

Battle Against Primitivism

A hundred years ago, film producers often made their movies by placing a fixed camera in front of a theatre play. Looking at such a film now is horrible. It barely seems like cinema at all. A good movie can have theatre sets and a fixed camera, but a full use of the medium requires editing, a moving camera, close-ups, post-production and all the other innovations that have been made since the time of Lumière. Stories are to role-playing as theatre is to cinema. As long as the endless talk about narratives continues, the camera will never move.

The film director Aki Kaurismäki has complained that no interesting films have been made after the cinema of the sixties, since that period marked the medium's last spasm of formal innovation. After the sixties, the conventions of film settled down, making Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) as fresh as Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985). In a sense, the role-player of today is lucky. He's able to literally invent new techniques and strategies of expression to every game, since it's all uncharted territory. Nothing's been set in stone yet, so there's nothing to prevent him from making the language of role-playing his own.

The flipside is that no one can claim to understand the medium now. It's young, unexplored and unfamiliar. There is precious little authority on which to build. The basic techniques of role-playing, the conventions and the mechanisms, are still being determined. Role-playing is about thirty years old now, and throughout most of that time has been as close to the real thing as a moving picture flipbook is to Kieslowski. The 19th century man didn't see much potential in flipbooks, and the same holds true of the modern *Dungeons & Dragons* player, who tends to resist all attempts to make his diversion into art.

Cultural evolution and development is impossible without the will to progress, and an important part of all growth is discarding the antiquated tools borrowed from other mediums. The camera started to move and the histrionic acting of the stage was replaced with the endless eyebrow wiggling of the silent era. In role-playing, the story is the relic, and no amount of creative back-peddalling or academic exploration can make it relevant.

Leftovers

The concept of a story or narrative holds a central position in the conceptual iconography of role-playing, but it hasn't always done so. I don't consider the original *Dungeons &*

Dragons to be role-playing at all, merely a tactical simulation spiced with a descriptive gloss, but for historical reasons it has to be included. Besides, right or wrong, it is the historical progenitor of the entire medium. Dungeons & Dragons has no pretensions, towards storytelling or anything else.

The concept of a storytelling game, a role-playing game using a story as its central formal metaphor, was popularised by the revolutionary games published by White Wolf, the first being *Vampire: the Masquerade*. Vampire broadened the scope of role-playing and brought a number of essential elements to the fore, especially social interaction. It did this, however, at the cost of introducing a lot of concepts like story and narrative, concepts foreign to actual role-playing.

Vampire was first published in 1991, and it and its sister games did a great service to the medium by giving alternatives to the old-school rape 'n' pillage games. Reading *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*, the second in White Wolf's series of Storyteller games, while still in my teens was a revelation. Some of my players adapted better than others. One made a werewolf biker killing-machine modelled after Antonio Banderas in the Robert Rodriguez film *Desperado* (1995). Another made a depressed, gay mystical kung-fu wizard who had just escaped from an orphanage where he had been raped, the trauma releasing his magic powers.

I can pretty much thank Vampire for being able to play the games I do today. However, today's quality games can usually be recognised by a distinct lack of kung-fu wizards, and by the same token, the very idea of a storytelling game is now merely a relic from a transitory era.

Yet now, almost fifteen years after the advent of Vampire, stories still infest the medium. Many tabletop GMs see themselves as storytellers, despite the fact that these two crafts have little in common besides the similar way you can use a funny voice to make comic characters. In larps, the idea of using stories is even more preposterous, since the medium doesn't even superficially support the concept.

Stories also infest the supporting material of the games, from the annoying trend to write little character-oriented short stories instead of designing playable roles to the mandatory pieces of fiction that seem to open almost every modern role-playing book. A gamer would describe a traditional game as "The story of my character", or a larp as "The story of a small village", despite the obvious fact that a role-playing game is neither.

Using stories in RPGs is very natural. People are constantly fictionalising their lives and other real-world events, and it's easy to use the same tools for seeing role-playing games in terms of a narrative. Stories are not a foreign concept to role-playing, but neither are they an integral one.

The individual experience of the player is at the centre of the role-playing medium. The player often forces his experience into a story as he struggles to make sense of the game, but in terms of the experience itself, the role-playing itself, the story is irrelevant and peripheral. Trying to tell stories through role-playing is fighting against the very grain of the medium, trying to force an essentially interactive and unpredictable

process into a stifling harness. It's like shooting yourself in the foot and then trying to run the marathon.

