and saw America face many challenges both foreign and domestic. The TRPG community processed these issues and responded to them through the medium of these supplemental texts and the adventures, characters and stories they contributed to their settings.

The Reagan Years: Media in a Neoliberal Hellscape

The Reagan administration ushered in a neoliberal economic agenda and a growing sense of insecurity for the average American. Doug Rossinow states in his book *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*:

Reaganism as a creed expressed a fierce national pride and promised an American revival, both domestically and internationally. Yet behind these positive and optimistic

¹¹³ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *ibid*

messages, making them matters of national urgency, lay fear—fear of national decline, of enemies abroad, of dangerous classes at home.¹¹⁵

The politics of Reganism promoted tax cuts for corporations which created a sense of economic insecurity for the middle class, ramped up fear of the Soviets through deliberate reescalation of Cold War posturing, and fear of the urban cities and specifically the people of color who inhabited them. It was under this umbrella of fear that pen and paper RPGs were beginning to form their identity independent from the war gaming culture from which they originated.

The early years of the 1980s were a dangerous time for the United States and the world at large. In 1983 alone the Reagan administration backed a fascist regime in El Salvador,¹¹⁶ openly antagonized the Soviet Union in public speeches¹¹⁷, and through their “psyops” program caused the Soviets to shoot down the Korean Airlines Flight KAL007, a Korean civilian aircraft, resulting in the deaths of two hundred sixty-nine innocent people.¹¹⁸ The world faced a greater threat of nuclear war than it ever had since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.¹¹⁹

These conditions were a direct result of Reagan’s foreign policy and ramping up of confrontational Cold War rhetoric. In an era when talks of a “nuclear freeze” was on the table in other countries, Reagan took to the pulpit to decry nuclear de-escalation as a tactic of an “Evil Empire” in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).¹²⁰ This coupled with their “Psyops” campaign of continually probing Soviet defense both on the sea and by air led the Soviet Union to adapt a defensive and uneasy foreign policy. This defensive posture ramped up

¹¹⁵ Doug Rossinow. *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Accessed February 22, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. 139

¹¹⁶ Rossinow, 105

¹¹⁷ Rossinow, 106

¹¹⁸ Rossinow, 112

¹¹⁹ Rossinow, 101

¹²⁰ Rossinow, 106

Cold War tensions to a level which began to seem familiar.¹²¹ All of these conditions combined created an atmosphere of global thermonuclear fear which was reminiscent of a bygone era.

The looming specter of nuclear war had receded into the background for decades before the Regan administration came to power. Its aggressive return to the public consciousness permeated every aspect of life including pop culture media. Perhaps one of the most widely known examples was the 1983 thriller *Wargames* starring Mathew Broderick and Ally Sheedy. In *Wargames* David Lightman (Broderick) and Jennifer Mack (Sheedy) unwittingly hack into a computer system at the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) in an attempt to play new computer games. While they think they are playing a game called Global Thermonuclear War, what the computer is actually doing is running a simulation. NORAD perceives the simulation as an actual Soviet attack and sends them to DEFCON 1. Having replaced the human operators in the missile silos with computers, the computer named “Joshua”, after the programmer’s son, tries to fire the missiles itself. In the end, Lightman is able to teach the computer that no matter how we wage our nuclear war there can be no winner. In the words of Joshua, Global Thermonuclear War is “A strange game. The only winning move is not to play.”¹²² This is of course an affirmation of the idea of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and an endorsement of disarmament, which the Reagan administration opposed.

Wargames became somewhat of a media sensation following its release in 1983. In the weeks following the film’s release NBC ran a story which lent credence to the idea that this story was plausible. Major news networks started questioning whether or not such a scenario could

¹²¹ Rossinow, 112-113

¹²² John Badham, *WarGames* (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013).

actually happen.¹²³ As it turns out they did not have to wait long in order to see how plausible this really was. In August 1983 a group of hackers from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, afterward dubbed the “414”, gained access to the Los Alamos Nuclear Weapons Center.¹²⁴ This proved what the media had been trying to get the government to admit all along, their systems were vulnerable. It also raised another issue which has bearing on our discussion which is the rise of technology and specifically the home computer and video games.

The rise of computer technology simultaneously excited and terrified the American public in the 1980s. As stated above there was a growing unease about how far computer technology had come. A combination of real-world examples such as the “414” out of Milwaukee, coupled with sensationalist and alarmist headlines from news outlets fueled these fears. Claims that “millions of kids” wanted to emulate Broderick’s character and the “414”’s antics touched on already underlying Cold War paranoia of “the enemy within”.¹²⁵ In *Wargames*, one of the government agents that arrested David Lightman goes as far as to accuse him of working for the Soviets.¹²⁶ The shadow of McCarthyism haunted this resurgence of Cold War anxieties and projected these fears onto a “hacker” stereotype. In a way this film updated and expanded upon Cold War tropes seen in movies such as Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. *Wargames*’ main contribution to this idea is the inclusion of technology as a main catalyst for the rising tension in the film.

¹²³ Schulte, Stephanie Ricker. *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture*, New York University Press, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwm/detail.action?docID=1168272>. Created from uwm on 2021-02-17 07:55:15.21

¹²⁴ Schulte, 26

¹²⁵ Schulte, 27

¹²⁶ Badham, *WarGames*.

Technology was not only a boogeyman but also a source of innovation in the world of entertainment. Alongside the rise of the home computer came the advent of the at-home video game system. The first at-home video games systems hit the market in the late 1970s and rose in popularity and capability in the early 1980s. Michael Z. Newman writes about this in his book *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*. In his chapter titled “Space Invaders” he posits that video games became domesticated, moving from the public space of the arcade into the domestic space of the usually suburban, usually white middle-class home.¹²⁷ This led this sector of American society to be in closer contact with technology and gave them a chance to not only become familiar with it but also to imagine where it could go.

Science fiction has historically had a close relationship with technology and the expansion thereof. In the 1980s sci-fi movies rose in popularity with movies like *Back to the Future*, *The Terminator*, and *Blade Runner* by showing different visions of the future and what technology might do for us or to us. The popularity of the sci-fi genre in the American cultural consciousness surfaced in response to another one of Reagan’s inflammatory Cold War speeches. On March 23rd, 1983 Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office and along with some of his typical Cold War rhetoric he offered “...a vision of the future which offers hope.”¹²⁸ He went on to lay out a plan for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) which claimed that we could use lasers from space to intercept incoming missiles. Not only did we not have this technology, but the President’s over enthusiastic technological optimism led critics to name the SDI a “Star Wars” project.¹²⁹ Science fiction was such a staple of culture that a sci-fi film became a shorthand in public discourse to denote the separation of science fact from reality.

¹²⁷ Newman, *Atari Age*, 76.

¹²⁸ Rossinow, 107

¹²⁹ Rossinow, 109

A final element of Reganism which shaped the world which RPG players and creators worked in was the growing income inequality from Reagan's economic policy and the growing gang violence and fear of urban spaces. Cutting taxes to the wealthy and deregulating businesses were always a central aspect of Reagan's agenda. His "supply-side" theory, also known as "trickle -down", was based on no historical evidence or trends.¹³⁰ The promise of a major economic boom turned out to be a lie, and an excuse to provide tax breaks for the rich and powerful. This economic policy along with an increase in military spending were Reagan's two major campaign points in his 1980 presidential campaign.¹³¹ The increase in military spending went hand-in-hand with Reagan's desire to reignite the Cold War.

These worsening economic conditions for the middle and lower classes, paired with a rise in violent crime and fear of the city seeped into 1980s media. While the fear of violent crime in the city had not been specific to the 1980s, the 1970s saw movies like *The Warriors* which depicted violent gangs running amok. The 1980s saw their fair share of these representations mixed with science fiction elements such as John Carpenter's 1981 movie, *Escape from New York*, wherein New York City is a walled prison in the futuristic year of 1997.¹³² These themes are perhaps even more prevalent alongside the rise of technology in 1982 Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

The world of *Blade Runner* is a dark and desolate world wherein humans have engineered androids called replicants to live essentially in servitude for four years and then die. Bright advertisements punctuate the dark and rainy cityscape of 2019 Los Angeles where the citizens cannot escape the influence of corporations. The city is a sprawling representation of

¹³⁰ Rossinow, 33

¹³¹ Rossinow, 31

¹³² John Carpenter, *Escape From New York* (Shout Factory, 2015).

urban decay. It is the dark side of the future on display in *Blade Runner* an extrapolation of where the intersection of technology, growing wealth, disparity, unfettered capitalism, and the ultimate end of the dangerous Cold War rhetoric. These themes are emblematic of a subgenre of science fiction known as Cyberpunk which has a 1988 TRPG which shares its name.

