

In Search of the Self

A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory

This paper summarises major English-language strands in thought about role-playing from the 1970s onward, taking an archaeology approach to the development of ideas. Starting from the highly structured initial form of the game, it will proceed to elaborate the crude but influential 'Fourfold Way', a taxonomy of player motivation, and further note theories of 'frames' and 'stances', as well as the 'storytelling' of the White Wolf games, all attempts to represent the multi-level nature of the player-character relationship with a variety of metaphorical devices. A number of other theories will be mentioned to show the diversity of approaches, including Tolkienian subcreation and writing on Mask Theory. Finally pointers to currently active sources of role-playing thought are offered.

One of the difficulties in attempting to compile even such a brief, provisional introduction to role-playing game theory as this is the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the activity. In the context of this book, perhaps the most important ambiguity concerns the distinction between so-called 'tabletop'¹ and live-action role-playing. But this is by no means the first ambiguity encountered in attempting to trace any history of the hobby.

Almost any attempt to record the early history of role-playing gets mired in the agenda of the historian. While the usual custom is to point to the 1974 publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Tactical Studies Rules as the 'beginning' of role-playing, that game did not contain the words 'role-playing game'. Moreover, the antecedents of the game were obvious. It was a direct descendent of wargames (its cover said 'rules for fantastic medieval wargames'), and thus wargamers who wish to argue that role-playing is little more than the bastard offspring of their hobby have plenty of ammunition. There are other antecedents of role-playing which may be called upon to support one or other view of the true nature of role-playing. For example, in the early 1980s I encountered the claims of one David Palter to have been playing what he called a 'Talking Game' in the late sixties. While it undoubtedly had affinities with role-playing games, it had affinities with many other forms of shared spoken entertainment, so it is difficult to claim it as the 'first' role-playing game.

¹ Known here in Japan by the more inventive term 'tabletalk'.

Similarly, the celebrated world of *Tékumel*, created by Professor M. A. R. Barker², existed for decades before the publication of *Empire of the Petal Throne* by TSR in 1975. To what extent the imaginative exploitation of the world by Barker and his friends constituted role-playing is highly debatable.

Rather than begin what will in any case be a contentious overview (because of the selection) with an argument, I propose to simply regard the publication of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 as a 'year zero' for role-playing. The game's antecedents are clearly discoverable in the early theory, in any case.

This paper also limits itself to English-language theory, primarily that published in the US and UK. This is not because of an absence of theory elsewhere. Far from it: it is because the linguistic and geographical distances involved led to non-English speaking countries developing very different and imaginative approaches of their own. Some of these approaches finally trickled into the English-speaking world through the actions of interested parties; others still await an introduction.

The First Five Years: Fireballs

Dungeons & Dragons was not an instant hit. In the first year it sold little more than 1000 copies (Fine 1983, 15). It took a couple of years for word-of-mouth to spread news of the game, and generate increasing sales and a body of players. That formative period, though barely documented, is significant. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* rules were a mess. They assumed that readers were already wargamers, and moreover left far more unexplained than explained. As a result, the first few years of *Dungeons & Dragons* saw a multitude of interpretations of the game. The period, and the limitations of that first edition, also led directly to the wave of games which followed D&D³.

Gary Gygax, the editor of first edition D&D who subsequently claimed authorship of the game, expended considerable space in the pages of *The Dragon* (the house magazine of the publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons* during the late 1970s and early 1980s) asserting the importance of players following a standardised, 'authorised' set of rules – specifically the rules published by his company. He berated fanzines for 'propagating material which is generally detrimental to the campaign.' (quoted in Fine 1983, 256). Yet ironically the fanzines emerged to a large extent as a result of players' desires for a consistent game that worked – a need not fulfilled by original D&D. This was certainly the case with one of the earliest, and most influential fanzines, *Alarums & Excursions*, as its editor Lee Gold has explained (quoted in Fine 1983, 32).

