

ABSTRACT

COVER, JENNIFER ANN GROULING. *Tabletop Role-Playing Games: Perspectives from Narrative, Game, and Rhetorical Theory*. (Under the direction of David Herman and David Rieder.)

Miller (1984) notes that when a communicative action is repeated and acquires a name within a community, it is probably functioning as a genre. In conjunction with the creation of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* in 1974, the term “role-playing game” has been used by gamers to specify a particular type of game that involves face-to-face interaction between a gamemaster and players with the intention of creating a narrative. Theorists of games often acknowledge *D&D* as a foundational text, but do not consider it a separate genre from games that involve the control of an avatar in a computer-mediated environment. However, that tabletop RPGs have not been replaced by computer games and that gaming communities continue to refer to them by separate terms suggests that there are generic differences at work.

The purpose of this thesis is to begin a more detailed study of the RPG genre by examining specific examples from a *D&D* adventure. I build on the work of Fine and Mackay but offer perspectives from narrative, game, and rhetorical theory. While my own study must be limited in scope, I suggest a possible framework for future study of RPGs as a rhetorical genre.

To establish this framework, I use Ryan’s (2001) study of narrative as virtual reality to explain how RPGs are examples of texts that involve productive interactivity. In Ryan’s terms, they combine elements of immersion and interactivity, and of narrative and game. I propose viewing RPGs as a system of frames based on Ryan’s (1991) possible-worlds terminology and Cook-Gumperz’s (1992) account of forms of talk in make-believe games. I define these frames in terms of their reference to a social sphere, a game sphere, and a

narrative sphere. To explain the structure of the plot in RPGs, I compare them to Ryan's (2001) tree-diagram format for interactive texts and Aarseth's (1997) cybertext model. I conclude that none of these formats fits the RPG completely, and that it should be viewed as its own genre.

Because they combine qualities of immersion and interactivity in a way that offers productive interactivity, RPGs grant players a narrative control that is not possible in computer-mediated environments. I conclude by defining RPGs as immersive and interactive story-creation systems that involve a group of players and a gamemaster who appropriate popular culture to create new texts as a way of connecting with each other in a social setting. Finally, I point out the possible implications this rhetorical definition has for the ways in which we talk about authors, audiences, and texts.

**TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES:
PERSPECTIVES FROM NARRATIVE, GAME, AND RHETORICAL THEORY**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh

2005

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and DM, Scott Cover. Without his amazing imagination, the world of Sorpraedor would not exist, and I would not have started playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. In addition, his support has made this project possible.

Biography

This biography has been done in the general form of a D&D character sheet.

Character Name: Jennifer Cover

Campaign: NCSU Graduate School

Class: Master's of English Candidate

Race: Human

Alignment: Neutral Good

Level: 18

Description:

Size: Medium Age: 28 Gender: Female Eyes: Blue Hair: Brown

Ability Scores

Strength 8 (-1)

Dexterity 8 (-1)

Constitution 9 (-1)

Intelligence 17(+3)

Wisdom 14(+2)

Charisma 15(+2)

Saving Throws

Fortitude: +5 against all night revisions

Reflex: +2 against falling book stack

Will: +8 against thesis advisors

Initiative: +6

Base Attack: +5

Armor Class: 10

Hit Points (equivalent to number of pages in thesis): **121**

Gear: Backpack, Coffee Mug, 45 Sources, + 1 Computer, Red Editing Pen,

Funds: Zero gold pieces

Feats:

Balance: This feat allows the user to balance teaching and taking courses at the same time.

Endurance: With this feat the user can survive on only four hours of sleep per night.

Skills:

Concentration, 5

Diplomacy, 10

Gather Information, 10

Knowledge, Rhetoric and Composition 9

Knowledge, Literature 9

Knowledge, Theory 3

Knowledge, Linguistics 6

Knowledge, Bibliography and Methods, 1

Knowledge, Thesis Research, 3

Speak Language, 1

Languages:

English, French

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my committee, David Herman, Dave Rieder, and Mike Carter. I would especially like to thank David Herman for co-directing this thesis long distance from Ohio State. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Carolyn Miller, under whose direction I completed a seminar paper that served as the basis for Chapter Three of this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Gaming Terms

CRPG: Computer Role-Playing Game

D&D: Dungeons and Dragons

DM: Dungeon master, the term for the gamemaster in *D&D*

GM: Gamemaster

LARP: Live Action Role-Play

RPG: Tabletop role-playing game

*Terms from Possible-World Theory (from Ryan, *Possible Worlds* vii)*

AW: The actual world is our reality.

APW: An alternative possible world in a different system of reality, a fiction that is accepted as true when the reader shifts to this world.

TRW: The textual reference world is the world that the text claims as factual. It is the alternative possible world that the text refers to.

TAW: The textual actual world is the view of the text reference world that is presented by the author.

NAW: The narratorial actual world is the world that the narrator presents to the narratee.

You approach the Blaze Arrow outpost. The bastion that guards the frontier of the city of Gateway is silent except for the distant cry of gathering carrion birds. You notice that the ground around the outpost has been scarred by the hobnailed feet of dozens of invaders. The three-story tower is surrounded by a now broken gate. The smell of burning orcish flesh, the smell of death, profanes the air. As you enter the gate you find the remains of a ballista that once defended the outpost. Another rests farther in, still fully loaded, its human operator dead beside it. All in all, twelve human bodies lie around, evidence of the attack that took place only hours ago. There are also orc bodies, but these are piled up and smoldering. It appears the victors have suffered losses as well, but their dead have undergone the cremation rituals known to exist in orcish societies. Yet the process seems to have been done quickly and was perhaps not completed. Some remains of orcish clothing and some shields have been left behind. They are marked with the symbol of a bloody hand, which you recognize as the sign of the “Blood Fist” tribe of orcs.

What do you do?

Introduction

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan states that the goal of art is “the synthesis of immersion and interactivity” (12). Ryan discusses what it means for a text to be immersive or interactive, associating immersion with the theory of text as world and interactivity with the theory of text as game (*Virtual Reality* 16). Although she says that both qualities can’t be enjoyed at the same time, both can exist in the same text (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 284). She offers virtual reality as such a synthesis;¹ however, Ryan acknowledges that other texts may produce a similar effect. “Games of make-believe,” Ryan states, “provide a compromise between the ‘game’ and the ‘world’ aesthetics,” which “makes them uniquely qualified to reconcile immersion and interactivity” (*Virtual Reality* 286). Children’s make-believe, virtual reality, computer games, hypertext: all of these texts offer both immersion and interactivity. Arguably, however, it is the tabletop role-playing game (RPG) that offers the richest possibilities for study. Unlike many interactive texts, RPGs are not limited by

technology but are bound only by the confines of the human imagination. Moreover, unlike children's games of make-believe, RPGs remain popular among adults, whose imaginative and narrative capabilities make their games far more complex than childhood fantasies. Thus, the RPG offers the potential for studying the process behind immersive and interactive texts.

The genre of the RPG is illustrated briefly in the epigraph above. The story is very similar to one that was told on a Sunday afternoon around a kitchen table during a session of the Sorpraedor *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing campaign. The story begins as immersive, but soon becomes interactive. At first, you are immersed by the sights, smells, and sounds of the outpost Blaze Arrow. But just as you have settled in for a good story, there comes a choice. *What do you do?* In the RPG, each player is given a chance to negotiate what will happen next. This basic structure has become a widely popular form of gaming.

Introduced in 1974 with the game *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, RPGs currently comprise a two billion-dollar industry (Dancey). The basic *D&D* form has influenced the fantasy game-books and *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories (Rilstone); computer games, such as *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) and *Temple of Elemental Evil* (2003); and even films such as "Scourge of Worlds," an interactive DVD released in 2003. While each of these media differs to some extent from the original tabletop game, that *D&D* is acknowledged as a precursor to these other formats points to its powerful and influential structure. Although *D&D* is significant because of its influence on new types of texts, the original game continues to be played. Wizards of the Coast, the company that now owns *D&D*, estimates that an average of 2.5 million people play each month (Dancey), which shows that new technology has not replaced traditional RPGs. Furthermore, hundreds of other RPGs have emerged, including the popular White Wolf series.

Despite their popular appeal, the RPG has not received much serious scholarly consideration in its own right. While both Espen Aarseth in *Cybertext* and Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* discuss the games that emerged from the *Dungeons and Dragons* tradition, neither gives the original game much consideration. Both Murray and Aarseth's books were written in the same year (1997), but have different focuses. Murray explores the possibilities for narrative in virtual environments, while Aarseth argues that such virtual texts should be considered for their own unique formats, separate from current definitions of narrative. However, both studies focus on narrative possibilities and limits within the realm of computer technology rather than on the relationship between narrative and game in general. The only references Aarseth and Murray make to *D&D* are used to credit it as the inspiration for the games they study. Aarseth notes that *D&D* is the precursor to the adventure games he studies (107), and also comments that many MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) facilitate "*Dungeons and Dragons* style gaming" (146). Likewise, Murray discusses the early computer game *Zork* as being based on *D&D* (77). She does briefly discuss live-action role-playing games (LARPs), which are played face-to-face rather than on the computer, but these also differ from the structure of tabletop gamesⁱⁱ. Again, however, she confers on *D&D* the status of an early and inferior precursor, commenting that LARPs evolved from "twelve-year-olds playing *Dungeons and Dragons*" (Murray 42). That both Aarseth and Murray acknowledge *D&D* as a foundational text and that Aarseth is able to refer to a "*D&D* style" point to the importance of *D&D* as a specific text and RPGs as a generic text. However, neither of these scholars discusses *D&D* in particular, or RPGs in general, in any detail.

To date there have only been two major scholarly books on the RPG. *Shared Fantasy* dates from 1983 when sociologist Gary Fine went undercover as a gamer to report on the subculture of RPG gamers. Fine's study lays a useful foundation for studying the RPG in terms of cultural and sociological issues, but it is outdated. In the past 22 years, there have been changes to both the *D&D* game itself as well as the community of gamers. In addition, Fine's book deals with the culture of the gaming group rather than with the text created during the RPG session. Daniel Mackay builds on Fine's study in his 2001 book, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, but his focus shifts to the RPG as performance art. Mackay deals with the RPG in terms of an aesthetic text and as a process-performance but does not include a specific discussion of the RPG as a genre.

The purpose of this thesis is to begin a more detailed study of the RPG genre by examining specific examples of a *D&D* adventure. I build on the work of Fine and Mackay but offer perspectives from narrative, game, and rhetorical theory. While my own study must be limited in scope, I suggest a possible framework for future study of RPGs as a rhetorical genre. This introduction begins with a brief explanation of the form of the RPG that situates the genre in relation to other texts. I then proceed to describe the specific sample and methods I use for my analysis.

The Framework of the RPG

RPGs are commonly thought of as games. But, what does it mean to classify something as a game? Ludwig Wittgenstein asks:

What is common to them all?—Don't say: 'There *must* be something in common, or they would not be called games'—but *look and see* whether there

is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (31)

These similarities, which Wittgenstein goes on to describe as “family resemblances” (32), do not point to one specific genre, but to a genre set. It would seem that RPGs are a part of the genre set of games. However, the connections between RPGs and other games are difficult to draw and often even more difficult to maintain.

Aarseth calls *D&D* a “board game” (98), perhaps because players sometimes use a large plastic mat with hexes, called a battle mat. The use of this mat might be seen as a connection to board games, though *D&D* cannot be considered a board game. However, it is also a connection to war-games that use similar methods of depicting setting. Similarly, RPGs can involve miniature figures, which also connects them with war gaming. As in many games, an element of chance is often added through the use of dice and rulebooks govern play. However, all of these elements are optional. The Wizards of the Coast market survey showed that 76% of gamers use some sort of detailed chart, though not necessarily a battle map; only 56% use miniatures; and 33% of RPGs are dice-less. Furthermore, as many as 80% of those surveyed said their gaming group followed house rules (Dancey). These variations make it difficult to establish the relationship between RPGs and more traditional, tightly rule-bound, games.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to further understand the differences and connections between RPGs and other games and also other types of texts, it is important to look in greater depth at the origins of the genre. The RPG began with *Dungeons and Dragons*, released in 1974. The idea for *D&D* began when Dave Arneson introduced Tolkien-like fantasy elements into his war-

games and shifted the focus from controlling an entire army to controlling a single character (Mackay 15). Mackay's account of *D&D*'s origins clearly aligns the text with two different traditions: a gaming tradition and a literary tradition.

If we look at the gaming tradition, it is clear that *D&D* emerged from war-games. The first war-game evolved from *War Chess* in 1811. Herr von Reiswitz created a war-strategy game called *Kriegspiel* with the purpose of educating Prussian military officers. In this game, miniature battlefields showed the terrain and counters represented troops; dice rolls added a degree of random chance in determining the way in which the battle progressed (Mackay 13). War-games moved from military use into the popular sphere in the late-Victorian era, when H.G. Wells created a popular game called *Little Wars* (Mackay 13). *Little Wars* replaced counters with miniature figures to represent soldiers (Mackay 13). The optional battlemat, miniatures, and dice reflect the war gaming side of RPGs' history.