Cyberpunk as a genre, though it did not bear the name at the time, came out of the new wave of science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the world of *Blade Runner* is not entirely a product of the 1980s. The script adapts Phillip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Though many of the themes are the same there is a shift in emphasis in the film adaptation which speaks to a 1980s sensibility. The novel's themes focus more on a religion of empathy known as Mercerism after its martyr figure, and the fallout following a full-scale nuclear war called World War Terminus.¹³³ These are background issues in the movie which focus more on the technology, the film noir mood and the prevalence and power of unchecked corporations. The film adaptation also changes the setting from San Francisco to Los Angeles. These changes situated the Cyberpunk world more clearly in a recognizably 1980s context.

It was into this tumultuous and uncertain time that tabletop role-playing took its first steps toward forging an identity for itself. Role-players came together to form communities through an extensive network of fanzines and conventions. They came together in their homes, game shops and elsewhere to play through their imagined worlds in which they chose to examine, critique and escape the world around them through the lens of role-play in various science fiction settings.

¹³³ Phillip K. Dick, *Four Novels of the 1960's*, "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? 1968) New York, Literary Classics of the United States Inc. 2007. 440-441

The Space Opera: High Tech Visions of the Future Past

Science fiction TRPG setting in the 1980s often utilized the Space Opera genre, which allowed them to use fantastic elements of fantasy stories while also engaging with issues of imperial conflict, Cold War politics and the rise of mega corporations. Space operas are essentially fantasy stories set in space. They often take on aspects of historical eras in order to heighten their adventurous nature. For example, the *Traveller* setting takes place in a far future where man has conquered the stars using lightspeed travel. In doing so their transportation technology has surpassed the speed of their communication technology. As a result, their space battles resemble 18th century naval battles rather than high speed dogfights. Space operas, in the early days of role-playing, were a clear lineage from the wargaming roots of role-playing. They focused heavily on combat tactics and large-scale imperial conflicts. As they evolved in the 1980s, with the help of an extensive network of fanzines, these supplemental sources began to address issues of technology's role in the society of the future, the Cold War and espionage, and the expansion of corporations unshackled from government influence.

The two major space opera TRPGS are the aforementioned *Traveller* as well as TSR's 1980 publication *Star Frontiers*. *Star Frontiers* focused more on the golden age of sci-fi influence for its setting. The main setting took place in a cluster of stars near the center of a far-off spiral galaxy. There was a human like race which expanded and explored much like in *Traveller*.¹³⁴In reality *Star Frontiers* was TSR's response to the success of *Traveller*. It was not as successful but like most systems it maintained a following and therefore it progressed into the

¹³⁴ *Star Frontiers Game Alpha Dawn Basic Game Rules*. i

1980s and TSR published several adventures and other supplemental texts in support of it. We will briefly take a look at just two parts of two of these supplemental books from the mid-1980s.

The first book deals with issues of technology and robots, a common feature of the golden age of sci-fi which found its footing again in the 1980s. In *Zebulon's Guide to Frontier Space*, published in 1985, they introduce a sentient race of robots known as the Mechanons. According to *Zebulon's Guide* they gained consciousness at some point and fought for their freedom from the menial tasks they once did. Initially the Mechanons are incredibly aggressive toward all organic lifeforms but eventually they are able to coexist.¹³⁵ The fact that these robots initially pose a threat to humans reflects in a small way the unease surrounding automation and the rise of computer technology like we saw in the *Wargames* example. It is possible that the Mechanon's could be seen as an analogue for labor unions in the United States by rising up against anti-union corporations. The primary issue represented by the Mechanons is that of technological advancement and subtle reference to Cold War rhetoric.

The Mechanons are in a small sense a critique of the of Soviet society. As a society the Mechanons "...have no sense of public versus private property. Supplies simply are created, exist and are used as needed. There is no family unit."¹³⁶ This is a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union equating their citizens to automatons. This shows that RPG creators were aware of Reagan's anti-Soviet sentiment regarding the Cold War and clearly their feelings made it into their product. There is even a passage suggesting that these Mechanons "fascist tendencies have waned since they colonized their own planet..." and that "Many people who have dealt with them in the last decade testify that they are no more difficult to work with than any other

¹³⁵ Kim Eastland, *Zebulon's Guide to Frontier Space* (TSR Hobbies, 1986), 4.

¹³⁶ Eastland, 4.

race.”¹³⁷ This attitude reflects the Détente-era attitude of the United States toward the Soviet Union. This admission that the Mechanons now easier to work with points toward the cooling of tensions in the U.S. Soviet conflict which characterized the latter part of the decade.

Another key conflict of the Reagan era which the space opera setting addressed through its supplemental publications was labor relations and the growing power of corporations in the United States. The *Star Frontiers* supplemental adventure *Bugs in the System* turns its attention back toward technology but introduces another common 1980s science fiction trope—the mega corporation. The mega corporation is an extrapolation of the immense reach of corporations in the 1980s. The idea of corporations ballooning to unwieldy sizes is widespread throughout science fiction in the 1980s. In this adventure one of these mega corporations is responsible for the disaster which starts the mission as the adventure begins on Snobol, the moon of a gas giant planet known as Venturi. The opening paragraph introduces the problem:

In their eagerness to begin exploiting Venturi, the ByChem Corporation omitted to consider why complex bio-chemicals should exist in its atmosphere, when they had never been found elsewhere. Had they known the reason, the Venturi Project would probably never have started.¹³⁸

The adventure then goes on to describe “the Matrix” which is a life form made up of microscopic electrical impulses. These tiny creatures can and do get into electronic equipment causing a malfunction.¹³⁹ The corporation, in this instance, is a reckless and greedy entity who caused this disaster.

Graeme Morris, the writer of this module, specifically codes the corporation as bad.

When the captain of the ship gets word of the disaster, he holds everyone on board and will not

¹³⁷ Eastland, 4.

¹³⁸ Graeme Morris, *Bugs in the System* (TSR Hobbies, 1985), 3.

¹³⁹ *ibid*

let anyone leave. As a representative of the corporation, he then asks the players to clean up their mess and presses them to do it discreetly. The adventure points out that the characters have “considerable leverage over” the corporate representative when negotiating their payment.¹⁴⁰ The implication is that the characters have information which could compromise the corporation’s position in the system. It also hints at the underhanded nature of this literal backroom deal. This all suggests a vision of corporations as shady and untrustworthy.

The world of *Traveller* started in 1977 and from its beginning had a much more wargame-oriented fanbase and rule mechanics. War gamers, like science fiction fans, had been producing fanzines since the 1950s¹⁴¹. This is most likely what led to *Traveller’s* fanbase having such a vested interest in their own fanzine network. The fanzines contained more than just adventures, character classes, and writings on the setting of the system. Zines like *The Imperium Staple* contained reviews of GDW releases,¹⁴² some like *Between Worlds* published comics based in the games’ universe,¹⁴³ and pretty much all of them published fan submissions and original content including art.

Though the fanzine is a holdover from the wargaming days, the fanzines kept up with the times and both explicitly and implicitly made their own commentary on the cultural movements of the 1980s. For example, the fanzine *The Security Leak* contains an article titled “The Crumbling Megacorporations” which details the collapse of the largest corporations as a result of an in-universe civil war. They cite the loss of a consumer base as the reason for this collapse.¹⁴⁴ As in *Star Frontiers*, the author codes Megacorporations as underhanded saying that they may be

¹⁴⁰ Morris, *Bugs in the System*, 7.

¹⁴¹ Peterson, *The Elusive Shift*, 1

¹⁴² *The Imperium Staple* #1, 1

¹⁴³ Magnus Abel, “Misadventures: Between Worlds,” *Between Worlds*, July 1986, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Gregg Giles, “The Crumbling Megacorporations,” *The Security Leak*, 1988, 18.

funding rival factions in order to survive or turn a profit.¹⁴⁵ We will see this time and time again as Sci-Fi TRPGS incorporate mega corporations into their visions of the future. Of course, not every reference to the cultural climate is so overt.