These early tabletop role-playing experiences did not stray all that far from their wargames origins. Many of the tropes that subsequently became embedded in the genre,

² Details of this remarkable creation can be found at www.tekumel.com (22.12.2003)

³ Ed Simbalist, author of *Chivalry & Sorcery* has stated on numerous occasions that the game was originally conceived as a 'supplement' for D&D and became a game in its own right partly because of TSR's lack of interest in publishing it, and partly because the D&D rule superstructure wasn't up to supporting the historicity desired.

and in derivative genres such as computer RPGs and even larps, can be traced either to skirmish wargaming or to the improvisations of early D&D players. Thus while 'character classes' and 'prime requisites' were a particularly tenacious legacy of the original D&D game, resolution of conflict through an abstract rules simulation was derived from wargaming, and 'spell points' one of many ideas originated by fans.

Initially, writing about role-playing games (or 'D&D' as all games were genericised in the early days) was resolutely technical. The game experience mainly consisted of pretending to be a character who would descend into a subterranean cave complex (to which the word 'dungeon' was somewhat inappropriately affixed), fight monsters, and recover treasure. Part of the appeal of the game was this structure and simplicity in the core activity, a simplicity which subsequently found more accomplished expression in the field of video games. While other activities were present from early on (the 'bar room brawl' being a popular, if apparently anachronistic, alternative to dungeon exploration) the central activity remained relatively unquestioned, at least within the D&D fraternity (other games such as *Chivalry & Sorcery* and *Traveller* were establishing other possibilities). Thus writing generally fell into three broad categories:

- 1 Expansion. Additional monsters, spells, items, character classes, and rules generally.
- 2 Expression. Scenarios and write-ups of adventures.
- 3 Interpretation. Debate over the correct way to interpret rules issues.

Rules disagreements generated what would now seem an almost incredible level of conflict. Arguments over interpretations of the D&D spell Fireball, for example, raged over several issues of the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*.

From the category of interpretation, some theory started to emerge as writers began to consider procedural issues arising from the rules, but going beyond them in implication. These would probably strike current role-players as quaint. For example, in the early days it was suggested that players act as a 'party' and their intentions and actions be relayed to the 'Dungeon Master' (as the referee was invariably known) by one member designated a 'caller'. The pros and cons of this system received much attention in print, and the argument shaded into the wider issue of whether or not players were best served by toeing the TSR line in all things. That Gary Gygax's attempts to mould role-playing in his own image were ultimately unsuccessful is demonstrated in many places, with the disappearance of the 'caller' as a game procedure being but one.

This also marks an important point in the transition of perceptions of role-playing from skirmish wargaming (in which participants 'identify' with their characters, but ultimately are players moving tokens) to more immersive role-playing. The levels of immersion and identification which are taken for granted now were considered somewhat extreme in the late 1970s.

Most analysis of the role of the referee was phrased in quite specific language which sometimes concealed the real issue being addressed. From early on it was evident

that although the 'Dungeon Master' was modelled on the referee of a wargame, the correspondence was inexact. Because the players tended towards co-operation rather than conflict, the role-playing referee had to provide opposition, a task somewhat at odds with the more impartial activities expected of a wargaming referee (such as rules arbitration and handling the 'fog of war'). In a game which was still approached more as a skirmish wargame than as a story-generator, this created an obvious source of tension. It was expressed in discussion comparing the extremes of referee behaviour, labelled 'Killer Dungeon' on the one hand and 'Monty Haul' on the other (this discussion appeared in most professional and amateur publications of the period, and can also be found in Fine, 1983). The former stressed the conflict between the referee and players taken to extremes: referees would kill player characters more-or-less arbitrarily. 'Monty Haul' was a joke derived from a US TV gameshow host; in this style the referee was constantly trying to please players by distributing treasure and items within the game. While most treatment of the topic advocated a middle ground, it took some years before it was widely recognised that the problem was an inevitable result of confusion in the goals of the game. As a pure conflict game, D&D was nonsensical (and was often derided as such by wargamers) since the referee had access to limitless resources to counter the highly limited powers of the player characters. Only when more overtly story-oriented approaches emerged widely during the 1980s was this contradiction overcome, and the role of the referee subjected to more detailed scrutiny.

Thus much of the early effort went into rules. Only when these had been taken to greater levels of sophistication would it be possible to start exploring implications beyond the established structure. Much work on developing new rules and settings was done in fanzines. Parts of *Runequest*, for example, a hugely influential game both in its rules and setting, originally appeared in the fanzines *Alarums & Excursions* and *The Wild Hunt*.