Role-playing exists in the now, in the moment of the game. It exists in the now even more so than a theatre performance or a concert, because there is no objective way to truly understand the totality of the game. Every participating individual reads and experiences the game differently. The most obvious difference is the character through which the player participates in the game: every character is different. After that come the differences in player expectations, taste, understanding and off-game issues.

These are the good parts. These are the issues of concern, the terms through which it's relevant to understand the medium.

Clogging the Drain

Role-playing games tend to produce stupid stories. Even the most ridiculous game can work brilliantly, because it doesn't matter if it's full of wereleopards and mutant monsters from *Druuna* as long as it makes sense as an experience. What on paper looks silly, and sounds silly when explained afterwards, may still be an extremely meaningful experience. It is a stupid story – and a good game. The story doesn't carry the impact of the game because the impact of the game doesn't fit into narratives, a phenomenon one can witness at public larp debriefs, in which people often misguidedly believe that stories of their personal experiences in the game might actually interest someone.

I don't really understand why people often want to know the “real story” behind a game they participated in. Generally these explanations are banal and uninteresting, irrelevant to the game experience. If it wasn't apparent in the player's game experience, it wasn't in the game at all except as an abstract matter of GM technique. An actor may imagine he's killing his wife as he strangles another character on the stage, but that's irrelevant from the point of view of the audience. If the GM has ninja snipers shadowing the characters the whole game, but the players never realise they're there, they don't exist in the game at all. They're a game mastering tool that never actualised.

Obviously, if the game experience is incomplete without extra information of this kind, the game probably has a design flaw, much like a movie you can't understand without a commentary from the director.

Simulation seems to be the other popular way of thinking about a role-playing game. Imagining a world that runs like a clockwork, and then inserting the player characters into it. However, building a detailed, running environment is a useful tool in creating a believable world, but nothing more. Sacrificing things like pacing, atmosphere or the themes of the game to the integrity of the simulation is pointless from the perspective of creating good role-playing. As long as the game environment seems plausible, there is no reason to have details unknown to the players cast in iron until they're brought into play.

Railroading means, at the most basic level, forcing your game to follow a certain route, to conform to a story. When the GM says “You fall in love with the girl at the bar”, “The phone doesn’t work so you can’t call the cops”, or “You can’t attack the orc camp before they have completed their rituals”, she may be railroading. Usually, railroading occurs when the GM sacrifices the logic of the in-game environment or takes away the free will of the player character to keep the story of the game on the tracks.

The easiest way to avoid railroading is to avoid having a story in the game. This is a good idea, because railroading is the most grotesque and harmful manifestation of the malignant influence of the idea of a story. Railroading sidelines the player entirely, making him a spectator to something in which he should be an active participant. In essence, railroading makes the role-playing game stop being a role-playing game, reducing it into a storytelling session.

It’s possible to force the player’s hand or have the in-game environment behave in an inexplicable manner properly as a stylistic device, although this is very rare. The difference is in the details and in the motivation. If the GM believes that techniques like these will ultimately benefit the player’s experience, perhaps taking advantage of the player’s assumption that this is railroading, to goad him into something unexpected, then they’re justified.

If the game is about sacrifice, the GM might attempt to drive the game towards a situation in which the player characters have to experience sacrifice. Superficially, this process may resemble railroading, especially in a traditional role-playing game where the GM has more opportunities to influence the game while it’s running. However, engineering the game so that it will probably go in a certain direction is not railroading as long as it’s not following a pre-set story. A competent GM can make a reasonable guess about the direction the game is going and may introduce elements he thinks will direct the game events towards the sort of thing he thinks would create the best role-playing.

This is not railroading as long as the logic of the game environment holds true, the PCs have total freedom of action, and the GM-introduced elements have intrinsic value of their own, other than their function as signposts and direction signs. Most importantly, if the player experience is supreme instead of a story, the GM can be much more flexible in running the game. Instead of the characters sacrificing their love lives for the benefit of their careers, they end up sacrificing their moral integrity on the altar of success. Entirely different game events, yet the core is the same.

You Can Be Clean

Losing the story angle is just a matter of perspective. Forget narratives, forget how the game might appear or sound later. The player experience is the only relevant thing. You can include a sense of narrative in that experience, though this has been done to death in the games of the nineties and the subject has passed it’s expiration date. You

can go back to it in a ten years time, because by then you should be safe from regressive contamination.

No fate-play. No heroic sagas. No subtle narratives.

Think what are the experiences you want the players to have, what are the perspectives you want them to take, and what are the characters you want them to employ, and proceed from there. Talking about role-playing in terms of stories is not just regressive and near-sighted – it's embarrassing.