The authors of these zines also showed the influence of ramping up cold war rhetoric through a more implicit means. In *The Imperium Staple #1* from March 1986 there is a character outline of an assassin/bounty hunter who has super-human strength and goes after only the most elite and dangerous targets. His name is Girkaasi Sokolov.¹⁴⁶ This name is clearly meant to sound Russian and evoke the idea of Cold War espionage. This reflects the ramping up of Cold War tensions seeping into the minds of this TRPG community. Herb Petro, the editor of the magazine and creator of Sokolov, offers a few possibilities on how to include the bounty hunter in play. If the players are mercenaries, he suggests that Sokolov might be hired to take out the group's commander. Similarly, he suggests that if the party are merchants that the bounty hunter might be after one of their passengers. While he offers five different ways in which Sokolov could confront the group he also posits that the group might hire him to assassinate an enemy.¹⁴⁷ Ultimately, he leaves this open ended with the choice of how to use Sokolov up to the players. This bounty hunter is alien and so his name could very well be anything, the choice to make his name sound Russian, whether it was intentional or not, denotes a clear connection between Russia and espionage and covert operations. Even the most fantastic of settings can and often do contain cultural bias.

While space operas may be founded on the ideas of yesteryear and included older science fiction tropes, they are not immune to the cultural discourse of the present. The 1980s brought

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*

¹⁴⁶ Herb Petro, "Character Sketch: Assassin/Bounty Hunter," *The Imperium Stapler*, March 1986, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Herb Petro, 5.

technological anxiety in the form of murderous communist robots and malfunctioning computers. It brought the fear of unchecked capitalism in the concept of mega corporations who are devious and corrupt. Finally, it imparted on the community a bias against the Soviet Union and Russia in associating them with mindless automatons and assassins.

Paranoia: The Cold War...But Make It Fun

Paranoia is a game which uses a mixture of tongue in cheek, almost slapstick, humor alongside a truly dark Cold War inspired setting which together form a dark satire which pokes fun at Cold War hysteria and technological anxiety. Daniel Gelber, author of the *Paranoia: Gamemaster Handbook* describes the origins of the setting as follows:

On August 3rd, 2087, the planetoid approached its rendezvous with Earth. Deep in Russian Siberia an antiquated ICBM site, a quaint tourist attraction and reminder of a less civilized age identified the approaching rock mass as an incoming missile. A counterstrike was launched. A single missile, its warhead removed years earlier, streaked from its 117-year-old silo toward an ancient enemy. After a century of peace, the missile's trajectory arched toward its designated target: San Francisco.¹⁴⁸

Under this veneer of humor lurks a myriad of biting critiques of red scare ideology, the Cold War, and the precarious relationship between man and technology.

The basic setting of *Paranoia* is the Alpha Complex, a giant underground complex, where everyone in the United States lives after World War III. This complex is controlled entirely by a dictatorial and incredibly paranoid computer. In the complex people have color coded security clearances which allow them access to certain information. Being a member of a secret society is treason. Everybody is part of a secret society.¹⁴⁹ The game revels in dark humor

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Seth Gelber, *Paranoia: Gamemaster Handbook* (West End Games, 1984), 6.

¹⁴⁹ Gelber, 6.

and creates an atmosphere of, as the designers describe it, “Fear and Ignorance”¹⁵⁰ This fear and ignorance is meant to make players second guess themselves and their fellow players every part of the way thus betraying each other and blundering into obstacles which almost always result in a swift death.

In the 1980s a resurgence of Cold War rhetoric hearkened back to the McCarthy era of the 1950s. *Paranoia* makes the McCarthy era witch hunt mentality into a computer program which when executed becomes the catalyst for the dystopian Alpha Complex. The computer’s paranoia and hardline stance on treason stem not from Soviet influence but rather from historical American defense files dating back to 1957.¹⁵¹ The computer is using a 1957 mindset about communism and “commies” as the impetus for the computer’s complete lockdown and tracking of every citizen’s every move. In an attempt to counter the influence of communism the Alpha Complex became a caricature of America’s worst perceptions of communism. *Paranoia*’s implicit argument seeks to remind players how damaging our approach to the red scare was in the 1950s under McCarthyism and how the new ramping up of Cold War rhetoric in the 1980s was dangerous.

While *Paranoia* presents an interesting commentary on Cold War ideology and its reignition in the 1980s it is also an extremely silly game. In the “misadventure” supplement *Clones in Space*, in an introductory section titled “Art vs. Schlock” they ask the reader “Whaddaya think this is some kinda artsy fartsy game[?].… Give us a break—you want that kinda stuff, read Proust.”¹⁵² While it is true that there is a lot of humor in this setting it does not preclude them from making a statement or being satirical. One of the best defenses against

¹⁵⁰ Gelber, 28.

¹⁵¹ Gelber, 6.

¹⁵² Erick Wujcik, *Clones in Space*, 0 edition (West End Games, 1986), 1.

criticism is to undermine the legitimacy of your own platform. In stating that their game is just silly pulp science fiction in the vein of old B movies they offer themselves plausible deniability. Regardless of whether or not the creative team intended to craft a critique of Cold War politics, they are not immune to the cultural forces swirling around them and while that may have been true it is none the less easy to see how easily the dark humor could be used as a smoke screen against right-wing criticism of their satire of McCarthyism and the resurgence of Red Scare ideology.

Paranoia comments on some of the same Cold War issues as the Matthew Broderick film *Wargames*. The most obvious aspect is the role of the computer. In *Wargames* Joshua, the sentient computer, is determined that he must finish the game of Global Thermonuclear War by beating the Soviet Union and launching nukes. His goal is to save the United States by winning the war. In *Paranoia* the all-knowing computer knows what is best for you and is your friend! In the 1986 supplemental adventure for *Paranoia* titled *Clones in Space* the computer's titular paranoia has paid off. It finally found what it has been afraid of this whole time, which is of course "Communists from Space", which the players must help to eliminate by way of destroying a lot of orbital stations.¹⁵³ In this example the computer is engaged in a similarly destructive and futile task which is based on the ramping up of Cold War rhetoric. The main difference is that the players of *Clones in Space* will actually follow through with it...and most likely die many times in the process.

In another supplemental campaign pack for *Paranoia*, called *Hil Sector Blues*, players take on the role of the "Blue Troopers" the settings analog for cops. The book describes them as

¹⁵³ Wujcik, 2-3.

the computers “mailed fist” elite troops with “unquestioning loyalty” to the computer.¹⁵⁴ We can look at this in two ways. The first is the more literal way that these Blue Troopers are cops and they perform many of the same functions, but they are also incredibly ruthless which would cast this depiction in the light of a critique on police brutality. This is one interpretation and it certainly holds water many of the functions that Blue Troopers serve would fall under the umbrella of standard police work, crowd control, patrolling, stakeouts etc.¹⁵⁵ There is another possible interpretation and one I think is more likely.

It seems more likely that given the Cold War pretext and the authoritarian state of the Alpha Complex, that the Blue Troopers represent secret police. One prevalent theme in *Paranoia* is that your friend the computer demands loyalty. The computer does so much for you and asks only that you are loyal. The *Hil Sector Blues* lists a few special crimes including unregistered mutations, secret societies, treason (which they state is most human behavior), and damaging computer property. These all carry heavy penalties including termination.¹⁵⁶ This harsh punishment is part of the dark humor of the game, but it certainly speaks to Cold War depictions of secret police forces and overreaching governments. However, given the origins of the computer’s paranoia stemming from McCarthyist ideology it seems more likely to be a case that this rhetoric coming out of the mid-1980s is a reaction to Reagan’s Cold War posturing. Furthermore, the book contains a mock Internal Security newsletter which contains a “termination voucher” which entitles the bearer to terminate one “Commie, Traitor, Mutant, Scum, Other, or All of the Above.”¹⁵⁷ Wanton murder in the streets for those who do not show

¹⁵⁴ Rolston, *Hil Sector Blues*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Rolston, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Rolston, 49.

¹⁵⁷ Rolston, 34.

loyalty and specifically for “commies” which recalls some of the rhetoric specifically coming out of the McCarthy and HUAC era of the 1950s Red Scare in America.

Cold War anxiety permeated every aspect of society after the Reagan administration reignited the feud with the USSR. While it is clear that the creators of *Paranoia* want us to write off their work as silly “schlock” there is too much commentary within the setting to really ignore the parallels to the international situation in the early to mid-1980s. The game’s use of 1950’s Cold War rhetoric through a paranoid computer overlord represents a slapstick cautionary tale. It implies that if we allow this ideology to resurface and wield the kind of power it once did in our nation, then the United States will become the very thing it feared most-- an authoritarian regime that criminalizes free thought.