Development

The late 1970s and early 80s saw the beginnings of a more theoretical approach to role-playing games. As yet, cases of genuine academic engagement were highly infrequent, and generally met with incomprehension at best, and derision at worst. But the Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine, which first appeared in 1979, presented a professional forum for more thoughtful material.

By far the most frequently covered topic in role-playing publications both professional and amateur at the time was a debate concerning the relative merits of realism and playability. Typically, the two were regarded as mutually exclusive, extremes of a continuum. The discussion can be seen to derive from the concerns of wargames: with the primary goal of simulating a real or close-to-real situation, the issue becomes the extent to which compromises can be made in rules to simplify the procedure of play. Again, perhaps because a wargaming paradigm was being applied to altered

circumstances, the debate rarely rose above the level of a slanging match, but in it can be found the seeds of later thought on the nature of the imaginary experience, styles of play and so on.

During this period more creativity was applied to settings for games. The initial D&D dungeon was characterised as a 'zoo', full of monsters and treasure placed somewhat arbitrarily. This phantasmagoric assemblage became increasingly unsatisfactory to many players, who developed what they referred to as 'living dungeons'. These fascinating compromises enabled gamers to retain the underground labyrinth (or in some cases, castle) as the mainstay of their gaming experience, while applying some measure of logic: the 'dungeons' were conceived to be functioning communities. The idea quickly spilled over into the commercial field, with TSR publishing the G series of modules (adventures) starting with G1 *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* in 1978.

The natural extension of this movement, however, was to remove the focus of the game from the dungeon altogether, and for the action to take place in a 'world'. At this point, especially in the UK, many writers derived inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien's essay *On Fairy Stories*, which they saw as explaining the means by which he had created Middle-earth – the process he termed 'subcreation'. British fanzines published by older gamers (such as Pete Tamlyn's *The Acolyte* and Pete Lindsay's *Drunk & Disorderly*) increasingly featured material on the features, physical and cultural, of imaginary worlds. In this period the elaboration of a fantasy setting often took precedence over the expression of a role. One of the original appeals of D&D other than combat had been exploration; the discovery of, and engrossment in, a world outside the dungeon enabled this aspect to be taken to sometimes extreme lengths.

The most significant development in analysis of the player experience came in the form of the *Fourfold Way* taxonomy (Blacow 1980) by which player motivation was categorised as 'wargamer', 'powergamer', 'storyteller' or 'role-player'. Despite the inevitable disagreements (many of which seemed to stem from a desire to privilege one or another approach), the notion quickly caught on. After an initial article in *Different Worlds* the Fourfold Way was developed in an eponymous article in the subsequent issue by a different author. It was subsequently invoked and refined in a number of forums.

The principal justification for such analysis appeared to be that by identifying your preferences in terms of the fourfold way, you could avoid misunderstandings and style clashes with other players. As yet, there was still relatively little thought being applied to what constituted the act of role-playing itself. In one example of fanzine debate on the topic, a dichotomy was established between two ways of role-playing: 'playing from' and 'playing to' a character (Walker 1985). The former referred to a more immersive, unconscious approach (akin to method acting) while the latter described a consciously crafted simulation of personality through player choice. As with many such discussions, it petered out without leading very far beyond the original idea. Such discussions were generally bedevilled by political concerns: in many cases it seemed writers established categories in order to privilege their own approach. In some cases virulent arguments broke out, with at least one writer for *Alarums & Excursions*

withdrawing from the magazine over a claim that only ‘playing from’ a character (though this specific terminology was not used, the idea was the same) could be considered ‘true’ role-playing.

The Plot Thickens

The withdrawal from the dungeon created huge potential problems. Originally, players had been provided with a large measure of freedom. Once their characters had entered a dungeon, it was up to them to decide how they proceeded, and which direction they could explore. The referee had a detailed map and description of the contents of the dungeon. Although Herculean attempts were made, such detailed specifications were impossible once the game activity extended into an entire fantasy world. The ambiguous role of the referee once again took centre stage.