Co-creator of *D&D* Dave Arneson participated in the gaming sessions of war-game innovator Dave Wesely and was especially interested in medieval war gaming (Mackay 14). In addition, he was fascinated by the fantasy worlds created in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which became especially popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mackay 15). These interests combined to help create *D&D*. In terms of gaming, the biggest change that Arneson made was changing the format of his war-games to allow players to control individual soldiers rather than entire armies. However, by incorporating the fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien into these gaming worlds, Arneson also made significant changes in the relationship between gaming and literature. RPGs became, in many ways, a response to literature and a way of interacting in literary worlds. The characters that resulted from Arneson's initial attempt at role-playing were endowed with magical weapons and spell-casting abilities, and

their enemies evolved into “mythical creatures such as dragons,” much like the characters found in fantasy novels (Mackay 15). Soon after incorporating these elements of fantasy into his war gaming, Arneson teamed up with fellow war-gamer and fantasy buff Gary Gygax, and in 1974 they published the first copy of the *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebook (Mackay 15).

While *D&D* was the first of its kind, similar games, often also based on fantasy or science fiction literature, emerged as a part of the RPG genre. Among these are *Vampire the Masquerade*, based on the vampire mythos; *Call of Cthulhu*, based on H.P. Lovecraft; *Babylon5* and *Star Trek* RPGs, based on the sci-fi television series; and *Champions*, based on comic book characters. What resemblance do these games have to *D&D*, and what is it that defines them as members of the RPG genre?

Mackay defines the RPG as:

an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters*' spontaneous interactions are resolved. (Mackay 4-5)

Although they can be played in a single session, RPGs are often played by a group of participants who meet on a regular basis. In this case, RPGs are *episodic* because each session can be seen as an episode in a story that continues to develop. In this story, each player *participates* by controlling the *character* that he/she has created. The *gamemaster* (GM) also participates in the creation of the story by setting up the story world^{iv} and the situations that these characters encounter, as well as controlling any characters that appear in the story besides the ones controlled by the players. Rulebooks such as *The Player's*

Handbook and *The Dungeon Master's Guide* (for *D&D*) provide *rules* that assist participants in creating and controlling their story world. These books create the *system* that is used to structure the game.

Looking at this definition of the RPG enables us to situate the genre in relation to other works. RPGs are *episodic*, but so are television shows and many computer games. They are *participatory*, but again, so are computer games. Pretty much every game, whether computerized or not, can be considered a *system* that uses *rules*. *Characters* are present in nearly every kind of narrative. From this definition alone, we can see that RPGs overlap with several different categories, including both narrative and game. One key feature does not distinguish this genre from other members of the genre set of games, but the combination of these features and the interaction between the *players* and the *gamemaster* sets this form apart.

Game designer Andrew Rilstone sees both this interaction and its goal as the primary defining characteristics of the RPG. In his introductory essay for the *Inter*action* magazine, "Role-Playing Games: An Overview," Rilstone defines the RPG as "a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players, with the intention of producing a narrative." The GM, which Rilstone calls the referee, sets up the story and the world that the game will focus on. Often times, this setting is as basic as a dungeon populated with monsters, but it can be as complex as a complete world. The GM presents a situation, much as the one presented in the epigraph, and asks the players "what do you do?" The players who create and manage characters in the world respond with "I do such and such." For Rilstone, this form of interaction and its goal of producing a narrative is what sets RPGs apart as a distinct generic form.

Methods of Genre Criticism

While a set of certain formal features is one way to define the RPG, genres have increasingly been recognized as “forms of action or modes of activity” (Jasinski “Genre” 275). By looking at genres as activities, we can go beyond simply comparing the formal features of RPGs with those of already categorized texts and begin to explain the reasons why people engage in these different forms of activity. My method of genre criticism is a rhetorical one that stems from the definitions of genre used by John Swales and Carolyn Miller and also incorporates David Russell’s use of activity theory.

According to Swales, “a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (58). This definition responds directly to concerns of scholars such as Miller, who argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (Miller 151). Russell connects this form of genre criticism to activity theory. An activity system, according to Russell, is “any ongoing, object-directed, historically-conditioned, dialectically-structured, tool-mediated [system for] human interaction” (510). Simply put, an activity system consists of subjects who use tools in order to produce an outcome (510). Russell draws on Miller to propose that “a genre is the ongoing use of certain material tools in certain way that worked once and might work again, a typified tool-mediated response to conditions recognized by participants as recurring” (515).

In order for a communicative event to stand as its own genre, then, it must either belong to a different community, involve different tools, or respond to a different rhetorical need than other genres. Russell explains that the same text can function as more than one

genre depending on the context. He offers *Hamlet* as an example. When used as a script by actors the rhetorical purpose is different from when literary scholars analyze the play. Each instance involves a different activity system, and thus forms a different genre (Russell 518). When texts move from one system to another, there is often a shift in terminology. Thus, naming is key to realizing when a text is functioning as a different genre (Russell 518). The actors may call Hamlet a “script” whereas the literature scholar may refer to it as a “text.” Both Miller and Swales point out that those actively engaged in a community give names to types of communicative events that continually occur as a part of this community. Specifically, Miller and Shepherd note that “when a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that’s a good sign that it’s functioning as a genre.”

In light of the aforementioned scholars’ practice of defining genres based on naming conventions, the names used in the history of the RPG become significant. Before 1974, “role-playing” was a term Dave Arneson had encountered in school when his history teacher set up a mock Continental Congress for the class (Bub). Since then, the term has acquired new meaning. Because of their ground-breaking game, Arneson and his partner, Gary Gygax, are now known as the “fathers of role-playing” (Bub, Keefer). However, as previously mentioned, while the term “role-playing game” started with *D&D*, it has been used to refer to different games in a variety of media. There are those games that are played face-to-face such as *D&D*, referred to as tabletop games because they are played around a table, and live-action-role-playing games (LARPs), which are similar but are acted out by the participants. In addition, computer games such as *Diablo*, which involve the creation of an avatar, are often billed as “role-playing games.” At first, this variety of usage might seem to indicate

some confusion over what texts are included in the genre. However, if we consider that these names arise out of different communities, a common name can be used for different genres in different activity systems. Because computer gamers participate in a different activity system than tabletop gamers, both can refer to their games as RPGs without causing confusion.

However, when the communities do intersect and a distinction is necessary, the RPG label is reserved for the tabletop gamers. For example, Dragon*Con, a convention that appeals to a wide variety of gamers, separates its gaming schedule into “computer games,” “LARPs” and “RPGs” (dragoncon.org). In this case, RPG refers only to tabletop games. Even though computer games with avatars are sometimes referred to as computer role-playing games (CRPGs), many do not consider them role-playing at all. Neither Rilstone nor Mackay’s definition allows for the inclusion of computer games. Furthermore, Gary Gygax, co-creator of *D&D*, claims that there are distinct differences between tabletop and CRPGs. When asked about the effect of computer games on role-playing, Gygax answered, “As to what computer games have done to role-playing, virtually nothing. The so-called CRPG isn’t role-playing” (Keefer).

Those who play both computer and tabletop games also make this distinction. When I posed the question on a roleplayers’ blog, asking the differences between computer and tabletop RPGs, the fifteen users who responded agreed that there were major differences between the two forms and that playing both met different needs. Livejournal user *utforsker* states “different needs are fulfilled by each” (gwenifyre). And *tikki_tikki2000* agrees that “you play each one for different reasons” (gwenifyre). Livejournal user *arthwollipot* advises, “don’t think of crpgs as roleplaying - think of them just as computer games and you’ll be fine” (gwenifyre). Swales states that the “principal criterial feature that turns a collection of

communication events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes” (Swales 46). Not only are gamers referring to RPGs by a distinct name, but they also acknowledge that they have different purposes in mind when playing RPGs than when playing other games.

Because the community of gamers recognizes the RPG as a distinct genre that both uses distinct tools and has a different desired outcome from computer games, it is irresponsible for scholars not to respect this differentiation. Yet, what is to be gained by studying RPGs as a separate genre from other games? The justification for studying RPGs is the same as the justification Aarseth gives for studying adventure games:

What above all makes them worthy of study is the fact that they present an alternative mode of discourse; a different type of textual pleasure. By investigating this we may be able to extract knowledge of a more general kind, which may tell us something about discourse itself and which we could not have learned from our previous, more restricted horizon. (Aarseth 109)

RPGs afford a “different type of textual pleasure” and this alone makes them a valuable object of study. In addition, studying the specific set of distinguishing features of this genre that allow it to respond to a specific rhetorical exigency enables us to test our more general notions about texts. Although some texts can be viewed as falling somewhere on a continuum between interactivity and immersion, I follow up on Ryan’s proposal that certain texts go beyond this binary to incorporate both ends of the spectrum. As I will argue, the distinct ways in which RPGs combine both immersion and interactivity, both narrative and game, problematize our understanding of this binary as well our concepts of authorship and audiences.

Sample: The World of Sorpraedor

In order to initiate a discussion of these broader theoretical issues, I offer specific examples from a *D&D* campaign. A common way to play RPGs is to organize a gaming group, a number of people who meet on a regular basis to advance the same RPG adventure. Such adventures are referred to as campaigns, and the characters, known as player characters, form a “party.” My study focuses on the Sorpraedor campaign, which began in the spring of 2002 and has continued for over three years. The world of Sorpraedor was created by Dungeon Master^v (DM) Scott Cover and has involved various players, though a stable group of five played twice a month from January 2003 through September 2004. In September 2004, one player moved away, and in February 2005 two other players left the game. However, new players have replaced them, with new characters, but the overall story has remained continuous. In addition to some variation in players, there has been further change in the characters in the party. When a character in the story dies, that player often continues playing with a new character. This has happened several times in the Sorpraedor world. In fact, only one character, Whisper (my character), has remained stable in the game world since its creation in 2002.

I focus my analysis on one sample narrative from the Sorpraedor campaign. This narrative spanned several gaming sessions from the end of January to the end of February 2003. The appendix includes the full narrative as I composed it after the gaming sessions. However, I provide below a brief synopsis of the sample.

Throughout my analysis, I refer to both characters and players in the game, depending on whether the situation involved the character or the player. When I refer to both player and

character at the same time, I include the player name followed by the character name. The characters in the campaign at this time were as follows:

- Whisper (played by myself): a 17-year-old human sorceress whose mother is a dragon. Her magical powers are innate, and as she grows older she develops both more magical powers and more dragon-like features and abilities.
- Maureen (played by Catherine): a human thief, who led a hard life, but is always open for more adventures.
- Smith^{vi} (played by Bex): a halfling^{vii} ranger, a creature of the woods who believes strongly in his principles.
- Cuthalion (played by David): an elven ranger, who is extremely talented with a bow and arrow.
- Fletch (played by Ray): a human fighter; the strong silent type.

The adventure in which the party encountered the orcs at Blaze Arrow was one of the first for this group of party members. Often the entrance or exits of characters can be seen as beginnings or endings to narratives within the overarching narrative of the campaign.

Thus, the story of “How the party defeated the orcs through cunning and diplomacy” can be seen as a smaller narrative contained within an overarching episodic story. At this point in the larger story, Whisper and Maureen had been working to uncover a subversive agency that had infiltrated the hierarchy of the town of Gateway. They had established themselves as heroes in the town and were working closely with the town’s Magistrate to assist in any difficulties. When this group of players came together, the new characters were immediately associated with Whisper and the reputation she had created for herself. This story begins after the Magistrate has asked the group to go to the outpost, Blaze Arrow,

which has not reported in with the main city of Gateway as scheduled. Maureen, a character who often likes to go off on her own, joins the group later in the journey, while they are camped for the night. Immediately chaos ensues as a threat and two heads are thrown into the camp. A mysterious tattoo makes the party wonder if Maureen is being watched and she is sent back to town. Meanwhile, the rest of the party continues on to Blaze Arrow where they find the scene as conveyed in the epigraph. Orcs have attacked the tower. However, the party manages to capture some of the orcs and find out that their real target was the Skullbash, another orchish tribe. Cuthalion gives a rousing speech to the chief of the orc tribe, Grumbach, who agrees to leave the human town out of his conquest. This story ends when the party returns to Gateway and a new story picks up from there. However, an overarching narrative spans across individual stories like this one, just as the world of Sorpraedor exists outside of any particular tale. The party has larger quests that continue from session to session and each smaller story adds to the larger narrative. Some plot points are resolved, but they are intertwined with new ones, much the way chapters of a novel consist of individual threads that make up a whole work. My study will refer to the overarching elements in the Sorpraedor campaign, but will focus specifically on the story of the orc adventure.