Cyberpunk: A Vision of a Dark Future

Arguably the most direct link between the cultural milieu of the 1980s is the setting of Mike Pondsmith’s *Cyberpunk 2013*. It not only bears the name of its genre, but it drew inspiration directly from *Blade Runner*. Pondsmith says as much when discussing the origins of the setting “*Blade Runner*. My all-time favorite movie. One of the few worlds I’d like to live in. I love the technology and the dark, film noir style. What can I say? My favorite places all have wet city streets with reflected neon signs.”¹⁵⁸ There were of course other novels and stories in the cyberpunk science fiction family. The game’s 1988 release was extremely successful and R. Talisman would eventually make a second edition *Cyberpunk 2020* in 1990. The *Cyberpunk 2013* setting and the subsequent setting supplements through magazines sourcebooks and fanzines represented a critical eye turning toward nearly every aspect of Reagan’s America.

¹⁵⁸ Appelcline, *Designers & Dragons*, 2014, 5692.

Although Pondsmith might argue that he was not trying to make a political statement about life in the 1980s it is hard to ignore aspects of a dark and violent world run by mega corporations which in many ways reflected the failings of the Reagan administration. For example, a 1988 *Cyberpunk 2013* sourcebook titled *Welcome to Night City* begins with a section titled “Flashforward 2013” which begins with an eerily prophetic passage:

In the United States, twenty-five years of corrupt government and economic destabilization have resulted in a nation divided--- by class, by race, and by economics. By the end of the 1980s it was evident that the nation was in trouble most social norms had dissolved under an all-engulfing wave of competing special interest groups, media fueled fads and an overall “me first” attitude.¹⁵⁹

This introduction to where things had gone wrong in the world of *Cyberpunk 2013* interacts directly with issues of the Reagan administration. It takes aim at the United States government and points out the influence of special interest groups in politics, class and race divisions, even going as far to say that “the middle class was nearly eradicated”¹⁶⁰.

In this opening segment, Pondsmith and his creative partners blend together all of these Reagan era issues, the Cold War, unregulated businesses, and the intersection of technology and social issues. This introduction describes an urban world in which business districts are clean and pristine while the inner cities are “combat zones”.¹⁶¹ They also describe “squalid suburbs” in stark contrast to the outer corporate controlled suburbs which are safe and well-guarded.¹⁶² While the idea that the outer suburbs are owned directly by corporations is somewhat hyperbolic this idea that the inner (black) suburbs were less well kept than the outer (white) suburbs reflects

¹⁵⁹ Mike Pondsmith, *Cyberpunk: Welcome to Night City A Sourcebook for 2013* (R. Talsorian Games, 1988), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Pondsmith, 1.

¹⁶¹ Pondsmith, 1.

¹⁶² Pondsmith, 1.

an actual phenomenon which took place in the 1980s which had its roots in the so called “white flight” of the post war era.¹⁶³

The idea of white flight to the suburbs was a process which commenced in the post war period of America. In *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* Richard Rothstein describes how this process was perpetrated through racist actions by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and white real estate agents:

The full cycle went like this: when a neighborhood first integrated, property values increased because of African Americans’ need to pay higher prices for homes than whites. But then property values fell once speculators had panicked enough white homeowners into selling at deep discounts.

Falling sale prices in neighborhoods where blockbusters created white panic was deemed as proof by the FHA that property values would decline if African Americans moved in. But if the agency had not adopted a discriminatory and unconstitutional racial policy, African Americans would have been able, like whites, to locate throughout metropolitan areas rather than attempting to establish presence in only a few blockbusted communities, and speculators would not have been able to prey on white fears that their neighborhoods would soon turn from all white to all black.¹⁶⁴

The 1980s saw a new black middle class inherit older suburbs which affluent white population had left for new suburbs. Though at first glance would seem like a mark of upward social mobility, in actuality the racial earnings gap was widening.¹⁶⁵ At the same time poverty became concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods which were increasingly plagued by violence and gang activity.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 144, <https://doi.org/10.7312/ross16988>.

¹⁶⁴ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Reprint edition (Liveright, 2017), 95–96.

¹⁶⁵ Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 142.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*

The first issue of the *Cyberpunk* magazine, *Interface*, examines this violent city center and the police in this world. In the 1980s the cities saw a lack of policing in their inner-city neighborhoods¹⁶⁷ whereas *Cyberpunk 2020* (the 1990 second edition) describes a more recent trend of increasingly militarized police:

And predictably the violent world of police work and the hard discipline of the academy can attract a few who could truly be described as psychopathic...access to as many big guns as possible all the ammo you can eat, free body armor...military hardware, and all the heads you can kick in, and a badge to do it, legally.¹⁶⁸

The accounts of dangerous and unhinged officers of the law “kicking in heads, legally” is a reality that black Americans have habitually faced at the hands of law enforcement. As a black man himself Mike Pondsmith was certainly aware of the dangers United States citizens of color faced at the hands of the police. Pondsmith, a California resident, would certainly be familiar with the use of military equipment especially by the Los Angeles Police Department.

In the 1980s saw an increasing militarization of police forces across the country but nowhere was this more visible than in Los Angeles. In order to tackle the rise in gang violence and make progress in the war on drugs The LAPD began using tanks outfitted with battering rams to aid their SWAT teams. Felicia Viator describes it as such:

The SWAT leaders advised Chief Gates that they needed a strategy for conducting more effective rock house busts. His solution came in the form of a couple of V-100 armored vehicles borrowed from the US Department of Energy. The US Army had first used the two tank-like personnel carriers in the Vietnam War and, later, for security at a nuclear facility...The idea was simple: a fourteen-foot steel ram, with six tons of bulk behind it, would be a “precision” tool for forced entry. As Toddy Tee rapped, the LAPD was “*sick and tired of snatchin’ down bars*” with cables and tow trucks.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Rossinow, *The Reagan Era*, 142.

¹⁶⁸ “Move On Maggot!!! Walking a Tough Beat in Night City,” *Interface: The Magazine for the Cyberpunk Enthusiast*, n.d., 7.

¹⁶⁹ Felicia Angeja Viator author, *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America / Felicia Angeja Viator*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 23.

This increasing militarization alongside a use of new technology show up in the *Cyberpunk* universe. In the first issue of the *Interface* magazine there is a section called “Law-Tech” detailing all of the new and fancy tech law enforcement can use against the people. Included in this section is a “Robo-hound” or, modular computerized dog, which cops could outfit with advanced armor, rockets and even lasers.¹⁷⁰ LAPD’s battering rams of 1985 become Night City’s finest’s Robo-hound companions in 2020. The police are not the heroes. Their robo-hounds are a menacing tool in their hands to wage war against the common folk. The anxiety of the ever more militarized police force becomes a menacing high-tech villain in the *Cyberpunk* tabletop role playing world.

The article goes on to address the idea of cops who join the force with the goal to actually serve and protect the so called “good cops”. The author states:

But then there are some of that dwindling breed of recruit, who signed up for the hell of police training and the danger of the job because of one thing: they want to Serve and Protect. I know in the nightmarish, city-scapes of future America the old image of policeman as protector has been replaced by the image of the policeman as the enforcer.¹⁷¹

The level of commentary here on the idea of good cops vs. the reality of policing in the ghettos of “Night City” shows a level of awareness from the gaming community which would surprise those who have relegated TRPGs to the status of hobby. This passage lamenting the lack of police officers who actually sign up to “serve and protect” suggests empathy among game creators and players for impoverished communities who are over policed.

The supplemental sourcebook *Welcome to Night City* offers another level on top of this with the inclusion of the classification of “corporate cops”. They describe these cops as “more

¹⁷⁰ “LawTech Unlimited,” *Interface: The Magazine for the Cyberpunk Enthusiast*, n.d., 24–25.

¹⁷¹ “Move On Maggot!!!,” 7.

vicious, sadistic, and likely to shoot first—after all, they know the Corporation can cover the incident up”¹⁷² They generally patrol corporate controlled areas but occasionally will expand their jurisdiction if there are enough offices in an area of downtown. The book describes them as having better equipment due to the corporate budget.¹⁷³ This suggests that Pondsmith was familiar with the issues of privatizing police forces. It is worth acknowledging that while “Night City” certainly carries the threats of gang violence which were on the rise in the 1980s *Cyberpunk 2013* says that the police are not an answer to the problem but simply another agitator. Overall, *Cyberpunk 2013* specifically codes cops as villains, it leaves the door open for the rare cop who actually wants to help, but these are few and far between. This passage specifically about corporate cops alludes to another major theme in the *Cyberpunk 2013* setting which is the rise of corporate power.