The solution was to move away from the freedom of the wargaming style, and look for inspiration from other genres. Since role-players had always been inclined to derive their material from literary and cinematic sources (the debt D&D owed Tolkien, even after explicit references were expunged, is obvious), they now started to think more about methodology. In books and films, the author crafted a plot. Why, therefore, shouldn’t the referee of a role-playing game also craft a plot? Instead of designing an environment, within which player characters would be free to ‘play’, the referee planned a story which would happen to the player characters, more or less irrespective of their actions.

This idea did not suddenly emerge, of course. Elements appeared in D&D from quite early on. But it was in the 1980s that articles explicitly advocated that referees start to view themselves as *auteurs* and, more influentially, scenarios started to be written this way. Perhaps because this enabled role-playing to be compared directly to other media, it quickly spread in popularity. Little thought was expended on its implications for the act of role-playing itself.

Going Live

The ambiguity surrounding the origins of role-playing has already been described. Initially, the activity was viewed as a branch of wargaming. Similarly, live-action role-playing was not initially regarded as a discrete category. Indeed, in the public imagination in the 1980s, D&D (ie. role-playing) *was* live-action role-playing. This ambiguity can be seen in media portrayals of the hobby, especially in the early Tom Hanks film *Mazes & Monsters* (1982) and to a lesser extent in the Spanish film *El Corazón del Guerrero* (2000).

For many, live-action was a natural extension of the tabletop activity, and legends sprung up of ‘steam tunnels’ underneath university campuses, in which D&Ders would

enact their games. The case of James Dallas Egbert, who went missing, believed by some to have 'lost himself' in a live-action D&D game, attracted unwelcome publicity to the concept (Dear 1991).

However there were established precedents which pre-dated D&D. The Society for Creative Anachronism is a medieval re-enactment society founded in 1966. Like similar organisations elsewhere in the world (such as the UK's Sealed Knot) the primary purpose is re-enactment and recreation of the period. However this inevitably shaded into role-playing when participants took on identities. The SCA directly influenced role-playing (the Runequest rules, in particular were inspired by findings from re-enacted combat) and traffic also flowed the other way. While one might expect the combat orientation of such enactment societies to fuel the preference for combat within role-playing, in practice the SCA was instrumental in generating interest in more political live-action role-playing.

The undifferentiated nature of the hobby was possible because so little detailed thought had been given to what actually constituted the act of role-playing. A perception of separation only started to emerge along with such thought. In the UK, this coincided with the establishment of Treasure Trap, a commercial operation based in a genuine castle. Treasure Trap reproduced all the tropes of D&D for live-action play, including character classes and dungeon exploration. Having game mechanics whose only purpose was to compensate for the lack of live-action ported over into a live-action experience made their contradictions all the more evident. Those who had moved on from D&D now derided this commercial form of live-action, and argued that while undeniably adrenalinising, it nevertheless represented a more limited form of role-playing, as players were constrained by their physical abilities as well as their mental ones. This argument was trumped in turn by those arguing for postal role-playing, who declared that the 'distance' from the actions of the character, the opportunity to think hard about actions, enabled a 'purer' form of role-playing.

Much of this debate, like others before and since, was primarily political arguments seeking to establish the superiority of one form or approach over another. It did have some positive consequences, however, in focusing attention on the relationship between the player and character. The rules intervene in order to make it possible for the character to achieve feats of which the player is incapable. But if this logic is followed to its conclusion, then the player would do nothing at all, since even making a decision is an expression of a person's abilities. Perhaps inevitably, at the same time as experiments with live-action role-playing were bearing fruit, many players were also trying out diceless and even ruleless (which is to say, fully referee-adjudicated) games. Others were integrating character personality more into the rules (in other words, taking elements of it out of the hands of the player). Chaosium's *Pendragon* (1985) expressed this idea in commercial form with its personality traits, though the 'character point' approach to character design pioneered by *Champions* and continued by *GURPS* could also be said to do the same, if in a more rule-intensive environment.