Overview of Chapters

Chapters one and two use the specific example of the orc tale to explain the ways in which interactivity and immersion function in the RPG genre. I draw on Ryan's study of virtual reality as a form that also incorporates these two qualities. Chapter one uses the three types of immersion that Ryan describes—spatial, temporal, and emotional—to characterize the RPG. I then go on to explain how these immersive qualities relate to the sense of

narrative present in the game. Using Ryan's possible-world terminology and Jenny Cook-Gumperz's study of children's make-believe games, I present a framework that explains the levels of communication involved in the RPG in terms of their degrees of narrativity.

In chapter two, I discuss the possibilities for interactivity and narrativity to exist in the same text. I refer to Ryan's use of tree diagrams and Aarseth's model for cybertext to explain the interactive qualities of RPGs. I explain the way in which interaction between the frames laid out in chapter one adds to an overall experience of immersion. I again build on Ryan's study of virtual reality to show how RPGs offer a form of interactivity that is productive rather than selective.

In chapter three, I synthesize the first two chapters to describe how the combination of interactive and immersive qualities is essential to meeting the rhetorical exigency of the RPG genre. These qualities create a sense of narrative control, and this shared control brings gamers together. I use the genre theories outlined above—Miller, Swales, and Russell—to pinpoint the way in which RPGs respond to this need for narrative agency. I conclude with my own definition of the RPG genre that calls into question not only traditional definitions of game and narrative, but also notions of authorship and audience.

You approach the Blaze Arrow outpost...

Chapter 1. Text as World: Immersive Qualities of RPGs

One of the distinguishing features of the RPG genre is its ability to immerse the player in the world and story that the game creates. The example from a *D&D* adventure in the epigraph addresses the readers in the second-person, pulling them directly into the story world, situating them in a place, and immersing them. In order to understand the overall significance of immersion as part of the RPG form and the way in which it contributes to the ability of RPGs to respond to the needs of their players, we must first define what it means for a text to be immersive. In this chapter, I apply Ryan's three modes of immersion—spatial, temporal, and emotional—to the genre of the RPG, using specific examples from the Sorpraedor *D&D* campaign. Since immersion is often thought of as an important narrative element, I also discuss the ways in which the immersive qualities of the RPG relate to narrative qualities. I conclude by introducing a model that represents the different frames of discourse in the RPG that respond to social, game, and narrative worlds. I arrange my frames hierarchically in terms of the degree to which each frame contributes to the narrative enacted over the course of multiple gaming sessions.

Ryan relates an aesthetics of immersion to the theory of the text as world. She explains that according to this point of view texts are seen as “window[s] on something that exists outside language and extends in time and space well beyond the window frame” (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 91). This sort of re-centering has often been seen as a narrative act. For example, in “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax,” William Labov explains that the abstract, which begins a narrative, is a way of re-centering to a narrative

world, and the coda, which ends the narrative, is a way of returning to the actual world (363-365). But does the act of re-centering to an alternate possible world create a narrative? Is it possible to be immersed in a world without the presence of a narrative structure?

Scholars who have studied the relationship between narrative and games are often faced with the difficulty of separating the narrative world, if one exists, from the game world, which exists outside of the story. Murray states that a “narrative world” can hold or support “many possible stories” (162); yet, if these stories are potential rather than realized, can the world be considered a “narrative” world? In his study of cybertext, Aarseth points out that some scholars operate from a “spatiodynamic fallacy where the narrative is not perceived as a presentation of the world but rather as the world itself” (3). Jesper Juul and Bearnadette Flynn reject this fallacy and argue that games often involve an exploration of a world without involving a narrative structure (Juul, Flynn 52-61). However, in Flynn’s attempt to avoid conflating game and narrative, she makes her own reductive moves. Her argument avoids placing games into the narrative pigeon-hole only by “shoehorning” them into a new slot, one of spatial exploration. To consider every aspect of the game as narrative is indeed to try to fit something expansive in a restrictive and inappropriate structure. However, to recognize that games can fit in both a narrative and a spatial aesthetics is to acknowledge their diverse and complicated nature. I agree with Aarseth, Juul, and Flynn that certain games involve only a re-centering to a world without the structure of a narrative. However, as I have discussed in the introduction, RPGs differ from other games, in part because of their connection with a literary tradition. Thus, RPGs exhibit a narrative structure to a higher degree than many other games.

The traditional literary genres that RPGs draw from have often been viewed as immersive. Fine compares the world creation involved in designing an RPG with that involved in creating a fantasy novel. He discusses a little known RPG called “Empire of the Petal Throne” in which the creator, Barker, developed the fantasy world he began as a child into a game (Fine 128). Fine compares Barker’s game to the literary works of J.R. Tolkien, explaining that both worlds are “living realities” that offer an extreme level of immersion that “most of us find impossible [even] in our own daydreams” (132). One factor of this immersive quality that Fine finds important is that both Tolkien and Barker were linguists who went so far as to create languages just for their story worlds (Fine 130). While Barker created an entirely new RPG, the type of world-building activities he engaged in is also possible within the confines of an already established game, such as *D&D*.

The world of Sorpraedor does not have a unique language, but as one can see from the map in Appendix B, a unique world exists. This world is based on the rules from the *D&D* handbooks, yet, as a creation, it stands as a text on its own. Sorpraedor is an entire world, much like Earth, with continents, bodies of water, countries, cities, mountain ranges, etc. Like an author, the DM must create more detail about the world than he/she conveys in the narrative. However, while the world exists independently from the way the characters and players progress through it, the participants of RPGs do influence the development of the world. For example, Scott created a town named Luyere that had twin brothers as rulers. He knew that that one brother was good and the other was evil. However, it was not until the party decided to visit Luyere that he fleshed out the motives of the two brothers and their city (Cover). Unlike a novel or computer game in which the reader’s or user’s view of the world is necessarily limited by the format, any part of the Sorpraedor world can be fully

created as the participants express an interest in it. In fact, certain details may not exist until the players ask specific questions about them.

For example, in the sample story of the orc adventure, the detail that the labels on the message tube were switched was not included until Bex/Smith asked about the labels. This detail was added in by the DM on the spot as a response to the player's question (Cover). Unlike many computer games in which you can assume that the majority of the information presented is essential to solving the puzzles presented, in an RPG any number of questions can be asked and answered, which adds to the complexity of the world. For example, my party was entirely convinced that the labels being switched meant that someone had purposely tried to disrupt communication at the Blaze Arrow outpost, when in fact this was simply a detail added at the whim of the DM to answer Bex/Smith's question. From reading the final narrative, as seen in the appendix, it is impossible to tell which details were created beforehand and which were added during the gaming session, although my interview with the DM revealed this.

Many details of the world get fleshed out only as the players/characters progress through them; however, certain events in the world progress regardless of the characters' involvement with them. For example, my interview with the DM revealed that once the party had moved on from their encounter with the orcs, the Blood Fist tribe continued on to fight the Skullbash tribe and win. This storyline is one of many in the world that was not narrated (at least until my interview), but it clearly shows that an expansive world exists outside the narrative.

In order for an RPG to continue for several years, as the Sorpraedor campaign has, it must maintain player interest. To do this, RPGs must immerse their participants in worlds

such as Sorpraedor. Fine states that players “must lose themselves to the game. The engrossment is not total or continuous, but it is what provides for ‘the fun’ within the game” (4). This ability to sustain interest is often much less of a concern in games that are only intended to last for one session. For example, when I attended NC State game day, I played in a one-time RPG session that was not immersive at all for me. In this case it was merely social pressure and etiquette that caused me to continue playing, much different forces from those that maintain my attention in the Sorpraedor campaign. The claims I present here, then, pertain to RPGs that are played on an on-going basis and may not hold true for other methods of play.

Certainly, RPGs involve a sort of re-centering to a world, but in order to understand whether or not this re-centering is a narrative act, we must further define what it means to be immersed in an alternate world. Some games involve only one type of immersion. But like Ryan’s example of virtual reality, on-going RPGs appeal to all three types of immersion that Ryan identifies: spatial, temporal, and emotional (*Virtual Reality* 121). Also like Ryan’s virtual reality example, the RPG involves a constant movement in and out of the world that is created. By teasing out the frames that players move between, we can begin to see how immersion and interactivity work together in the RPG, and where, if anywhere, a narrative structure exists.

Spatial Immersion

Ryan states that for a text to be immersive it must create a space to which the reader can relate. This spatial setting is a place for “potential narrative action” but is not narrative because it “may lack the temporal extension [required] to develop this action into a plot”

(*Virtual Reality* 15). Spatial immersion is found in narratives but also in games. Erving Goffman, who studied more traditional board games, such as chess, states that even these basic games are “world-building activities” (27). Games create unique worlds that are explored through the act of playing.

One of the primary counter-arguments to viewing games as narratives is the idea that games involve nothing more than this exploration of space. Flynn’s article on “Games as Inhabited Spaces” suggests that games should be seen through an aesthetics of space, which she states is “grounded in immersive aesthetics, maps, tours, modes of navigation and geometric landscapes” (54), rather than in narrative aesthetics. Like the majority of scholars now focussing on games, Flynn limits her discussion to games of the computer medium. Indeed, many computer games simulate elaborate settings that facilitate spatial immersion, which Ryan contends is a “response to setting” (*Virtual Reality* 121). In the graphic-rich medium of the computer, this type of response may overpower any interest in an unfolding story. In her discussion of the computer game *Myst*, Murray agrees that this sort of immersion may be “at the cost of a diminished immersion in an unfolding story” (Murray 109).

Like computer games, RPGs can involve an exploration of a world. Many *D&D* gaming sessions consist of the exploration of a dungeon populated by monsters. As Fine observed, some DMs map locations of monsters and treasures before the game begins (84). This style of playing RPGs is more closely analogous to the computer game environment insofar as it involves a simple exploration of a created space. Yet the way in which this space is created, and the extent to which it can be immersive, differs in face-to-face RPGs and computer games. For example, Murray notes that “the slamming of a dungeon door behind

you” is more concrete in an online visual environment than in a face-to-face *D&D* game (82).

Spatial immersion is, in some ways, more difficult to achieve in *D&D* than in computer games, which have a strong visual element; however, this type of immersion is still important to the game. Because there is not a visual component to RPGs, players may have difficulty picturing the exact setting that the DM lays out. Wizards of the Coast’s market survey shows that 56% of gaming groups use miniatures to solve this dilemma (Dancey). Each player selects a small figure^{viii} to represent his/her character. The DM will select additional figures to represent monsters or non-player characters. When the game calls for exploration of space, miniatures are often used to show the relative position of characters to one another on their journey. Similarly, players often use graph paper to map out the journey for future reference. These miniatures can also be placed on a battlemat, a plastic surface with graph paper-like hexes, each representing five feet. Since *D&D* combat rules often offer suggestions as to what you can or cannot do at certain distances, these battlemats help players visualize the scene and decide on their actions. The *Sorpraedor* campaign often uses battlemats and miniatures during battle sequences; however, some gaming sessions that focus more on information gathering or puzzle-solving will progress completely without them.

Whether the battlemats and miniatures are used or not, setting still plays a large part in immersing the *D&D* players. Certainly the setting of *Blaze Arrow* with the sights and smells of the dead orc and human troops serves to further engross the players in the story. This type of immersion is often found in sections of the game where the DM describes the setting for the players rather than in the game play itself. The DM must create the visual

picture in the minds of the players through long descriptive accounts. While the visual components presented in the RPG cannot compare with the graphic quality of computerized games, the DM's descriptions serve the traditional function of descriptive elements in texts, namely, to call to mind scenes in the imagination (Hamon and Baudoin 3).

Descriptive utterances have often been considered separate from narrative, in part because they do not seem to need to follow a particular order, whereas in narrative there are causal connections between events. However, as Meir Sternberg points out, the relationship between description and narrative is extremely complex. According to Sternberg, "description is no more doomed to disorder than a narrative of events" (65). Often, the descriptions given by the DM in *D&D* are chronologically organized. My epigraph is descriptive, but this description has two distinct temporal orderings to it. First, there is the order of progression followed by the reader. At the time of the gaming session, this description was presented in the general order that the party came upon Blaze Arrow. First they would see the footprints leading to the tower, then the broken gate, then the bodies inside the gate. Had the party approached Blaze Arrow from a different direction, the description would likely have been different.

Furthermore, the way in which the DM constructs these descriptive passages also clues the party in to the events that happened previously. Orcs advanced on the tower (the footprints); they broke down the gate, breached the tower, and killed the soldiers. Stories like this are rarely narrated directly by the DM; rather, he/she will present the evidence in a descriptive form that allows the group to formulate an event sequence in their minds. Sternberg claims "that spatial features are subject to chronological or even causal sequencing, which explains their order of presentation in terms of some order of occurrence,

is no paradox; and if it sounds like one, that is only because we tend to draw too sharp a line between the referential constructs we call action (or narrative or plot) and description” (72). Likewise, the descriptive accounts in *D&D*, while immersing the player spatially, do not necessarily negate temporal immersion, another important dimension of the immersive potential of RPGs.