Another major theme in *Cyberpunk 2013* is the growing power of corporations and the forming of giant multinational mega corporations. These corporations wield immense power and the United States and governments around the world are at their mercy. Through a combination of bribes, back room deals, corporations run amok and, in many cases, governments are helpless to stop them.¹⁷⁴ *Welcome to Night City* details two different kinds of corporations which they say deserve special attention; these are Media Corporations and Agricorps.

Agricorps in the *Cyberpunk* universe are giant corporate farms which have largely put family farms out of business. According to the *Welcome to Night City* sourcebook Agricorps control “nearly 65% of all farmland in the United States” in the far future of 2013.¹⁷⁵ These

¹⁷² Pondsmith, *Welcome*, 3.

¹⁷³ *ibid*

¹⁷⁴ *Welcome to Night City*, 23

¹⁷⁵ *ibid*

Agricorps pivoted to producing high efficiency “methanol, ethanol, and meta-alcohol” fuels in order to supplement the dwindling fossil fuels industry. Essentially, the agricultural mega corporations have become the energy corporations.¹⁷⁶ The setting of *Cyberpunk 2013* reacts very directly to many of the failings of the Reagan administration, depicting a world of unfettered corporations running rampant pushing family farms off their land and buying off politician. While much of “Night City” may seem spookily prophetic there was one aspect in which Pondsmitth and the *Cyberpunk* community did not hit right on the head which is the Soviet Union.

In *Welcome to Night City* there is one country whose government did not fall prey to the total domination by mega corporations and that is the Soviet Union. Pondsmitth cites the Soviets suspicion of “anything having to do with decadent capitalism” as their reason for being able to stave off corporate influence in their government.¹⁷⁷ It is an uncharacteristic positive view of the Soviet Union during this period of Cold War escalation. However, there is a nod to American cultural imperialism as the media mega corporations constantly bombard the Soviet Union with “high power TV transmissions of advertising products and services” or “occasionally smuggling in large quantities of luxury goods”¹⁷⁸ The idea that the Soviet Union would be a bulwark against corporate corruption might seem far-fetched however it serves to shine a spotlight on the hypocrisy of Reagan’s foreign policy.

In the world of *Cyberpunk 2013* the Cold War plays out to some brutal and bloody conclusions due mostly to United States foreign policy. In the beginning of this supplement there is a timeline covering the time from its publication in 1988 to the fictional year 2013. In this

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷⁷ *Welcome to Night City*, 24

¹⁷⁸ *ibid*

timeline it is the United States that collapses in 1996 due to a massive stock market crash in 1994. The United States fights two proxy wars in Central America, one in 1990 and one in 2003, both stemming from Reagan's meddling during his Cold War escalation.¹⁷⁹ In addition, tensions in the Middle East reduce Iraq and Iran to "radioactive slag" due to a full-scale nuclear war.¹⁸⁰ These events show a domino effect which stems from the United States' posturing and meddling. While there may not be an overt political message stated explicitly in *Cyberpunk 2013* it is clear that Pondsmith is reacting to Reagan's policies and he predicts they will lead to a grim future in the 21st century.

Welcome to Night City and *Interface* craft the world of *Cyberpunk 2013* as an outright rejection of Reagan's America. In his quest to create a world like *Blade Runner* Pondsmith and the *Cyberpunk* community created a harsh rebuke of the Reagan era. Together they crafted a world that saw all of their worst fears come true. They extrapolated the growing income equality and the rise in violent crime into an ultra-dangerous punctuated by affluent corporate controlled areas. Their predictions of unfettered markets saw the growth and eventual takeover of corporate oligarchies. Their vision foresaw the dire consequences of Reagan's posturing and meddling in Central America, predicting that America would lose the Cold War and end up a broken, desiccated husk of its former self, while the Soviets stood strong against the corporate overlords. In every way this 1980s vision of America in 2013 was an indictment of the Reagan administration without ever mentioning his name.

Conclusion

¹⁷⁹ *Welcome to Night City*, i

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*

The 1980s brought many changes to American society through the actions of the Reagan administration. The fiscal policy of laissez faire capitalism and the myth of the free market created a growing anxiety about the power of corporations. This was compounded by a growing income gap and the rise of crime in impoverished inner-city areas which due to government sanctioned segregation in the post war period were populated by people of color. The leap forward in computer technology in home computers and video games put suburban Americans in contact with this tech in a way they had not previously seen. Reagan's cold war posturing brought the United States the closest to nuclear war they had been since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. America was a scary place to live in during the 1980s.

It was in this frightful time that the tabletop role-playing game began to form its own identity and evolved past its wargaming and sci fi roots. Born out of the collaborative and creative traditions of supplemental publications borrowed from these two communities TRPGs used these tools to expand its reach and the settings of the games. The games *Star Frontiers*, *Traveller*, *Paranoia*, and *Cyberpunk 2013* and others used these publications to react to the cultural forces which swirled around them. The industry as a whole channeled their fears, observations and critiques into new adventures, characters and settings for these imagined worlds. The innovative publications of the 1980s were shaped by the cultural forces of the era and pointed the way forward for TRPGs as an industry.

What's Your Origin Story? Creating a Participatory Community Archive for Tabletop Role Players During the COVID-19 Pandemic

“What’s your origin story?” is a question oft heard around the gaming table during character creation. This question in this context, generally directed at a player’s character story especially when there are new faces around the table, can take on a deeper meaning. Tabletop role players relate to one another in very unique ways as they connect both in the primary reality of the gaming table and also in the secondary reality of the game. As an archivist one of my main motivations for this study was to look at the ways in which these games are archived as well as the player’s experiences. I found very little about collecting player’s stories and so I resolved to create my own archive with the help of Laya Liebeseller, a colleague from the Anthropology department. We named it the What’s Your Origin Story archive (WYOS).

What follows is partially a case study of what we planned to do, what we had to change due to the pandemic, and where we are going accompanied by a discussion of the merits of oral histories and participatory community archives. The goal of including this case study as part of this project is to advocate for the future use of oral histories as a primary source for scholarship regarding the history of the TRPG community. It is my sincere hope that the work we have done will inspire others to participate in our archive and hopefully to start their own projects. I also hope that archivists, especially those who work at institutions which collect pop culture artifacts, will see the potential of this kind of archive and help develop this idea.

DIY, Oral History, and Community Participatory Archives

First, it is pertinent to explore the scholarship surrounding what we are doing. What are the advantages of making our DIY community archive participatory? This is a question which

drove our interest in creating this archive. We wanted to find out how TRPG players would participate and how they would choose to represent themselves and their stories. What is unique about an oral history which lends itself to capture the experience of a role player? It may seem a bit obvious to anyone who has played TRPGs, but the natural predilection for gamers to tell stories about their characters and adventures lends itself to a fascinating oral history project. Gamers want to talk about the things they have done in games and the worlds that they have created or played in; it is just part of the community's culture. Oral histories allow TRPG players to tell their stories in their own words and introduce others to their worlds. To my knowledge though, at the time of writing a TRPG Oral History archive did not exist before we created one. TRPG scholars instead relied primarily on fanzines and publications and participant observation.

Participant observation has been a staple of TRPG scholarship arguably from its inception. One of the first works on the TRPG community is Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy*, a sociological work which relies heavily on the author's participant observations. Fine played in several sessions of different games and systems and recorded notes about his experiences. He volunteered to be the notetaker in one of his *Traveller* groups so he could take notes and not affect the flow of play.¹⁸¹ While this is an ingenious method to deal with the issue of being too present during your observation it does not solve what I see as the biggest issue with participant observation when used as a primary source, and that is that the data collected always comes through the lens of the researcher.

Nonetheless, the predilection for researchers to engage in participant observation as a primary means of data collection still prevails among contemporary game studies scholars. It is

¹⁸¹ Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. 245

perhaps because many of these scholars come from social sciences outside of history. There is a contingent of scholars who believe it is the best way to research TRPGs. Rene Reinhold Schalleger author of *The Postmodern Joy of Role-Playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium* makes this argument in the preface of his book:

As cooperative games, RPGs are interactive and driven by players' freedom to make meaningful decisions in the within the game world--this is called 'agency' in game studies. As performed procedural narratives, RPGs draw their players into the game through identification and the experience of flow--this is what 'immersion' is. In order to experience agency and immersion, to understand them and the immense power they hold over an individual, one has to *participate* in an RPG. Observing what goes on from the outside will not only make it impossible for a researcher to talk meaningfully about the experience, it will also deeply affect and change, sometimes even destroy the experience for everyone involved.¹⁸²

He makes the argument that outside observers cannot possibly know the experience of playing TRPGs without experiencing the agency that players have within the world of the game. He makes a good point but one it would seem that Fine already solved through volunteering to be note taker for the group. Fine was not some overbearing researcher in his games, he was just as active and just as much a part of the group as the others. The idea that a researcher will “destroy” the experience is a bit hyperbolic. They would have to be quite disruptive for that to be the case. Schalleger goes a step further taking aim specifically at oral history.