The form of larp called a 'Freeform' is claimed as an Australian invention⁴ though since similar activities were taking place in the UK and USA, perhaps the invention actually consists only of the name. Freeforms moved away from the combat orientation that had characterised *Treasure Trap* and its successors. The publication of *The Freeform Book*, and simultaneous experimentation with freeforms in the UK, particularly by those connected with the highly regarded British fanzine *Aslan*, helped to establish the form in its own right, paving the way for far deeper and more sophisticated contemporary expressions. At its origins, however, it was entwined with the tabletop form. *Aslan* reported on the integration of live-action sequences into a predominantly tabletop *Ars Magica* game at Warwick University.

Authorised Sources

The 1980s marked the commercial peak of Dungeons & Dragons. Inevitably, therefore, interest was sparked outside the 'industry'. 1982 saw the publication of two books on role-playing in the UK, the first from the Puffin imprint of Penguin, by three schoolboys (Butterfield et al 1982) and the second from Ian Livingstone (a founder of Games Workshop, the company which first imported Dungeons & Dragons into the UK, and which later went on to global success in the field of fantasy wargaming). Because of the target audience, and the limitations of the authors (Livingstone was a boardgamer at heart, and a money-maker first and foremost, as his subsequent success with *Tomb Raider* at Eidos demonstrates) neither of these books had anything to contribute to role-playing theory. At best, they offered a simple introduction to the D&D side of the hobby, with all its clichés.

The subsequent year saw the publication of *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (Fine 1983), a sociological study of the hobby which nevertheless managed to present far more useful theory than the works by supposed practitioners. Most influential was the invocation of Erving Goffman's 'frame analysis' as a means of examining how role-players switch between levels of identity. Fine explored how role-playing saw frame-switching far more rapid than that described by other social theorists, and related it to 'engrossment' (which may be seen as synonymous with immersion). These ideas were influential, especially on later work in the short-lived journal *Interactive Fantasy*, and appear elsewhere in the present collection.

Towards the end of the decade, Gary Gygax burst into print with the portentously titled *Role-Playing Mastery* (1989). Sadly, the book was marked only by a hissing aversion to just about every development from Gygax's original conception of dungeon delving. The 'mastery' of the title, it transpired, consisted of learning the rules thoroughly, and co-operating with other players in order to efficiently dispose of monsters and maximise treasure gained. Players who distracted from this goal by making some effort to 'act'

⁴ 'The world's first freeform was run by Peter Quinton at Octocon in Canberra, October 1982. The next was run at Cancon '83 and involved nearly 150 players.' (Chapman et al. 1993)

their characters were labelled problems. 'Plot' was no part of the Gygaxian picture. Gygax had left TSR in 1985, and this book did nothing to restore his place in the role-playing pantheon.

The Future In The Past

Though at the time it seemed like rather a minor game, 1988's *Ars Magica* was extremely important in finally releasing into the commercial sphere ideas which had hitherto been the province only of gaming groups of an experimental bent. Its authors went on to fame elsewhere, with Jonathan Tweet co-authoring the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* 12 years later and Mark Rein•Hagen being the head storyteller for *White Wolf* (of whom more anon). It is significant that both authors, along with Robin Laws who was to become one of the most significant figures of the fin de siècle – contributed to *Alarums & Excursions*, where their ideas could be subjected to intense scrutiny from highly experienced theorists.

Ars Magica concerned itself explicitly with the creation of a story by the gaming group. At the same time, however, it tackled very practically many of the problems that could emerge. The game background provided a relatively limited setting (the magical 'covenant') which could be detailed, while other places could be prepared as required. The character types were made not as artificially 'equalized' classes, but in order to support the shared model of gaming that came to be known as 'troupe' play. In this, the authorial power of the referee could be mitigated by rotating referee duties. Thus an *Ars Magica* game took place in a genuinely shared setting. Players would also be able to reduce the gaming trope of the 'adventuring party' by taking over other, shared, characters (known as 'grogs', perhaps as a deliberate jibe at wargamers) when their own main character was not involved in the current plot thread.

These were not completely new ideas (perhaps because of the intensely subcreated nature of the setting, *Tékumel* groups had also been rotating referee in a shared setting for many years) but this was their first expression in the commercial field.