Temporal Immersion

Temporal immersion relates to plot (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 121) and is therefore the type of immersion most characteristically associated with narrative structure. When the reader is engrossed in temporality there is the constant suspense of what will happen next. Ryan explains that temporal immersion is most suspenseful when situations have “diverging, but reasonably computable outcomes” (*Virtual Reality* 141). She goes on to elaborate by explaining that situations become more suspenseful, and therefore more immersive, as the range of possibilities decreases (*Virtual Reality* 142). This sort of suspense is also not unique to narrative but figures significantly in gaming. Again, however, it functions differently in computer games than in the RPG.

Computer games involve a type of suspense similar to traditional narratives. The plot lines are often created in advance by the game designer,^{ix} and the suspense comes from not knowing what will happen next or what ending will occur. Much of a computer game designer’s job involves placing clues in the gaming world to direct the player down a certain path (Lewis). DMs may do the same thing. In a dungeon setting one door may be locked or have unbeatable monsters hiding behind it. However, a computer game may simply not allow the player to go a certain way. The directional mouse button may disappear, or you may be

unable to interact with certain characters or objects in the gaming world. In RPGs such boundaries do not exist. The players make pick the lock on that door, or run back to town and hire more allies to beat that previously unbeatable monster. Whatever the obstacle, tabletop gamers can, and often do, find a way around it, often to the chagrin of the DM who tried so hard to steer them in a certain direction. If this happens, the DM may need to design new obstacles on the fly, as he/she may not have been prepared for the party to go in a certain direction or beat a particular foe. In the single session game I attended at the NC State game day, a member of our party used an extra powerful spell to blast to the bottom layer of the dungeon to where the treasure lay, completely bypassing the obstacles or clues the DM had intended for the party to run into had they taken the standard method of following the stairs. Similarly, if the Sorpraedor party in the orc adventure had decided to go straight to Barrenstone and bypass Black Tower, the story would have had a very different ending because they would not have received the clues at Black Tower.

In contrast, computer games rarely allow actions that are out of sequence. Often levels in computer games do not open until the player has completed the previous levels, or if he/she does, bypassing an important clue will lead to failure. Game designer Sam Lewis states that this is one of the major differences between computer and tabletop games. In this way, he contends, computer game narratives are more linear but less re-playable, whereas RPGs offer an infinite number of side quests to explore. These side quests can usually be returned to at a later time, though the initial experience cannot be “re-played” as such.

While events may often be navigated in whatever order players chose, this does not mean that there is no connection between them. For Murray, temporal immersion is linked to causality. A plot involves events, and each event in the plot causes the next. Murray’s view is

that if players feel as though they cause the events their immersion level increases (Murray 207). If we look at this sense of control as temporal immersion, traditional narratives are the least immersive because the reader has virtually no say over the way the events unfold. Computer games seem to exhibit more control, but as discussed, this power is somewhat illusory. RPGs are more engrossing because of the players' ability to affect what happens next.

Ryan states that spatio-temporal immersion takes place when the imaginary distance between the time and place of the narrator and that of the addressee is eliminated (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 130). This idea calls to mind the classic ghost story in which the listener realizes that the storyteller is describing the scene and time that both listener and teller presently occupy. In the same way, when the DM narrates part of the *D&D* adventure, players are intensely immersed because the story corresponds to the "here and now" of the game world. This sense of the present comes in part from the method of second-person narration and in part from the use of present tense. Monika Fludernik notes that stories told in second-person frequently use present tense narration and thus eliminate "the duality between the time of narration and that of the story narrated" (285). In his discussion of concurrent narrative, Margolin also agrees that immersion in the story world increases when the narrative takes place in the present (162). These methods of narration increase immersion in the temporal sequences of the emergent story.

However, in some ways the greatest temporal immersion and the greatest suspense do not come from the DM's narrative interludes but from other types of game play. Thus, temporal immersion may not always be linked directly to narrative elements. As Ryan explains, complete temporal immersion exists when an action has only two possible

outcomes (*Virtual Reality* 142). The most suspenseful situations in *D&D* involve dice rolls, which are either/or situations. Rolling dice may seem to violate Murray's condition of causality, but Fine observes that RPGers have a rather illogical view of their ability to control the dice. He calls this "dice beliefs" and explains that when a computer system which randomly generated numbers between 1 and 100 for players was used in place of dice, players objected because they felt a certain amount of control had been taken away from them (Fine 98). Fine observes that "the belief in the efficacy of dice is so ingrained that players deliberately change dice when dice are not performing well, in the belief that there are luckier dice" (94). Gamers, of course, will not always confess such beliefs; but I admit that, even though I know it is utterly illogical, I confine dice that are not rolling well to my dice box and test each die first before using it for the gaming session. Fine states that these beliefs are "engrossment beliefs" because they are legitimate inside the context of the game but not outside that context (Fine 92). Not only do these beliefs arise from being immersed in the game, but they also add to immersion. A reasonable explanation for such illogical behavior is that believing one can control the dice adds to the temporal immersion and thus adds to the enjoyment of the game.

Dice rolls become increasingly suspenseful if the outcome in question is particularly important to the game. In fact, when players somehow fail to make the dice roll the way they want them to, they are known to cheat. As Fine points out, cheating is "particularly likely to occur in 'must situations'—occasions that will influence the character for the rest of the game" (101). It is also more socially acceptable to cheat in RPGs than other games. Fine observes that DMs will often tolerate cheating or even let a character re-roll if the dice affect the story in a way that appears detrimental (101). Interestingly, while players make their rolls

in the open, the DM often makes his behind a screen, allowing him a greater opportunity to cheat or adjust the roll. While I have never noticed a player cheat in the Sorpraedor campaign, the DM admits to occasionally altering dice rolls when he feels the results are unfair (Cover). In general, however, the suspense is greater in a game where cheating is not allowed. In his study of other types of face-to-face gaming, Goffman observes that cheaters are resented because they “destroy the reality-generating power of the game” (Goffman 68). The likelihood of cheating in *D&D* seems to indicate that some players want to undermine the “reality-generating power” to relieve some of the suspense created by the game.

While the roll of the dice is a matter of game mechanics, the sort of temporal immersion that is connected with it is related to the temporal immersion in the events of the story. The most situations that Fine sees often leading to cheating are most situations because of their significance to the plot of the story. In the sample story, as we negotiated with the orcs rather than killing them, their numbers increased, and we lost the hope of succeeding if a battle ensued. Thus, the speech that Cuthalion gives to Grumbach at Barrenstone was crucial to the survival of both the town and our characters. Going into that negotiation, we knew that we could not, at that point, withstand an all-out attack. The dice rolls that held the most suspense in that game were the diplomacy rolls Cuthalion made in his attempt to convince Grumbach to leave Barrenstone. Had Cuthalion failed in his endeavor, the lives of our characters would have been in grave danger. The tension in this case was immersive because of the need for a continued progression of the story, but also because of the emotional attachment each of us had for our characters.

Emotional Immersion

Like temporal immersion, emotion can be extremely intense in an RPG. Ryan defines emotional immersion as a “response to character” (*Virtual Reality* 121). This type of immersion is perhaps the one that has led to the societal fears about the power of RPGs that began in 1979 after a Michigan State student who enjoyed *D&D* committed suicide. The public voiced the fear that players could become so engrossed in their alter egos that they would have trouble re-emerging. Aarseth states that this sort of role-merging can take place in any game that involves an avatar, and that players, in general, see avatars as extensions of themselves (113). However, Fine explains that there is a difference between “role embracement” and “role merger” (207). Whether or not a player creates an avatar that resembles him/herself, the constant movement in and out of character prevents a complete role merger.

Still, players often do become attached to their characters to a degree not often seen in response to traditional narratives. Fine observed that players often responded with anger or resentment to their character’s problems or death (222). In a post to a blog titled “gamer_chicks,” a user posed this question: “In your gaming groups, have you ever had such an intense/amazing/tragic/touching event happen that people start crying in the middle of the game—in character or out?” (klantyre). In the fourteen responses that bloggers gave to the question, there was unanimous agreement that RPGs provoked this type of emotional response. Furthermore, the situations presented always involved situations such as death or trauma in a character’s life.

In the Sorpraedor campaign this sort of emotion has been most strongly connected to conflicts between characters. In the orc adventure, my character, Whisper, opened a scroll

tube that released a curse on the entire party. Because this was an event that seriously affected their characters, it naturally evoked an emotional response from my fellow players. Heated arguments ensued, and the event permanently scarred Whisper's reputation among the members of her party. This situation was the first of many that led to significant conflicts between Whisper and Smith, which eventually led to Smith's death. Although these feelings did not affect our out-of-game relationships, there was a great deal of anger and frustration exhibited during game play over this development in the story.

While it is difficult to measure the force of emotion a player feels for a character, it seems that there is the potential for greater immersion in the RPG than in CRPGs. Certainly, players also become attached to computer-generated characters. Sam Lewis notes that online games that involve a pay service make a great deal of money even from users who no longer play the game. These users continue to pay a monthly fee simply to avoid the deletion of their character from the server (Lewis). Clearly this indicates a level of emotional immersion. However, Lewis also notes that the visuals of the computer graphics may detract from the player's connection if the graphics do not appeal to him/her. He particularly noted that some computer games depict overly sexualized female avatars that may dissuade female players from connecting with them or from playing the game at all (Lewis). Like other aspects of the game, RPGs allow for greater flexibility in customizing characters and therefore can lead to a greater sense of connection between players and their characters.

In addition, emotional immersion is often re-inforced in RPGs by the social setting. This type of immersion, however, is not always tied to characters—sometimes it involves real-world social relations. Goffman observed that face-to-face games involved a sort of mutual emotional commitment that could either be added to or detracted from based on the

other participants' level of engrossment. He states that "the perception that one participant is not spontaneously involved in the mutual activity can discredit the identity imputed to him as someone who is able and ready to immerse himself in an encounter and can weaken for the others their own involvement" (42). While RPGers engage in a great deal of commentary outside of the game, they also are very direct about taking to task a member who is not engrossed at a particularly crucial moment. When players share in this type of immersion the emotions run particularly high.

Again, the incidents in the Sorpraedor campaign that involve the most emotion are ones in which the entire group is immersed in conflict between the characters. When not immersed in the game, the Sorpraedor players often call these moments our "come to Jesus talks" because of the zealous passion they involve. Similarly, there have been numerous times when the entire group has "flooded out"^x in laughter because of the silly or outrageous actions of a character.

The emotional immersion of the group setting also seems to increase over time. I have played Whisper for over three years now, and my sense of tension at moments that may mean her death have increased as I have become more attached to her. In addition, the shared experiences of the group members increase the number of emotional responses, such as laughter, to situations in the story that recur. For example, when Maureen first arrives on the scene of the orc adventure, she offers Smith some peanuts. Out of context, this incident has little significance, but the peanut-offering was something that Catherine continually had Maureen do to the point of its becoming an inside joke among the group. Thus, emotional immersion exists both because of players' relations to characters within the story and in response to the social connections among players as they respond to the story.

The Creation of Possible Worlds in Make-Believe

As these examples have shown, *D&D* sessions involve spatial, temporal, and emotional immersion. However, it is difficult to separate out which aspects of the gaming session are immersive due to the story and which are immersive simply because of game play. Spatial immersion often seems linked to passages of narration by the DM, whereas temporal immersion may be linked to plot or simply the rolling of dice. Emotional immersion may have to do both with players' connection to characters and social aspects of the gaming session itself. It is clear that a re-centering of some sort takes place during the gaming session, but in looking at texts as worlds, it is important to acknowledge that a *D&D* gaming session involves more than one world. There is the social sphere of the actual world, the gaming structure of the gaming sphere, which also exists in the actual world, and the narrative structure of the story world. Ryan's explanation of possible-worlds theory helps to illuminate these differences.

The possible-worlds theory views the story world as a separate system of reality and thus accounts for the idea of truth in fictional stories. There can be only one actual world (AW); however, alternate possible worlds (APW) exist and are treated as actual worlds in fictional stories. The text reference world (TRW) is the alternate possible world that the text refers to, while the textual actual world (TAW) presents the view of the TRW that the author^{xi} projects (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* vii). When we step into a fictional world, we behave as if it is the actual world; we subscribe to the truth of the APW. Both the actual world, and the alternative possible world exist outside of any narrative structure, much the way both this world and the world of Sorpraedor exist. The TRW and TAW come into being with the

creation of the text. The author refers to the TRW but controls our view of that world by presenting only pieces of it in the TAW.