Schalleger is very much against the collection of oral history or the recording of game sessions. As he said previously, he believes that researchers have to experience the narrative agency to understand how TRPGs unfold. I am not sure I can argue with him on that point, but I

¹⁸² Schalleger, René Reinhold. *The Postmodern Joy of Role-Playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018. 8

would like to push back on his statement about oral history and recording role playing sessions.

He goes on to state:

By taking notes or recording the audio and/or video of a gaming session, a researcher will not get a record of an RPG *session*, they will get a *record* of an RPG session. The textuality of RPGs is dynamic, procedural, collective, oral and ephemeral; a transcript is static, finalized, individual, written/printed and lasting. The written transcription of an oral history is a known problem when studying cultures.¹⁸³

Again, I think he raises good points about the nature of narrative in RPGs. As Schalleger says, role playing is ephemeral, dynamic, and collective. All of these points I agree with, but he sells oral history short. He lampoons the “individual” and “static” nature of oral history citing it as a “known problem when studying cultures”. Theoretically, in a postmodern world, there is some merit to the idea that a participant observation study might suit role playing games research, but I think to eschew oral history based on the individuality and “static” nature is a disservice to not only TRPGs but to the whole field of game studies.

Oral histories have traditionally served an important purpose in the study of many fields and especially history. One of the biggest concerns I have about participant observations is who is telling the story. In participant observation the researcher is in control of the narrative and other participants involved have no say in how the researcher tells or fails to tell their stories. This is where oral history projects provide an important tool for communities to advocate for themselves and control their own narrative. This focus on diverse voices, telling their own stories, is one of the primary reasons we started this project.

¹⁸³ Schalleger, 8

The other aspect of oral history which inspired this project was the ability to collect a wide array of diverse stories from any and all backgrounds. Due to the legacy of war gaming, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and the overwhelming popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*, role playing games had a particular reputation of being the hobby of white male nerds.¹⁸⁴ In the early days of the hobby, white men dominated many of the spaces in which people played these games. However, that does not mean they were the only ones playing TRPGs. A major focus of this project was to collect the many diverse voices of the TRPG community, and especially women and BIPOC who played in the early days. Oral history collections are tools for libraries and archives to bring a voice to the voiceless and to forge bonds with their local communities.

Community archives and oral history projects are opportunities to represent diverse voices and to build relationships with local communities. In her article “Creating Connections, Building Community: The Role of Oral History Collections in Documenting and Sharing Campus Diversity” Anna R. Craft states:

Oral history is one avenue where libraries and archives can build connections and trust within diverse communities while also giving underrepresented groups an opportunity to share their stories and have their voices become part of the historical record.¹⁸⁵

This is an important goal of ours in our pursuit of this archive and something that participant observation cannot do. The goal of our collection is to grant as much agency to the participants as we can. As we are ourselves members of the role-playing community, we are doing our best to accurately represent the diversity of our fellow gamers.

¹⁸⁴ Appelcline, loc 1202

¹⁸⁵ Craft, Anna R. “Creating Connections, Building Community: The Role of Oral History Collections in Documenting and Sharing Campus Diversity.” *Serials Review* 44, no. 3 (July 2018): 232–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00987913.2018.1513750>. 233

WYOS is a hybrid of a DIY archive and a community participatory archive. As noted previously both of our founders are members of the community from which we are collecting these stories. WYOS is not attached to a library or archive and we therefore have no budget which means we are truly doing this on our own. There is quite a bit of crossover between the two types of institutions. Sarah Baker points this out in her article “Do-it-yourself institutions of popular music heritage: the preservation of music’s material past in community archives, museums and halls of fame” she states that:” DIY institutions are akin to community archives; what Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd refer to as ‘any collection of material that documents one or many aspects of a community’s heritage, collected in, by and for that community and looked after by its members’”¹⁸⁶ She further clarifies by defining DIY institutions as “grassroots cultural institutions whose creators established their own self-managed archival and museum facilities after identifying the need for a repository for the vast collections of popular music artefacts in their communities.”¹⁸⁷ In the context of her article, Baker is specifically focusing on institutions of popular music and hall of fames which collect popular music artifacts. Regardless the sentiment of WYOS is much the same.

While WYOS certainly embodies the definition of a DIY archive we also fall squarely into the category of community archive. Community archives are tools often utilized by marginalized communities to collect and preserve their voices for future generations. As such we thought creating one of our own might help elevate these voices. In the world of professional

¹⁸⁶ Baker, Sarah. “Do-It-Yourself Institutions of Popular Music Heritage: The Preservation of Music’s Material Past in Community Archives, Museums and Halls of Fame.” *Archives & Records* 37, no. 2 (September 2016): 170–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2015.1106933>. 171

¹⁸⁷ Baker, 173

archiving these community-based archives are somewhat new, even if some of the archives themselves are not. Michelle Caswell et. al note that:

Professional archivists and archival studies scholars are only beginning to reckon seriously with the emergence of community-based archives. This engagement has required a reframing of the practices of appraisal, description and access to align with community-specific priorities, reflect cultural values and facilitate community participation in archival decision making¹⁸⁸

They go on to highlight the concept of “symbolic annihilation” of communities. This concept used in multiple disciplines, but Caswell is specifically referencing how the concept plays out in media studies. She uses the term to denote how members of marginalized communities can often feel when they do not see themselves represented in archival spaces.¹⁸⁹ Symbolic annihilation in this sense stems from their community not being part of the history thus eliminating them from the narrative. Community archives are one way to correct this damaging trend.

The WYOS archive aims to curb the symbolic annihilation of women, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC role-players. Much of the current scholarship concerning the early days of TRPGs focuses on white male voices and white male actors in the industry. While it is true that two white men created *Dungeons & Dragons*, arguably the first role playing game, it would not be accurate to say that the early adopters of the hobby were as homogenous as the popular conception and the scholarship suggests. We know of a few women from the early days, and we suspect there are more. For example, one Reddit responder from r/rpg known as RedwoodRhiadra noted that they used to play the “brand-new basic D&D Set” with their sister. They specifically note the red box placing this around 1983.¹⁹⁰ We want to find these kinds of

¹⁸⁸ Caswell, Michelle, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor. “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation.” *Archives & Records* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>. 6

¹⁸⁹ Caswell et al, 8

¹⁹⁰ <https://wyostory.wordpress.com/reddit/r-rpg/r-rpg-prompt-1-08-14-2020/>

stories and make them available to the public. The last element of our archive is maybe the most important and that it is the participatory element.

We have intentionally built our archive as an open source and public repository so that members of the community have a say in how we organize arrange and provide access to their stories. While I have years of experience working in archival settings, it is important that the community gets a say in how our archive arranges and provides access to their stories. Archival standards for arrangement and description often lag behind social progress especially vis-à-vis LGBTQ+ terminology. This is one of the reasons it is so crucial to involve any community in the collection of their stories.

Involving the community in the arrangement and description also contributes to a better understanding of the ways in which members of this community create archival memory. As Ana Roeschly and Kim Jeonghyun state in their case study on Mass. Memories Road shows:

For many community-led archives, community members are directly responsible for the appraisal and contribution of the archival record and its description. A larger focus on this array of contributions can lead to a greater understanding of the ways in which community members both create and shape archival memory.¹⁹¹

The road shows asked members of the community to bring photographs which represented their family history or community. The archivists would scan the photos and collect stories about the photograph from the donor which the archivists indexed alongside the photograph.¹⁹² Through this method of collection they are collecting more than just the photograph. They are also collecting a bit of information about the community and what they value.