The emphasis on storytelling continued with the publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991. This was significant for at least two reasons. It was another example of the way in which strands of role-playing diverge and then retwine. *Vampire* came from a successful live-action group, and the live-action sensibility informed the tabletop game. For many, this represented the (suitably bloody) final severing of the umbilical cord that connected wargaming and role-playing. A second key point was that *Vampire* and its successors took role-playing out of its core constituency (which could perhaps be pithily, if unkindly, be described as *Lord of the Rings*-reading social inadequates) and established an alternative fief – in this case that of undead-obsessed 'goths'.

At Last?

One of the most frustrating aspects of role-playing games for those who had been playing for a while was the impermanence of theoretical developments. As this paper itself demonstrates, most of the writing on role-playing appeared in ephemeral publications with very low print runs. As a result the ideas were only weakly disseminated. As new magazines emerged, the same ideas (particularly 'realism and playability') were continually gone over. For many it felt like the hobby was marching on the spot.

In 1994, therefore, James Wallis of Hogshead Games teamed up with Andrew Rilstone, editor of *Aslan*, to publish *Interactive Fantasy*⁵, a 'journal of role-playing and story-making systems.' While the project attracted much of the derision that the English-speaking role-playing hobby has always heaped on any attempt at thought, it nevertheless offered, for its brief span (the poorly thought-out business model on which it was predicated meant that only four issues were published) an eclectic blend of ideas about what had been done and what could be done.

Inevitably, old obsessions reared their heads. Taxonomy cropped up in the very first issue as Greg Porter attempted to fit role-playing to a deterministic historical progression of 'generations'. One excellent feature of the journal was, however, the debate it engendered; Porter's analysis was subjected to heavy critical scrutiny from Pete Tamlyn two issues later. Moreover, the view of role-playing was resolutely inclusive: live-action and freeforming were represented, as were computer role-playing and the use of role-playing in educational and therapeutic contexts.

In only four issues the journal had little opportunity to develop strong, coherent positions, but it did bring together a number of fascinating strands. For example, though unable to avoid the taxonomic urge, James Wallis pointed many readers in the direction of Keith Johnstone's seminal *Impro*. Wallis attempted to identify four ways of role-playing: puppet-play (the manipulation of a character primarily as a puzzle-solver or token), type-play (the manipulation character as a representative of a role which includes those role-plays used in business and other fields), personality-play (the creation of a fictional character) and finally, mask play. The latter was a putative style of play inspired by Johnstone's identification of the trance state induced by wearing Masks in improvisational acting (Johnstone 1981, 143–200). Wallis picked up on *Impro* on the recommendation of Dave Morris who, sadly, had never written about most of these ideas. Wallis went on to champion more social games, and never returned to Mask Theory; *Interactive Fantasy* ceased publication.

Another of the perennial concerns of role-playing, expressed frequently in *Interactive Fantasy* as well as elsewhere, is the quest to be recognised as 'art'. Robin Laws, who designed some of the most critically applauded games of the last few years (including *Feng Shui*, *Dying Earth* and *Hero Wars*) staked his claim in the pages of *Interactive Fantasy* and true to form, the claim was rebutted two issues later by Brian

⁵ The first issue was called *Inter*Action* but following legal threats from a computer games company, the name was changed.

Duguid. Laws at least had a useful reason for his assertion: that art demanded a critical framework⁶. Other demands for role-playing to be regarded as art were transparently motivated by a desire for social acceptance, the idea being that the status of art might provide this. Few writers seemed to notice that video games had emerged from their ghetto to full mainstream acceptance with few accompanying pretensions to the status of art.

Advocacy and Diversity

As the popularity of tabletop role-playing waned during the 1990s, fan activity shifted to the Internet. Prior to the inception of web-based forums such as *rpg.net*, the newsgroups of Usenet⁷ were the obvious location. A number sprung up concerned with role-playing games, with *rec.games.frp.misc* attracting most of the general discussion. Unfortunately this newsgroup also attracted a number of highly abusive posters, and anyone attempting to conduct a serious discussion would quickly be drowned out in trivia and rage. The alternative of *rec.games.frp.advocacy* was created as a place for advocates of one system over another to argue their case; ironically it developed into one of the few sites of critical discourse on role-playing.