RPGs involve continual frame shifting between these worlds. The world of Sorpraedor can be seen as an APW. Such worlds are populated with complete human beings who can be assumed to have existed and experienced certain events even if these events are not told as a part of the story (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 23). Grumbach and the Blood Fist tribe have already attacked the Blaze Arrow tower before the party arrives. They also have a history and a reason for being there that stems from events that occurred before the story began. When the DM refers to these events, the world of Grumbach and his orcs also becomes a part of the TAW. The way in which the DM describes Grumbach and the orcs is the view of them that exists in the TAW, which may or may not be the same as the truth of the TRW. However, whether or not the players discovered the motives of the Blood Fist tribe, these motives do not cease to be true in the TRW. Similarly, although it has not been narrated, the Blood Fists' victory is a matter of truth in the world of Sorpraedor. Likewise, when players propose actions for their characters, their discussion exists in the actual world but refers to the actions that may happen in an APW. If these actions succeed, they become a part of the TAW. Dice rolls may affect the TAW, but they are made in the AW.

In contrast with most texts, in RPGs decisions made in the AW directly affect the TAW. For example, in the interview I conducted, the DM noted that if the party had not chosen to talk to the orcs and had not asked the right questions, he would not have explained the motivation for the orcs' attack on the towers (Cover). The motivation would not have disappeared from the APW, or the TRW, but the view of the orcs presented in the TAW would have been quite different. Furthermore, the way in which the DM presents the TAW

affects the decisions the players make in the AW. These decisions, in turn, have an impact on the APW. If the players had not asked the right questions and had not made successful diplomacy rolls to convince the orcs to respond to those questions, they would not have discovered the motivation for the attack and might have responded differently. Scott explains that he planned for several different possible outcomes before the session, though he was also open to other outcomes based on the player's actions. If the party had defeated the orcs and prevented them from making their journey into the mountains to defeat the Skullbash tribe, Scott had planned that the orcs would have vowed vengeance and in several months time they would have accumulated a greater army and come to attack the city of Gateway (Cover). This outcome was certainly affected by both the TAW and the AW, for had the players not been presented with the motivations of the orcs, they would likely have reacted differently to the situation.

Ryan states that stepping into the alternative possible world means "erasing the linguistic signs" that this world is a fiction (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 23). Participants in *D&D* continually switch between the APW and the AW; but once they have entered the APW, they do not need to continually signal that it is not the AW. The actions that the players take don't need to begin with the phrase, "Let's pretend that." Even though participants continually go back and forth between the AW and the APW, they rarely clarify whether they are referring to the AW or the APW. Ken Lacy points out that even when going from out-of-character to in-character roles involves a gender change, participants rarely use traditional linguistic markers to call attention to these changes (Lacy). While this occasionally causes some confusion, the majority of the time there is no question about which world is being referred to. In reference to gaming in general, Goffman explains that the notion of frames allows

gamers to sustain both a side-encounter and the main encounter with relatively little confusion (Goffman 20). This holds true for *D&D*, even though the frames are extremely complex.

Frame Shifting in and out of the World of Make-Believe

In this study, I characterize the RPG as a kind of text in which, to use Ryan's terms, the aesthetics of immersion can be reconciled with the aesthetics of interactivity. Children's make-believe games are another such genre. As discussed in the introduction, although adult RPGs operate on a much more sophisticated level, they do have many similarities with childhood fantasy. The ability to shift frames is one of these similarities.

Others have drawn the connection between make-believe and narrative in general. For scholars like Kendall Walton, immersion in fiction is linked to a suspension of disbelief that we learn as children through games of make-believe (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 105). However, like *D&D*, children's make-believe games rarely involve one act of re-centering to the story world but instead continually shift between the AW and the APW. Another useful way to look at RPGs, then, is to compare the frames used in them to those used in make-believe games.

In her article "Gendered Contexts," Jenny Cook-Gumperz studies discourse samples from the make-believe games of two three-year-old girls. Although her main goal is to observe the formation of gender identities rather than the structure of narratives, Cook-Gumperz gives an in-depth model for this format of storytelling and the frames that it involves. Cook-Gumperz explains that because the children work together to develop a plot, make-believe sessions may be understood as "narrative games" (Cook-Gumperz 182), a term

that corresponds directly with the way Rilstone referred to RPGs as producing narratives and Mackay defined the RPG as a “story-creation system” (4).

In these make-believe games, Cook-Gumperz recognizes three distinct voices used by the children: narrative speech, in-character speech, and off-record speech. Narrative speech is used to describe objects and events in the story world. In-character speech involves speaking as a character in the make-believe game. Off-record speech is grounded in the actual world and involves organizational planning of the narrative game as well as statements not directly related to the story being told through the game (Cook-Gumperz 184). Off-record speech includes narrative planning speech, which is used to counter what someone has done or alter the course of events in the story that the children are developing (Cook-Gumperz 188). These forms of talk are analogous to those found in the *D&D* game.

In its most extreme form, off-record speech is simply off topic. Mackay finds that gamers often refer to other popular texts, such as sci-fi/fantasy books or films, and that if the “setting, story, and characters are not sufficiently engrossing, there is the danger of digressing into out-of-character anecdotes and free association of popular-culture references from which the players never return” (75). Often Sorpraedor sessions are a bit slow at the beginning because players engage in this sort of off-record speech while waiting for others to arrive. Likewise, when we break for food, the pleasure of socializing can make it hard to restart the game.

Sometimes, though, off-record speech will refer to previous sessions of an on-going gaming campaign rather than to a completely different text. To this day, the Sorpraedor players continually refer to the incident in the orc adventure where Maureen carves the “M” into the chest of the dead assailant. Whenever Whisper does something questionable in the

game, the players remind me that it was obviously an upside down “W” and not an “M” that was etched on the dead body. This sort of off-record speech exists in the AW, rather than the APW, but it functions as an audience commentary on the events in the story. As I have discussed, these sorts of comments can also add to emotional immersion, though this immersion carries a social function rather than a narrative function.

Off-record speech can also show how something in the real world is connected to something in the game world. In the beginning of the orc adventure, two heads that Whisper recognizes as the twins Mirador and Mardowin land in the middle of the camp along with the cursed scroll tube. While Maureen and Whisper did not initially tell the group who Mirador and Mardowin were, Catherine and I explained to the new members of the gaming group that they had been the characters played by our last gaming companions. This led to an out-of-game discussion on different types of gamers and why these particular players did not fit in with the gaming style of the Sorpraedor campaign. This discussion was off-record in the sense that it did not forward the narrative or the game; however, it both explained the bodiless heads in the story world and gave the players an opportunity to discuss the way in which they preferred the game to progress.

What Cook-Gumperz refers to as “narrative planning speech” (188) is essential both to the children’s make-believe games and *D&D*. While planning for the three-year-old girls consisted of deciding who would use what doll and the like, adult games involve much more complex planning. Often this form of talk involves complex negotiation of the game rules. The final narrative that is created from the role-playing gaming session does not usually reflect this stage of thought. A several-hour debate over what action to take next and the rules surrounding the action is reduced to one line in the write-up of the orc adventure: “We

discussed amongst ourselves the political repercussions of the situation and decided that if at all possible it would be best for humans to stay out of this orcish war.” Again, these interactions may increase emotional immersion in the social situation but do not involve immersion in the TAW.

Once the players move from discussing events “out-of-game” or off-the-record and begin to discuss things “in-game” as characters, they begin to compose the textual world. Cook-Gumperz refers to moments when the player takes on the voice of the character as “in-character speech” (184). In RPGs, the amount of in-character speech varies depending on the style of the group of gamers prefers to engage in. In general, the Sorpraedor campaign does not involve a lot of in-character speech; however, there were several notable instances of it during the orc adventure. When Cuthalion negotiated with Grumbach, David delivered an in-character speech as Cuthalion^{xii} that was so eloquent the DM granted him extra experience points^{xiii} for it. The DM also uses in-character speech when representing another character in the story. For example, after Cuthalion’s speech, the DM responded in character as Grumbach. Players often mark speech as in-character by prefacing it with a statement such as “I’ll say.”

In addition to in-character speech, the TAW consists of narrative and descriptive utterances spoken by the DM. Cook-Gumperz observed similar types of speech in the children’s games. Instances when the children actually narrated the story they were creating are examples of “narrative speech.” Cook-Gumperz found that when the children explained events as if they were telling a story, they maintained a “reading tone,” an even tone with careful word enunciation (184). I have also observed this type of tone when the DM narrates the action of the *D&D* adventure. At these times, the DM is often granted a longer turn of

talk, which is characteristic of narrative speech. As mentioned in my discussion of spatial immersion, these accounts can also contain description, such as when the DM described the scene at Blaze Arrow. However, even these descriptive scenes can be seen as temporally motivated. For example, when I wished for Whisper to open the scroll tube, I first indicated this intention. Then, the DM narrated something like this: “You see Whisper pull something out of her cloak. It is a scroll tube. She quickly removes the cap, and you hear a hissing sound escape from the tube.” Passages like this both describe the scene and advance the “plot” of the story.

Levels of Narrativity in D&D

Ryan’s distinctions among types of worlds and Cook-Gumperz’s distinctions among types of speech in make-believe games lend insight into the question of how to separate the narrative from other modes of immersion in the gaming session. The types of speech used in the RPG have varying relationships to the actual world and the alternate possible world and indicate that both narrative and non-narrative can exist within the same text. In an article that attempts to define narrative, Ryan explains that there is a difference between being a narrative and “possessing narrativity” (Ryan, “Narrative”). Likewise, rather than concluding that the entire *D&D* session is or is not a narrative, I propose a model for RPGs (figure 1) that involves levels of narrativity that reflect the relationships between the multiple worlds accessed during the game.

My model incorporates the terminology of both Ryan and Cook-Gumperz to explain the multiple frames that exist in *D&D*. The bottom level of “off-record speech” contributes the least to the narrative and is often everyday talk rather than part of the narrative. Off-

record speech shows the players reacting to the story as an audience by relating events to other cultural texts or making jokes about the actions and characters in the story. It exists in the actual world, although it may comment on the textual world.

<i>High Narrativity</i>	
The NARRATIVE sphere: Players create the textual world of the narrative.	narrative speech DM narrates and thereby creates the TAW
	in-characters speech players and DMs interaction contribute to the TAW
The GAME sphere: Players engage in game play and are immersed in the game world, which exists as a part of the actual world.	dice rolls player's dice rolls in the AW determine whether their suggestion actions succeed in the APW
	narrative suggestions players suggest actions in the AW for their characters in the APW
The SOCIAL sphere: Players interact in a social setting.	narrative planning speech players negotiate rules and how the game will be played out in the AW
	off-record speech players comment on the story world, or engage in everyday conversation in the AW
<i>Low Narrativity</i>	

Figure 1: Levels of Narrativity in RPG Discourse

Although Cook-Gumperz includes narrative planning speech as a subdivision of off-record speech, my model places it in a different frame because in this type of discourse the players are no longer a passive audience but actively involved in planning how the game will progress. This level still exists outside the narrative in the actual world but creates a bridge between the actual world and the game world through its discussion of gaming tactics.

However, just as everything discussed in this frame does not become a part of the narrative, every idea posed in this frame does not become a move in the game.

Since the make-believe games Cook-Gumperz studied did not involve the type of complex game mechanics seen in *D&D*, she does not include a type of speech for things such as statements of intention or dice rolls, both of which are crucial to the game play sphere of RPGs. The game play sphere still exists in the actual world, but is governed by the rules of the game and is composed of moves in the game. Like narrative planning speech, game play has a greater effect on the TAW than off-record speech because actions taken within the game cause what happens next in the story. I separate two different types of game play, narrative suggestions and dice rolls. Narrative suggestions involve statements of intention in which the player describes the actions his/her character attempts. In my observations, players almost always use future tense when stating the actions of their characters. For example, rather than stating that Smith entangles the orcs, Bex would state, "Smith will attempt to entangle the orcs." At this point, the action progresses to the next frame as Bex must roll dice to determine Smith's success in this endeavor. When actions do not require a dice roll, this frame is skipped, and the players progress directly to the narrative speech frame. Both frames in the game play spheres are expressed in the AW, but their outcomes are incorporated into the TAW. The outcome of these speech acts will affect the story one way or another; the action, at that point, is in play and cannot be easily retracted. However, these outcomes become a part of the TAW only as narrated by the DM.

In-character speech and narrative speech possess the highest levels of narrativity because they are the TAW. In-character speech is one level below narrative speech because it involves both the DM and the players and is thus always subject to the authoritative power of

the DM, who may retract it. For example, Ray could make a statement in character as Fletch, “No, don’t do that!” when he discovers Whisper is opening the scroll tube; however, the DM might rule (as he did in this case) that Whisper’s action took place so quickly and by such surprise that the characters did not have time to react, and thus Fletch’s speech never reaches the TAW of the narrative. However, unless directly countermanded by the DM in this way, in-character speech becomes a part of the TAW and does not need to be re-stated when the DM narrates the action.