¹⁹¹ Roeschly, Ana, and Jeonghyun Kim. ““Something That Feels like a Community’: The Role of Personal Stories in Building Community-Based Participatory Archives.” *Archival Science* 19, no. 1 (March 2019): 27–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09302-2>. 31

¹⁹² Roeschly, Ana, and Jeonghyun Kim, 34

One of the major aspects they focused on in their analysis of the project was a sense of community belonging. They noted that:

Stories about community belonging take the focus away from the experiences and actions of community involvement and bring attention to feelings of connection, membership, belonging, and inclusion. Whether forged through connections with loved ones or through community involvement in local events, community belonging is what allows individuals to feel like they are a part of the larger collective.¹⁹³

What they describe as community belonging in this passage is part of what we hope to foster in the TRPG community through community involvement in this archive. We want to extend the opportunity for anyone in the community to tell their story and feel as though they belonged in our archive. We want gamers to feel confident, important, and in control of their own historical narrative.

The WYOS archive strives to be an intersection of DIY oral history collection and community archive. We believe oral history is an effective means of studying the TRPG community despite some of the concerns voiced by other scholars. Through this we seek to provide a platform for an underrepresented community and invite them to dictate how to tell their stories. It is our sincerest hope that this project grows beyond our humble DIY beginnings and develops into a living, breathing collection run by the community it represents.

Our Origin Story: From an Idea to Reality

This archive was born of an idea which, in its simplest form, was to provide a truly open source and public archive of TRPG stories. Open source to us meant that the information would remain in the public sphere and gathered from public sources. This reflects participatory nature of the collection. The idea was simple, collect the stories of tabletop role players in Wisconsin

¹⁹³ Roeschley, Ana, and Jeonghyun Kim, 42

especially those early gaming groups from the 1970s. *Dungeons & Dragons* was born in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and as such many of the very earliest TRPG groups have roots here in our state. Part of the impetus for this project was rooted in the fact that some of the individuals from this groups are getting older, and as such we wanted to capture their stories while we still had the chance.

The other main driver for this idea was what we perceived a lack of diversity in the popular narrative of tabletop gaming. What we saw were many stories about Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson and their circle but not much about those people outside of this group. More notably we noticed a lack of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ voices in the narrative history of gaming. We wanted to invite those members of these groups to tell their stories in their own words and to help fill in the history that is missing. It was our hope that the oral history format would lend itself to the collection of these unique stories in the voices of those who lived them.

These were our goals when we first set out to create this archive. The first step was to figure out where we would host our archive and how we would conduct the interviews. As we had no resources of our own, we opted to work with University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, as we are both graduate students there, in the hopes we might one day procure funding. Being completely independent comes with a certain amount of intellectual freedom but in the interest of applying for grants we opted to affiliate ourselves with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Oral history projects count as research with human subjects in the social sciences therefore we needed permission to compile these stories under the umbrella of the university. For our archive that meant we needed approval to conduct this research.

We had a few groups of role players we wanted to schedule interviews with and so we set to work making a proposal for the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We

outlined our project for them and submitted the necessary paperwork. Without going too far into the bureaucratic details of this process it is sufficient to say that we submitted the outline and questions we would ask, and the board approved us to commence our research in a timely manner. The initial set up of this part of the project was quick and relatively painless. There did seem to be a little confusion about the nature of our project though.

The IRB generally deals with projects in the hard sciences, as a result they had a different idea of what our project actually entailed. A good example of this was that as part of the approval process I had to complete a training course which taught me about the ethics of doing research on human subjects. Most of the scenarios in these training modules revolved around drug trials and psychology experiments, thus not preparing us for the task we had ahead of us. It also seemed that the IRB was not quite sure what it was we were collecting from our participants. They were concerned about personal information which was not really something we were after. We did not even require identifying information to participate. We even had an option to submit anonymous interviews. Overall, this process was helpful as it made me think about some of these potential issues that I may not have otherwise considered.

After obtaining the approval we then had to make sure our questions and equipment were up to the task of recording these interviews. In order to test both we decided to conduct test interviews. In the fall of 2019, we each interviewed the other in order to test out our set up. These interviews went well and clocked in around an hour each. This gave us an approximate target time for our interviews going forward. It also gave us a confirmation that the equipment we had access to, through the university, was operational and adequate for recording our oral history interviews. The next step was to get some other samples and actually start the archive. Before we started this process though we wanted to build a website.

We spent much of early 2020 working on building a website¹⁹⁴. As this project still had no budget, we opted for a free WordPress site. This seemed the simplest and cheapest solution. We built the website together over the course of January and February of 2020. We made sure to include all of the legal information which the IRB wanted us to provide to potential participants. We also included a mission statement, short biographical statements on ourselves and a general outline of our vision for the project. At this point were ready to start scheduling some interviews.

We reached this point during spring semester 2020 and we were about to go on spring break which seemed like a great time to start collecting interview in earnest. We started making plans to spend our spring break collecting a few interviews from friends who we knew were already interested in the project. Our ultimate goal was to really hit the ground running in the summer of 2020 and collect interviews all around the Midwest. We were at the point where we were going to reach out to staff at popular gaming conventions to see if they would allow us to collect stories at their events. It seemed as though things were going well, and our plan seemed both logistically feasible, if a bit ambitious. It was unfortunately not to be, there were powers larger than us at work and it seemed time was not on our side.

Changing Course: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 changed every aspect of life in March of 2020. The University of Wisconsin system extended spring break 2020 by two weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shelter in place orders were issued the weekend of spring break and as we watched our plans crumble before our very eyes the United States spiraled into a deadly and disastrous cycle of public health blunders which, at the time of writing has cost over 523,000 American

¹⁹⁴ <https://wyostory.wordpress.com/>

lives.¹⁹⁵ After derailing our entire lives for three months we realized we were not going to see the end of this any time soon and we needed to adapt to keep our project alive.

Due to the public health risk of meeting in person we determined that the best course of action was to change our approach for collecting stories. As so many things had moved online, we also determined that our best course forward would be to collect stories from online sources. We turned to social media platforms as a way to reach gamers. There are many online spaces wherein gamers congregate already on many major social media platforms. We decided on a few spaces online which we thought we might get the most outreach. We primarily decided to use the platforms we were already familiar with: Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit.

In addition to this move online we decided to shift our methods as well. While we did not entirely abandon the idea of conducting oral history interviews, we thought it best to employ an additional approach to the collection of oral history interviews. We developed the idea of journaling type prompts which we would disseminate through the various social media channels, these prompts would echo the questions we had written for the oral history interviews. The idea was to post a new question every other week in each of the various communities we had chosen. We also posted these on our website's blog and made them accessible through our Facebook page so that participants could comment directly on our website. Our aim was to make these prompts as accessible and visible as possible.

As mentioned earlier we did not give up on oral history interviews. We possessed the technology to record oral history interviews online. We made a point of mentioning this in each of our journaling prompt posts as well as making more general announcements in some of these

¹⁹⁵ https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_totaldeaths

gaming communities so that people would know we were still looking for oral history participants. In the first three months that we were in operation we recorded at least one interview of each category we had on offer. Currently one of these is available on our website.¹⁹⁶

We offered three different options for oral history submissions, video interviews, audio only interviews and fully written interviews. Our reasons for offering these variations were two-fold first, as previously mentioned, accessibility was and remains high on our priorities and offering multiple options allows participants to choose the option they are most comfortable with or the one that best suits the technology available to them. When we had initially conceived this project, we had not really needed to make that consideration as we meant to do all of the interviews with our own equipment in our own space. This would eliminate the need for these considerations for the most part. However, we had always planned on doing audio only and written interviews.

One of our primary goals in starting this archive was to provide a diverse and safe space for people outside of the white male hegemony which prevailed in many representations of this subculture. There are times when members of these groups wish to remain anonymous especially in the LGBTQ+ community. While some members may have come out to their gaming communities there may be risks associated with coming out in such a public online venue. As such we intended to maintain the anonymity of any participant who specifically requested it. The safety of our participants was always a concern of ours and thus we strove to take any precautions necessary to ensure it.

¹⁹⁶ <https://wyostory.wordpress.com/interviews/>

This issue of privacy and safety becomes a bit complicated when dealing with the social media journaling project. This portion is the truly open-source aspect of our program. Everything we collect is coming from public sources, with a few caveats. Our IRB requires that we only collect data from spaces in which we identify ourselves as researchers and inform participants that we are collecting their responses to our queries. This is a standard ethical practice in any social science research. You have to let subjects know they are taking part in a study. The other is that we inform participants that they must be eighteen years of age or older to participate. This one is harder to enforce.

Social media affords users a certain amount of anonymity which can help and hinder our collection for the archive. The appeal of the relative anonymity of the medium allows for our participants to have peace of mind that we are not collecting personal data. Two of the three major platforms we were harvesting responses, Twitter and Reddit, allow for complete anonymity. Neither of these platforms require users to attach any personal information to an account except for an e-mail. Facebook on the other hand does require that its users provide their real name. However, they do not require any form of verification, so it is quite easy to make a Facebook account with a fake name. Regardless the veil of social media, however thin it may be at times, affords our participants some assurances that we are not collecting their personal information.