The discussion on *rec.games.frp.advocacy* is too rarefied for many Usenet users, and too abusive for others (it *is* still Usenet, after all). While it tends towards the taxonomic, it nevertheless remains probably the single most significant source of Anglo-American role-playing theory that is available. While sifting through the archives on Google is not made all that easy by the interface (which assumes you know what you are looking for) if you can find a way of skimming it from the beginning you will discover an abundance of fascinating threads. Because of the tendency of Usenet towards irrelevance and abuse, however, probably a better solution is to browse the pages of John H. Kim, one of the most significant contributors to the newsgroup, who has collected a wealth of material on his website⁸.

Consistent with the history of role-playing game theory in the English-speaking world, one of the first things that writers attempted to do was to classify different player motivations. On *rec.games.frp.advocacy* the taxonomy of choice was the 'Threefold Way' (a term coined by Mary Kuhner in a post in July 1997), which emerged from a wide-ranging discussion. In the course of the discussion participants attempted to define various aspects of role-playing on appropriate axes. One suggestion, which provoked thought for a while but dropped out of use, suggested 'Preparation, Diagesis [sic], and

⁶ Unfortunately Laws's personal dislike for semiology (Laws 1994, 95) apparently blinded him to modern critical theory's critique of auteur-theory, and he was unable in his article to devote sufficient attention to the application of the latter to role-playing to avoid the impression that, as a writer of role-playing games, he was chasing auteur status for himself.

⁷ Usenet uses the news protocol rather than http. It is unknown to most new users of the Internet, despite being a mainstay from the days before the Web.

⁸ www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg

Metagame' as axes on which games/campaigns could be classified. But the most long-lived result came from the identification of 'stances' describing the relationship of the player to the game. The three stances of the 'Threefold Way' were based on the values of 'game', 'simulation' and 'drama'⁹. Despite inevitable disagreement over definitions, this identification of stances subsequently proved useful, both in allowing participants to state their own preferences, and in describing how different aspects of games might be approached from the different stances. For example, the question of whether the referee should prepare a plot prior to a game could be addressed in terms of the stances, with it being evident that a simulationist approach (in other worlds, one in which meta-game causes did not have in-game effects) would preclude such a practice.

Beyond 25 Years

Overall, the main characteristics of English role-playing game thought over the 25 years following the publication of Dungeons & Dragons have been dichotomy (realism vs playability, fun vs. seriousness) and taxonomy (the Three-/Fourfold Ways etc). It is interesting to note how these correspond to structural elements of the D&D game itself. Neither this, nor the persistent aversion of many English-speaking role-players to theory, has entirely succeeded in stifling advances in understanding of the phenomenon, yet the mainstream acceptance which many theorists crave seems no closer. It may be that despite role-playing's origins in the English-language culture sphere, it is only outside that environment that it can be properly examined.

In 2001 two books on role-playing theory were published. One, an academic tract, analysed role-playing primarily from a performance art perspective (Mackay 2001), while the other expressed the ideas on role-playing of a game designer, ideas which had previously been accessible only within his games, or by reading the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions* to which he contributed (Laws 2001). Both of these works will repay the interested student, and both feature content too dense and controversial to be tackled here. While the most remarkable thing about the first 25 years of role-playing theory is probably its published paucity, it is nevertheless reassuring to note that some works are trickling out.

This is especially true as the third edition of Dungeons & Dragons (published in 2000) represented a conscious retreat to the values and principles of the original game. Sufficient time had elapsed since the initial thrill for nostalgia to be a powerful drive even for those who have pioneered commercial advances in the field.

⁹ These ideas are further developed at the website *The Forge* (www.indie-rpgs.com), a site which provides an excellent current source of discussion on tabletop role-playing theory.

A Note on Sources

The overwhelming majority of sources for role-playing theory are ephemeral. Prior to the arrival of the Internet as a widespread means of exchange, most discussion took place in fanzines. Only a very few of these can still be obtained. Lee Gold maintains some back issues of *Alarums & Excursions* going back to the early 80s, which can be had from her. The author of this paper obtained an ISSN number for his fanzine, which means it is deposited with the British Library and therefore theoretically available. The derision which he received for doing this says something about general attitudes to the preservation of role-playing thought (or perhaps something about the quality of his fanzine). Because of the unavailability of sources, the majority of references are to books and journals which interested parties have at least a chance of obtaining.

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