Narrative speech is spoken only by the DM. While the narrative suggestions are voiced in future tense, narrative speech is either in present or past tense. If the DM is describing a scene, such as the epigraph in the introduction, the present tense may be employed to give the players a sense of temporal immersion, or if the DM is responding directly to the narrative suggestions, he/she may declare in past tense that the action in question was a success. Thus, narrative speech creates the TAW; it is the window through which the DM presents the TRW to the players. It is therefore the top level of my model.

All levels of this model involve forms of immersion that can be quite intense. In the off-record speech and narrative planning speech there may be emotional immersion as players react with laughter or anger to events they see happen in the story world or to the social setting of the game. In the game play frame, temporal immersion exists as narrative suggestions and dice rolls determine the possibilities of what will happen next. In-character speech often involves emotional immersion since it is directly related to character. Narrative speech, however, can involve all three types of immersion, depending on the events, setting, or characters the DM portrays in his/her speech.

In RPGs, multiple worlds exist, but the world presented in the DM's narrative speech is indeed a story world. It is this level that possesses full narrativity. Because of this level, players feel as though they are immersed in a story, even as they continually shift between frames and worlds. This sense of being immersed in a narrative world is one of the main reasons for playing RPGs. Yet, this alone is not enough to distinguish RPGs as a genre for there are many other genres that involve immersion in story worlds. The narrative speech frame may be the least interactive of the levels in my model, since it involves only the speech of the DM; however, its significance is directly impacted by the other levels of the model. Since players' actions in the game play sphere influence the narrative speech frame, their level of immersion in this frame is directly related to their level of immersion in other frames. I have here discussed the ways in which a sense of spatial, temporal, and emotional immersion function in the RPG; however, the interaction between frames is also significant to understanding the RPG.

As Ryan notes, immersion and interactivity can both exist in the same text, though not at the same time (*Virtual Reality* 284). However, as seen in the multiple frames of the RPG, immersion and interactivity do impact one another. In my next chapter, I focus on the ways interactivity functions in this genre, and how it can be seen as positively related to immersion. As I will show, the way in which these two qualities work together distinguishes the RPG genre from other texts.

What do you do?

Chapter 2. Text as Game: Interactivity in *Dungeons and Dragons*

In chapter one, I discussed how *D&D* is spatially, temporally, and emotionally immersive and how levels of narrativity exist within the game. As Ryan suggests, the quality of immersion is connected to the view of a text as world (*Virtual Reality* 90), but rather than being wholly immersed in one world, in the RPG, players move between a social world, a game world, and a story world. Each of these settings impacts the others, and there is constant movement between them. The story is created through the actions of the players in the game frame and can thus be considered an emergent story. As defined by Ryan, an emergent story is one “that is produced dynamically in the interaction between the text and the reader” (*Virtual Reality* 258). Thus, emergent stories are interactive stories, and while immersion refers to the theory of the text as world, interactivity pertains to the view of the text as game (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 191). Although theorists have used the idea of texts as games to represent the way in which all texts can be interactive, the metaphor is literalized here. Rather than discussing the ways traditional literary genres are traversed as games or have game-like properties, my concern is how a game can make use of interactivity in literary ways.

The two qualities of interactivity and immersion at first appear to be binaries; however, Ryan argues that they can be reconciled. She poses the question of “whether interactivity can be a positive factor of immersivity” (*Virtual Reality* 258). She finds that this is the case in virtual reality, and she mentions that make-believe games also have the potential to bring together the qualities of both immersion and interactivity in a way that

“transcend(s) the aesthetic ideals that the literary theory of the past twenty years seeks to express through the [text as] game metaphor” (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 185). RPGs constitute another type of text that brings together immersion and interactivity. Although many texts are either immersive or interactive, the way in which RPGs fulfill both these needs distinguishes this genre from other texts.

The tendency to dissociate immersion and interactivity seems to underlie current theoretical discussions about the relationship between narrative and games. Aarseth, who argues that the distinction between games and narrative needs to be strictly maintained, explains that scholars who view games as stories see the narrative process as one of filling in gaps, something that both a reader and a gamer appear to do (Aarseth 110). However, for Aarseth, “interactive fiction” is a myth because the reader, in the case of the hypertext and games that he studies, is always at the “constructor’s mercy” (Aarseth 89). The gaps, he claims, are not ever really filled in by the reader but instead simply function as a filter by which the constructor of the game guides the player through a certain version of the text (Aarseth 111). Certain responses will lead to certain pre-planned results. To think of the reader as fulfilling the role of creator is, for Aarseth, a fallacy (4). While games appear to challenge the author/reader binary and have thus been used by theorists as a metaphor that suggests the active participation of the reader in the creation of the text, Aarseth points out that in many games the “gap between these two [reader and author] has never been greater” (94). Aarseth’s cybertext model shows how the user of computer adventure games is separated from the author/narrator/creator^{xiv} through interactive negotiation with the computer interface (Aarseth 111-114). Aarseth mentions that “the *Dungeons and Dragons* genre might be regarded as an oral cybertext, the oral predecessor to computerized written

adventure games” (Aarseth 98), but he does not discuss the genre in greater depth or attempt to explain how it lines up with his concept of “cybertext.”

In this chapter, I explain the ways in which the interaction between frames plays a significant role in the RPG. Using established models for interactivity—the tree form that Ryan discusses, and Aarseth’s description of cybertext—I show how *D&D* differs from other interactive texts. I conclude that in RPGs interaction does enhance immersion by being productive rather than selective. Thus, RPGs offer a different experience from many other interactive texts, an experience that responds to the needs of its players.

Activity between the Frames

By simply passing off *D&D* as an oral version of the computer games that arose from it, Aarseth fails to recognize the significant differences between face-to-face gaming situations and computer games. In “Fun in Games,” Erving Goffman explains the discourse situation that is present in face-to-face games. Although computer games were hardly a consideration in Goffman’s 1961 piece, he does make a careful distinction between face-to-face games and the then-popular play-by-mail versions. Goffman defines “gaming” as “the varieties of interaction that occur among persons who are face-to-face for the avowed purpose of carrying on a game” (36). Although the term gaming is now used in reference to playing computer games as well as face-to-face games, Goffman’s point that the social encounter involved in playing a face-to-face game involves more than the game play itself is relevant to the current discussion.

I have laid out the complex framing devices specific to *D&D*, but Goffman recognizes that framing is a key component to understanding any social gaming encounter.

According to Goffman, these frames “determine the type of ‘sense’ that will be accorded everything within the frame” (20). For example, he explains that a phone call would interrupt the play of the game, but not the gaming encounter itself (Goffman 36). Because of the use of framing devices, the participants would in no way see this call as something to be incorporated into the game itself. According to Goffman, “rules of irrelevance” govern whether or not something affects the outcome of the game, and these rules change when the frame shifts (Goffman 60).

As I have suggested in chapter one, these framing mechanisms are powerful in *D&D*, and they are far more complex than those used in games that do not include a storytelling element. Completely off-the-record talk, such as discussion of players’ lives or joking, may or may not affect the game play or the narrative; it is incorrect simply to say that such discussion is irrelevant. Most gamers attempt to separate personal social relations from character relations within the game. For example, in the Sorpraedor campaign, the conflict that arose between Whisper and Smith did not carry over to my personal relationship with Bex. But this distance is a difficult thing to maintain, and in many cases the social situation affects either directly, or indirectly, the narrative that emerges. Before the incarnation of the Sorpraedor group that is depicted here, a married couple was a part of the group. When the husband was out of town, the wife played his character for a session. During this time, she had his character attack a monster that was made of acid, and it dissolved his brand new weapon. The wife then gave all of her character’s money to his character to buy him a new weapon despite the fact that her character had nothing to do with the incident. Although social interactions do not often directly impact the story in this manner, it is impossible to know how much unconscious influence exists between frames. Did the group’s constant

teasing about the “M” on the body being an upside down “W” contribute to Smith’s eventual conclusion that Whisper was evil? Bex himself may not know, but it seems plausible that switching between frames as immersive as those in *D&D* can be difficult.

While players may attempt not to let social relationships influence the story, dice rolls and narrative suggestions are intended to help create the story, although they are not represented in the final narrative. The actual roll of the dice (the number it comes up as) is irrelevant to the final story. That is, neither the number nor the act of rolling the dice is represented in a write-up such as my sample. Number crunching is essential to the *D&D* game frame, but only the final outcome is important to the narrative frame. In addition, the way that players outfit their characters and what skills they chose to give them affects whether or not the dice rolls are successful and thus indirectly has an impact on the narrative.

In order to understand how dice rolls influence the *D&D* narrative, I will present a concrete example of how skill checks work. If Cuthalion wished to follow the orcish footprints alluded to in epigraph, he would need to make a survival check. Survival is a skill that allows you to follow tracks as well as succeed in other tasks that involve nature, such as hunting or avoiding natural hazards. *The Player’s Handbook* and *The Dungeon Master’s Guide* help players and DMs determine what the difficulty class (DC) should be for certain situations. For example, if the ground is very soft, the DC for a survival check on tracking would be a five. In other words, the player must roll a five or better on a twenty-sided die in order to successfully track on very soft ground. If the ground is hard, however, he/she must roll a twenty or better^{xv} on a twenty-sided die in order to beat the difficulty class and succeed in tracking (*Player’s Handbook* 101). Other factors may also contribute to the DC. For example, if there is fresh snow on the ground the DC for tracking will increase by ten

(*Player's Handbook* 101). If the player put points into the survival skill of his/her character, he/she may add these points to his/her roll. Thus, even if David rolled a five, if Cuthalion had a survival skill of fifteen, his total roll would equal a twenty, and he would be able to track the orcs over the hard ground. In this case, the DM would narrate how Cuthalion tracked the orcs, but neither the actual roll nor the DC would be told as part of the story.

As this example shows, the activity between frames plays a complex role in *D&D*. Keeping frames separate is a goal for many players, but it is hardly practical. Fine explains that problems in the game often come from applying knowledge from one frame to another frame (188). While Ray may have been playing *D&D* for years and know the strength of every monster he encounters, Fletch does not have access to the same knowledge base. Similarly, if Ray rolls a 19, but is unable to do damage to the monster he is attacking, he may decide to retreat. It is difficult to say whether or not Fletch would have realized in that one hit how tough the monster was, but Ray would realize that he could not possibly roll high enough to defeat it. In some gaming groups this transfer of knowledge, often referred to as “metagaming,” is accepted; in others it is frowned upon. Either way, it is difficult to completely avoid because players are simultaneously immersed in the game world and the narrative world.

Fine concludes that the rapid shifting between frames in *D&D* does not negatively affect immersion (183); I propose that the activity between the frames actually serves to enhance immersion. The frames I have laid out refer to different worlds. When the frame shifts, the player directly responds to a different world; however, the other worlds are still present in his/her mind. The DM's narrative speech immerses players in the narrative world but since this immersion is shared by a close-knit audience in a social encounter, immersion

increases. Likewise, since dice rolls affect the story world, immersion in the game world and in the physical act of rolling the dice is only reinforced by immersion in the story world. That players frequently change frames without difficulty shows that they are engrossed in multiple worlds simultaneously and do not need the types of discourse markers usually needed for acts of re-centering. The DM's narration does not need to be prefaced by an abstract or concluded with a coda but flows seamlessly with the other frames of discourse. Fine explains that "the extent of frame switching can be seen as a function of engrossment" (196). That players switch frames so often and so effortlessly shows a high level of their immersion in the game as a whole rather than in any particular frame.

As these examples show, each frame contributes to the narrative that is created in the gaming session. However, with the constant shifting between frames, this narrative may seem rather disjointed. Game designer Sam Lewis, as well as several gamers I talked to, indicated that computer games followed a more linear plot structure than RPGs (Lewis, gwenifyre). If this is true, how can a plot line of the kind that is created in *D&D* be represented? To answer this, I return to Ryan's discussion of virtual narratives and interactive texts.

The Structure of Interactive Narrativity

If it is possible for a text to be both interactive and immersive, what form might such a text have? In a section titled "The Structures of Interactive Narrativity," Ryan deals with a variety of interactive texts from *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, to computer games, to hypertext. She sees each of these forms as a series of links that are connected in different ways. Ryan explains that "the narrative potential of the interactive text is a function of the

architecture of its system of links” (*Virtual Reality* 246). She offers nine different diagrams to represent different systems for types of interactive narratives. Of these structures, “The Tree” (figure 2) structure is the one that most closely matches the structure of RPGs.