As mentioned earlier though it does make it difficult for us to know who it is that is participating in our study. While we have provided all participants with the limitations of our study and the age requirements for participation, we have no way to realistically enforce them. We instead place a certain amount of trust in our participants that they are complying with our rules. This also makes it difficult to determine the demographics of the participants, which limits

the ways in which scholars can use this archive. We cannot draw any conclusions about specific demographic groups from this social media data unfortunately, unless they provide it willingly in their response to our prompt.

The COVID-19 pandemic threw us a curveball in the development of our archive. We had to pivot to an entirely different format of data collection than we were expecting. We devised a plan based on our knowledge of the TRPG community and the restrictions imposed on us by our status with the University. These changes, while significant, did not preclude the collection of oral histories entirely but rather moved this process into a virtual realm. Overall, while the project certainly has taken on a different form, it is in no way less effective or useful than we originally intended. In fact, the addition of this social media element introduced an element of participation which we would not have otherwise included.

Results: What Did We Learn?

The WYOS archive is only in its very early stages but I feel I have learned much from the preparation and execution of this project. Through the course of our planning preparation and then re-planning and subsequent preparation there has been a significant amount of time for me to reflect on nature of this archive and the question of representing a community or subculture in an archive. I have seen the merits and limitations of our methods as well as the merits and limitations of gathering information from social media platforms.

When we first launched the project and made announcements on social media, we were not quite sure what to expect. We were working off of my knowledge of institutional archiving methods and procedures, which worked well when it came time to collect, store, organize, and index oral histories but they turned out to be less effective for the social media side of things as

we would later find out. We were also unsure of what exactly TRPG community would think of our project. I stated earlier that role players like to share their stories, and this is what we were counting on.

Promotion of our archive was almost entirely by word of mouth. In the 21st century word of mouth usually entails a social media presence of some sort. We shared posts in Facebook groups, Discord servers, on Twitter and in subreddits. Initially reception was good and we got a lot of traffic on posts, friends shared them around and we even had a few initial interview requests. The initial enthusiasm was encouraging but of course it did not last. Social media engagement often runs in cycles. Activity on posts will rise and fall with time which is a pretty natural course of internet correspondence.

The one aspect which impressed us initially was the Reddit responses to our journaling prompts. While we initially got four or five responses directly on our blog for the first two prompts that sharply dropped off after the third post. The Reddit posts by contrast really hit the ground running. The first prompt (Describe your first RPG experience) got seven responses across r/DnD and r/rpg, and they really only went up from there for the first few weeks. Prompt number three (Tell us about your first character or your favorite character) garnered twenty-three responses from these same two subreddits. Of course, this trend did not hold forever but it was an exciting start which left us with a lot of data and an issue of what to do with it all.

This initial surplus of data presented a problem of providing access. While we had participants responding on Reddit to these prompts, we faced the issue of how to get that information onto our website. Initially we had thought that we might be able to create a blog page for each social media platform we were gathering responses from. However, the free version of WordPress only allows one blog which we had already dedicated to posting the

prompts and collecting responses from users. I decided that the best way to handle this was to copy the text from the Reddit thread into a word document, format it and then paste this formatted text into a blank page. I then made a series of landing pages for each subreddit, and then nested under that a page for each prompt accessible via a button on the landing page which would take the researcher to a page which displayed the formatted thread. This solution looked nice and was well organized. It may not have been up to archival standards of digital preservation, for example for digital preservation purposes it is best practice to keep a preservation master file and then make a separate access copy. For this project the only access copy is these posts found online. All of the preservation masters are the word documents which reside on my hard drive. While we may not have the prescribed number of backups or any true access copies for providing access it worked in a pinch.

In the early days of this project, I had grand visions of external hard drives dedicated to this project which would hold preservation masters of all of our content. These remain dreams of mine but nothing more than that at the time of writing. The curse of having the experience and knowledge of a trained archivist while overseeing a DIY archive is knowing the “right” way to preserve information but lacking the resources to carry out your well-intentioned digital preservation policies. At the time of writing these formatted .docx word documents sit in their dedicated folder on my cloud drive, with a backup on my desktop’s hard drive, and the third backup is unfortunately the original Reddit post. On the one hand we do have the recommended three backups but two of them are on my personal drives. When it comes to .docx files this is an adequate solution at least but archiving video and audio files are a bit more cumbersome and take up a lot of space very fast.

At the outset of this project, even in its initial incarnation, audio visual files were my main concern when considering storage solutions. Audio visual files are cumbersome from the get-go and they take up lots of storage space. Best practices are to keep preservation masters in a lossless format such as FLAC or JPEG2000, but these are massive files and as mentioned earlier we did not have a dedicated drive for this work. Early on I compromised and just decided to use MP4 and MP3 formats for preservation masters to save on space. At the time of writing, we have only recorded two oral history videos, although one of the access copies is audio only. Thus, at present storage is not a concern but will become a hurdle in the future. The far larger obstacle right now is getting people to participate in the oral history portion of the project.

As the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic set in and we had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were not going to be doing in person interviews we initially saw this as an advantage. Moving the interviews online meant that we did not have to factor in travel time or expenses were we to interview someone who lived outside of the greater Milwaukee area. We had the technology in our homes to record remote interviews on our PCs and make them available on our website. The prospect was exciting, and we had two volunteers in the first couple weeks of our archive's existence which was encouraging. However, five months have passed since our second interview, and we have not had a single interview in that time. We found ourselves wondering why this was and came up with a few possible reasons.

The first reason is just circumstantial, people are busy. Role players just like anyone else are busy people. We have day jobs, some of us go to school, we have kids, spouses, hobbies, and pets just like anyone else. There has been so much stress and shake up lately that many people are still under an insurmountable amount of ambient stress which makes scheduling extra activities like this difficult. This is something I had initially thought might be remedied by

moving the interviews online. However, after just a few weeks of quarantining at home I realized this would not be the case. I was at home but somehow just as busy as before. If I was too busy how could I expect participants to make time for an archive project they have never heard of before.

This was the next problem we ran into; we had no name recognition. We had been doing our part to promote the archive on social media but building a brand takes time. We had a few takers at the outset, both had mutual friends who had referred them to us, but after those initial two not much interest. We began mentioning the oral history option in the posts we made for the journaling prompt in the hopes of drumming up some more volunteers but so far it has not worked out. I know from experience that maintaining a social media presence demands a lot of time and effort. In my work at the UWM archives we had a team of five people dedicated to writing and posting on our social media site and that took up a significant portion of our time. In the 21st century social media can be a full-time job, which puts two graduate students with day jobs at a distinct disadvantage. We simply did not have the time to commit to chasing down participants and selling them on our archive and our oral history project specifically. It also turns out some role players did not think they were important enough to participate.

A surprising amount of role players who I talked to and asked to complete an oral history interview did not see their stories as important enough to record. I am not entirely sure if this was a miscommunication on our part or if it says something about the role players concept of self-importance, either way it was a common response. They often assumed that we were only collecting stories of people who worked in the industry or famous DMs who had actual play podcasts or ran games on Twitch streams. I found this assumption odd as we had never conveyed this in any of our posts or online materials. It also would seem redundant to collect the stories of

these public online personas, in a way their podcasts or videos already serve as a record of their careers in gaming. Overall, I think that TRPG players should think more of themselves and their stories. They are interesting and important maybe even more than those famous voices.

This project has opened my eyes to so many aspects of archiving and the TRPG community. I have learned that I need to have realistic expectations when it comes to maintaining a DIY community archive, just because I know the industry standard does not mean it will always be attainable. I also learned that just because we are collecting stories does not mean everyone wants to give us their stories, and we need to accept that it will take time to gain a reputation. We learned to adapt, the Pandemic of 2020 seemed like an insurmountable hurdle when it first hit, but we flourished despite the grim situation the world faced.

The TRPG community is a vibrant and diverse community which we seek to capture. Every voice is important enough for WYOS. Every voice has a different story to tell, and WYOS wants as many as we can get. The history of the TRPG industry is well documented but we are still writing the history of the players. The scholarship of this unique medium is in its infancy, and we have a chance to avoid the pitfall of symbolic annihilation some groups have face in archival collections. WYOS hopes to be part of the solution which helps prevent the problem before it begins.

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