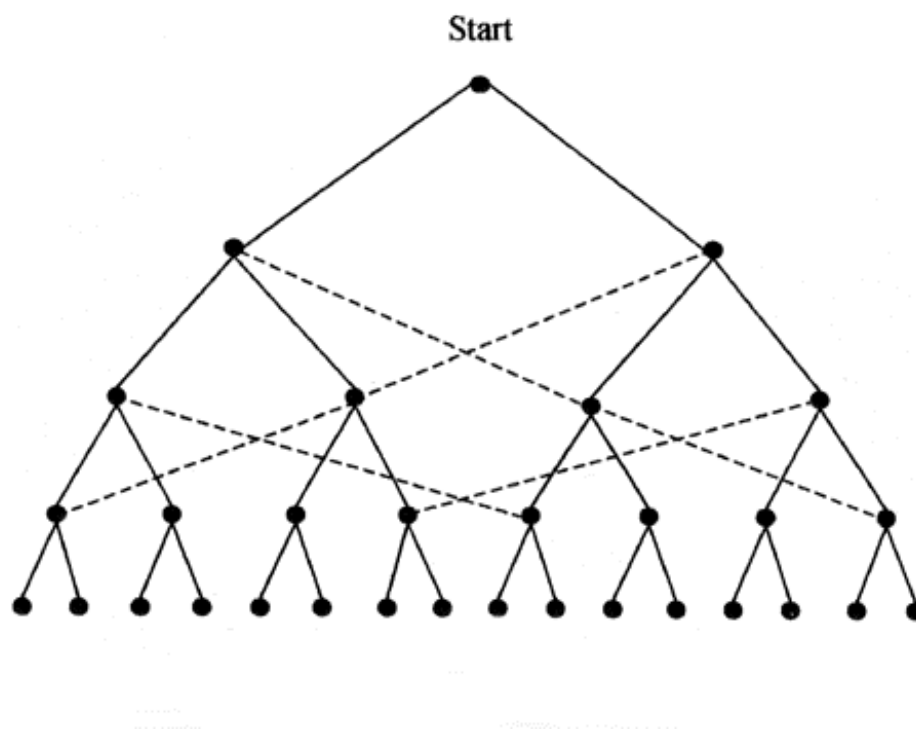


Figure 2: Ryan’s Tree Diagram (*Virtual Reality* 249)

The tree pattern allows players to branch off on different paths; however, “once a branch has been taken, there is no possible return to the decision point” (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 248). Ryan’s graph shows only binary nodes, but she explains that the tree structure can be made more complex by offering more than two possibilities at each decision point (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 249). This narrative structure does not seem so very different from some ways of viewing more traditional narrative structure. For example, Claude Bremond also discusses the structure of print narratives as a series of decision points.

In “The Logic of Narrative Possibilities,” Bremond explains that the narrator chooses whether or not to allow the plot sequence that has been initiated to continue. Narrative

possibilities include a virtual event that can then be actualized or not and then can succeed or not succeed (Bremond 388). Bremond's essay goes on to set out the types of sequences that can occur: processes are divided into processes of amelioration and degradation, each of which can be divided into more and more detailed categories (Bremond 390). In Bremond's view of narrative, from many potential plot lines the narrator chooses one path. Likewise, narratives diagrammable as tree structures, such as *D&D*, extract a single plot from many possible plots.

By using Bremond's view of narrative, we can see how decision points leave certain paths unexplored in the orc adventure. Take, for example, the party's decision to negotiate with the orcs. This particular path can be seen as a process of amelioration. Amelioration is obtained through Cuthalion's brilliant speech and the bargains that were struck; however, if Cuthalion had not been as convincing or had not been willing to hear Grumbach's side of the story, things could have gone differently. The pathway in which the orcs attacked was a potential story that was not pursued. While this example seems to fit well with Bremond's theory of narrative possibility, comparing it with Ryan's tree model will help illuminate the differences between the interactive nature of RPGs and other texts.

The key difference between Ryan's tree and Bremond's narrative possibilities concerns who makes the decision at the decision points. In Bremond's view these choices are made by the narrator, and the path not taken is never presented to the reader. In Ryan's model the choices are made by the reader. However, in *D&D* neither the DM nor the players are solely responsible for which narrative path is pursued. It is the negotiation between the players and the DM, as well as dice rolls, that determine whether or not the process of amelioration or degradation is successful. Rather than make the decision of whether or not

the orcs attacked, the DM only contributed to the outcome by playing the character of Grumbach, who had his own ideas and motivations. Meanwhile, it was up to David as the player in control of Cuthalion, as well as the other players, to make moves in the direction he considered desirable. At this point in the adventure, after seeing the great numbers of the orcish army, our party decided, together, that it would be best to negotiate with Grumbach and avoid combat. While players may not be completely aware what the other path would hold,^{xvi} they are aware of both their power to make a choice and that this choice prevents the possible return to the decision point. In Ryan's tree narratives, the readers are also the ones given the choice; however, the readers have less control over the choices they are given than *D&D* players.

One example of the kind of tree narrative that Ryan discusses is the *Choose Your Own Adventure* children's books. TSR^{xvii} published a series of these books based in the *Dungeons and Dragons* world; however, their structure differs somewhat from the game itself. In these books, after several pages of story, the reader is asked to make a choice. For example, in the book *Spell of the Winter Wizard*, the reader is addressed in the second person and takes on the role of a wizard's child. The wizard has been kidnapped and the goal is to follow the path of the story so that it reaches the positive conclusion of the father-figure being rescued. At the end of the first section the reader is offered a choice:

- 1) You can try to destroy Warzen [an evil wizard] first, then save Alcazar before he freezes. Turn to page 65.
- 2) You can seek out the Druids, find the Crimson Flame Mushroom [a powerful magical item], and take it to Alcazar. Turn to page 21.

(Lowery 10).

The book offers similar choices throughout, some of which lead the reader to a happy ending, some of which do not. As Ryan points out, in order to avoid an unmanageable number of pathways, often paths merge, as shown by the dotted lines on her diagram (*Virtual Reality* 249). While the reader can physically turn back the pages and take a different path, unlike a hypertext, where the reader chooses what order to follow the links in, the *Choose Your Own Adventure* stories function through readers making either/or choices at pre-determined points and following these choices through to the end. Thus, if Ryan's tree diagram was extended to cover the entirety of the story, it would look like figure three above.

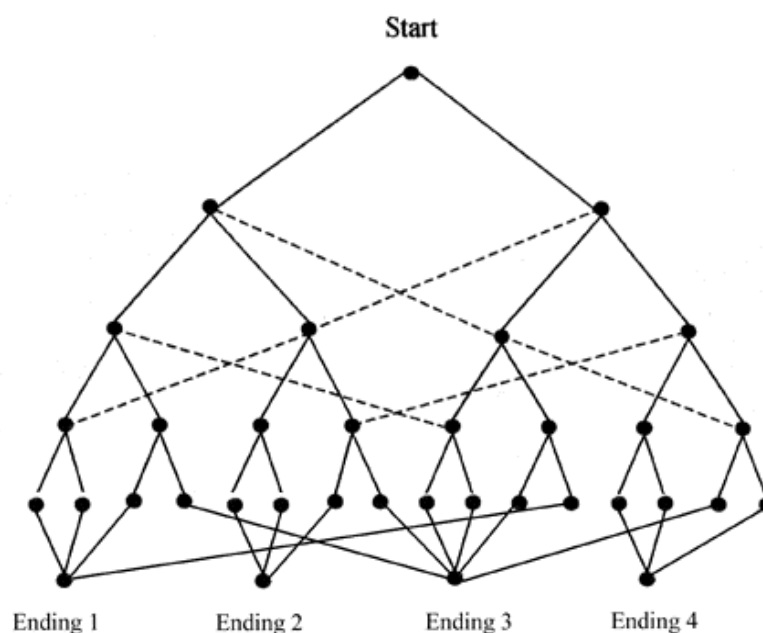


Figure 3: An extension of Ryan's tree diagram to show the entirety of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* form.

While *Spell of the Winter Wizard* is set in a *Dungeons and Dragons*-like setting, it is not an accurate representation of the format of the game. RPGs offer a variation on the tree format by offering players not only the ability to make a choice at decision points but also the

opportunity to come up with what those choices may be. The pathways in *D&D* continually expand outward rather than overlapping in order to connect to pre-determined endings. When players are posed with the question “what do you do?” they are given the opportunity not only to make decisions but also to build their own pathways.

Although Scott did have several possible endings for the orc adventure in mind, no pre-set pathways existed to reach these endings, and any other endings that might have evolved from the players actions would have also been acceptable. He had planned what would happen if we defeated the orcs through battle and what would happen if the orcs were allowed to pass, but the actual pathways in the adventure were left up to the party. For example, when our party first encountered the orcs rather than ask “do you fight” or “do you negotiate,” the DM simply poses the question “what do you do?” We decided to carefully sneak up and assess the situation, upon which Smith entangled the orcs, and we interrogated them. However, we could have attacked, returned to Gateway with the information that the orcs had invaded, made a treaty with the orcs, or done pretty much anything we could imagine and justify as a course of action to the other players. While we followed fairly closely the possible outcomes that Scott had planned for this adventure, when I asked him how often players do something completely different from what he expects or has planned, he responded “constantly” (Cover).

While players are often able to create the pathways within the story, unlike in Ryan’s tree diagram, paths in *D&D* are not always followed by choice. Often chance is used to dictate which path is taken. As I have discussed, dice rolls are made in either/or decisions where an action either succeeds or fails. The player may be able to propose a certain action, but the factor of chance contributes to whether or not the player is allowed to progress down

that chosen path. Not only did Cuthalion need to give a good speech to convince Grumbach to withdraw his army, but David also had to make a successful diplomacy skill check on his twenty-sided die. In this sense, there is interactivity but the choice comes from creating possible pathways rather than deciding which one to follow.

Another difference from Ryan's tree diagram or Bremond's model of narrative possibilities is that multiple pathways can simultaneously be pursued in *D&D* by different players. When Catherine could not attend the session, she decided that her character, Maureen, would go back to town. At this point, her character entered an alternate plot line that none of the other characters had access to. Scott met with Catherine separately to work out the details of what happened to Maureen in town while the rest of us were away. This example of a completely alternate pathway is rather extreme and does not happen often, yet smaller examples of the phenomenon can be found within the story of the orcs. The reason that Cuthalion's speech to Grumach, despite its success, is not fully reported in the write-up is that Whisper and Fletch were not present for the speech. At a decision point, these characters chose to stay in the town while Cuthalion and Smith chose to confront Grumbach. Thus, the two plot lines were able to happen simultaneously, though neither decision was reversible. Depending on the situation, the player may remain and listen to what happens in a passive role as audience, but not as an active participant. I remained to hear Cuthalion's speech, though I could not affect its outcome because my character was not present. On the other hand, Maureen's adventures in Gateway were done behind closed doors, and I was not allowed to find out the results. Thus, the model of narrative possibilities is complicated because, as Mackay also notes, each player's experience is different due to his/her character's position within the story (Mackay 86).

Ryan's tree model for interactive narrative (figure 2) fits the *D&D* story, but not without oversimplifying it. Like the tree diagram, players in *D&D* have a series of decision points available to them, but unlike the tree model, there are multiple factors that limit which path may be pursued, including random chance. As I will discuss in chapter three, despite this lack of control in choosing which path to take, the ability to create pathways gives players a sense of agency that is an important reason for playing RPGs.

Cybertext and Negotiation

Ryan's tree diagram offers some insight into the type of interactive structure found in the RPG, but the form is not a perfect fit. Aarseth, who had labeled *D&D* an oral cybertext, sets out another way to view interactive structures in his book *Cybertext*. While the term "cybertext" may conjure images of computer technology, Aarseth presents cybertext as "a perspective on textuality" rather than a genre or medium (24). Thus, the concept of cybertext does not refer to any particular medium but could be applied to written, oral, and computer-mediated texts alike.

Aarseth focuses one chapter of this book on text-based adventure games,^{xviii} which involve a computer database of commands and possible plot lines that the user attempts to access (Aarseth 100). As in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, adventure game players' decisions lead to certain pre-determined outcomes but involve more activity on the part of the player to reach these outcomes. Rather than simply choosing one path or the other, the player must solve the puzzle in order to proceed. Aarseth explains that the gaps in adventure games are "not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination; rather, they are used as a filter, in which only the 'correct' response lets the user proceed through the text" (111).

According to Aarseth, this extra level of effort to traverse the text sets cybertexts apart from traditional narratives or hypertext (110).

Aarseth's cybertext model presents some useful distinctions that I will use to help clarify the interactive structure of the RPG genre; however, there are many reasons why *D&D* cannot be considered simply an "oral cybertext." One useful proposal that Aarseth makes is his distinction among narratives, hypertexts and cybertexts (figure 4).

Narrative	Hypertexts	Cybertext
Progression and Event	Progression	Progression
		Negotiation
	Event	Event

Figure 4: Aarseth's concept of discourse planes in narrative, hypertext, and cybertext. (Aarseth 126)

Aarseth sees cybertext as complicating notions of plot and story and argues that "the reader (user), being strategically within [the plot], is in no position to see through it and glimpse a story behind" (112). He explains that in a traditional narrative there are two planes: the event plane, where events of the plot are narrated, and the progression plane, where the events are unfolded by the reader (Aarseth 125). In narratives, these planes must be connected because the reader follows the order of events as the narrator presents them. The reader may eventually need to rearrange the order of these events in order to make sense of them, but he/she must initially be subject to the order chosen by the narrator. However, in hypertext these planes are disconnected. The narration is not presented directly to the reader, but must be discovered by the reader (Aarseth 125). Thus, the order in which the plot is presented will

vary based on the reader rather than based on the narrator. Cybertext involves another plane, that of negotiation. In cybertext the reader must negotiate with an intermediary in order to unfold the plot (Aarseth 125). The plot is not presented directly to the reader and is not discovered by him/her but is controlled by the computer-mediated environment. In adventure games, Aarseth's example of cybertext, this negotiation is a process of interaction with the computer "voice" in order to unlock the "correct" progression of events (125). Aarseth states that "the determinate cybertext reconfigures literary experience along a different plane than the narrative" (114). Thus, narrative structures cannot be used to explain the process that exists in cybertext.

While interaction with a computer "voice" is always limited by the computer programming, participants in RPGs negotiate face-to-face with the gamemaster. In this way, as Aarseth suggests, *D&D* can be seen as a cybertext (98), although it is not associated with computer technology. However, negotiation in *D&D* is quite different from negotiation in adventure games. While users of the text-based adventure games work with an intermediary voice, the computer, to unlock the story set out by the narrator, in *D&D* no set story underlies the adventure. There is no one way to proceed through the RPG, and thus the players and the gamemaster negotiate the actual events of the story *before* they are narrated, rather than the negotiating the way through pre-set events.

Both the author/narrator/creator and the computer voice have far more control over the reader/user than does the DM. In *D&D* veering off the expected path is often rewarded with a more interesting story, but doing this in a computer game is either impossible or results in "narrative punishment." Aarseth finds that in the computer adventure games "noncooperation and free play result in narrative punishment, which equals the end, death"

(Aarseth 121). In these adventure games, there are only certain commands that are recognized by the “voice,” which is the computer system. For example, in the game *Deadline*, if the player gives the command “stroll around,” the computer responds, “The word ‘stroll’ isn’t in your vocabulary” (Aarseth 116). Likewise, if the user enters in a creative action that is not expected by the computer, such as “hit Leslie with roses,” the computer responds with the script for a losing ending in which Leslie falls dead and the character’s avatar is arrested (Aarseth 121). However, “narrative punishment” might also refer to unsuccessful attempts by the user to navigate through the narrative. My own experience with the adventure game genre was playing “221B Baker Street” as a teen. I was never able to negotiate successfully with the computer, and the majority of my commands were met with the voice stating something like, “Holmes, your brain has become swiss cheese.” For me, the “narrative punishment” was not always the literal death of the avatar or the computer-initiated end of the story but the inability to reach any end to the narrative because of sheer frustration. Although the text-based games that Aarseth examines lost much of their popularity in the late 1980s, even in the most complex computer games, narrative choices are still limited by what can be programmed into the computer system.^{xix} Negotiation does take place in *D&D*, but as a process in which the player has actual power over the narrative as it is being created rather than as way to uncover events already inscribed in the text.

Productive Interactivity

As I have suggested, the face-to-face environment allows for a greater freedom of choice in *D&D* than in computer games. This process of negotiation involves the reader in

what Ryan calls the “fullest type” of interactivity. She states that when the user’s involvement is not simply selective but productive, interactivity is at its greatest (*Virtual Reality* 205). Ryan defines productive action as anything “that leaves a durable mark on the textual world, either by adding objects to its landscape or by writing its history” (*Virtual Reality* 205). Ryan provides a number of examples of productive interactivity, such as amusement park rides, children’s make-believe games, interactive drama, and MOOs (*Virtual Reality* 287-331). Again, Ryan does not specifically discuss RPGs, but she does mention that “a genealogy of interactive genres leads from...*Dungeons and Dragons*” (*Virtual Reality* 310).

Clearly, the examples I have given show that productive rather than selective interactivity is the type of action that takes place in *D&D*. Simply by creating and adding new characters to the world, the players make a mark upon it. By continuing to make decisions for these characters, players continue to influence the history and progression of the world in a productive rather than a selective manner. The tree model mimics the structure of the RPG storyline, but the pathways are created by the players rather than presented for them to choose from. Aarseth’s cybertext model clearly shows the separation between the author/narrator/creator of the adventure game and the reader/user. While his concept of negotiation involves more than the simple selection of possible paths represented in the tree model, it still involves a type of interactivity that is more selective than productive. The user must work with the computer voice to uncover the choices available to him/her, but he/she cannot present choices that are not programmed into the computer database. However, negotiation in RPGs requires that players come up with possible options for the progression of the story; any of the options presented has the potential to be selected by the group as a

course of action. Thus, while Aarseth shows the clear divide between creator and user, this division cannot be maintained in the RPG. The player takes a truly interactive role in the production of the text.

Productive interactivity offers a way to reconcile interactivity and immersion. Murray comments that doing something that affects the story world is always immersive (112). Ryan agrees, and explains that virtual reality is a prime example of the way these two features work together. She states that the “key to immersive interactivity” is “participation of the body in an art-world” (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 286). Virtual reality involves the physical participation of the body, but Ryan comments that verbal contribution can “count as the actions and speech acts of an embodied member of the fictional world” (Ryan, *Virtual Reality* 286). As I have shown, narrative suggestions are speech acts that *D&D* players use to affect the story world, thus, they become “embodied members” in this world by interacting with it.

Both *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and the type of adventure games Aarseth studies had a short-lived success in the 1980s. Text-based adventure games have experienced resurgence in the form of interactive fiction, but have not survived as a part of the mainstream marketed gaming industry. However, RPGs have maintained a wider popularity. Fine estimated that in 1979 there were approximately 500,000 RPG gamers, a tenth of which he estimates play regularly (27). Dancey’s 2000 survey showed that this number has increased to 2.5 million players who play monthly. One possible reason for this success is the way in which the gaming industry has kept up with the needs of the players. In terms of *D&D*, Wizard’s of the Coast’s re-release of the *D&D* rulebooks in 2000 has rekindled an interest in the game. Game designers found that the previous editions of the *D&D* rules had

become so complex that the storytelling aspects of the game were being lost. They saw that the majority of groups tweaked these rules on their own and set out to do a complete overhaul based on the issues that had been brought to their attention (Rausch). Players have not only been able to affect the worlds of their individual gaming groups, but they have also served a productive role in the future of the overall gaming form. Furthermore, companies such as White Wolf, which began in 1991, have created other successful RPGs, many of which incorporate more of a storytelling element than the original *D&D* game. White Wolf claims that their “award-winning games like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* and *Mage: The Ascension* have revolutionized roleplaying” by allowing players to “tell modern stories of tragedy and personal horror” ([White Wolf](#)).

However, the on-going success of RPGs is not simply a matter of effective business practice, but has to do with the ways this genre responds to an exigence. Why have players responded favorably to the White Wolf games and the 3rd edition changes to *D&D*? What need does playing RPGs fulfill for players, and how does this need fit into a larger social context? To answer these questions, we must shift our focus from the more formal features of the RPG to the look at culture that has embraced this form. Therefore, I now move on to rhetorical theory to discuss the ways that the immersive interactivity of the RPG genre addresses a rhetorical situation.

Chapter 3. The Rhetorical Exigency of Narrative Agency

In my first two chapters, I discussed how immersion and interactivity function together in an RPG. By incorporating both immersion and interactivity, RPGs challenge traditional definitions both of narrative and of games, making it impossible to categorize them solely as either. The narrative and game frames work in concert and neither can be separated from the whole. Both immersion and interactivity play a large role in these two spheres, but they are also important in the social sphere. The social sphere adds yet another dimension to the complexities of the RPG—a rhetorical dimension. The rhetorical dimension of the RPG allows us to situate it in a broader cultural context and explain its persistence as both a genre and a subculture. Immersive interactivity is a distinguishing feature of this genre, but its significance is more than simply that of a formal feature. It responds to a broader rhetorical and social situation. Thus, determining the features of the RPG helps to define it as a genre, not just in formal terms but in rhetorical terms. In order to do this, I draw on rhetorical models of genre.

In his discussion of genre theory, John Swales states that “the principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communication events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes” (Swales 46). The most important question in defining RPGs as a separate genre, is to discuss how they fulfill a specific “communicative purpose.” This purpose, or exigence, will explain why RPGs have remained popular although there are computer games with similar themes, some even based on the *Dungeons and Dragons* rules and setting.

In order to say that a text is rhetorical and that it responds to a rhetorical exigency, we must first discuss the rhetorical situation. Lloyd Bitzer’s article “The Rhetorical Situation”

sets forth a model for defining rhetorical situations. Bitzer argues that “we need to understand that a particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance” (6). In my discussion of RPGs as games that incorporate a narrative structure, I have explained many of the specific details of this genre in terms of their story-producing function. However, in order to determine the rhetorical situation that RPGs respond to, we must look at the form as whole rather than isolating individual features. As a whole, RPGs can be seen as rhetorical discourse.

According to Bitzer, the aim of rhetorical speech is “to produce action or change in the world” (4). As explained in chapter one, RPGs involve a complex system of frames that respond to different worlds, and it is possible to see rhetorical aims in each of these worlds. However, Bitzer explains that while fiction may involve rhetoric within the story, “the speech is not genuinely rhetorical” because the situation is not real (11). Cuthalion’s speech to Grumach may be an excellently crafted rhetorical appeal within the world of Sorpraedor, but it does not directly influence action in the actual world. Similarly, I may make a strong appeal to the DM to not count a roll made in the game frame, and this appeal would affect the story world, but should not influence on the actual world.^{xx} However, Bitzer explains that literary texts may have a rhetorical purpose that affects the actual world (11), and if the poet has such a rhetorical purpose it is met in the act of composing the work (8). Since players of RPGs build a narrative only during the actual gaming session, RPGs offer us a look at the ways in which this genre not only functions in a literary domain, but may also function as a response to a rhetorical situation.

Just as rhetorical appeals can be seen at different levels of the RPG, we can also define different activity systems. According to Russell, an activity system consists of subjects

who use tools in order to produce an outcome (Russell 510). On the level of the narrative world, the characters as subjects use the tool of negotiation to produce the outcome of protecting the town of Barrentsone from the orcs. On the gaming level we can see the subjects of the activity system as the members of the specific gaming group, both the players and the DM. The tool is the gaming system, in this case *D&D*, used by the gaming group. The outcome of RPGs, as stated by game-designer Andrew Rilstone, is to produce a narrative. On a larger scale, however, we can view the subculture of gamers as the subjects, the RPG itself as the tool, and the outcome as the bringing together of members of society who are socially marginalized. In each of these activity systems the gamers have the ability, or agency, to produce the desired outcome by using the appropriate tools. Yet, as I have suggested, these systems do impact each other. By looking at the way gamers use a system of rules and conventions to create a narrative, we can see how gamers use the RPG genre as a tool to fulfill larger social needs.

Immersion + Interactivity=A Sense of Narrative Agency

In order to understand the larger rhetorical issues at stake in RPGs, we must first return to the ways in which gamers use the gaming system to create a narrative. As we have seen, not all aspects of the RPG are concerned with narrativity, and the game as a whole should not be considered a narrative. However, gamers seem to agree that creating a narrative is one major goal of participating in an RPG. Ed Stark from Wizards of the Coast, the company that now owns *D&D*, comments that “people often say playing *D&D* is like writing your own movie” (qtd. in Waters). When asked by BBC News Online to comment on their memories of *D&D* for its 30th anniversary, participants did indeed note the feeling of

controlling a story world. James Dodd of the UK states that RPGs are “a chance to star in your own subjective version of any film or novel.” Paul Grogan also says that *D&D* gives you a chance to “recreate cinematic moments, kinda [sic] like being in a film where there is no defined script.” Diana Thirring agrees, noting that “it is like writing a story without knowing the outcome” (Waters). Whether or not narrative theorists would consider games such as *D&D* narratives, many gamers feel that their experience with the RPG is a narrative experience.

In chapter one, I linked the narrativity of RPGs with their immersive qualities. However, a careful look at how gamers talk about their RPG experiences shows that the sense of being in a movie or book is much more than a sense of immersion in a story world. They “star” in the film, “recreate” the moments, and “write” their own story. Clearly the sense of being immersed is reflected in these statements, but so is the sense of interacting with the world. Players have a sense of agency in the narrative sphere. Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (126). When Murray uses the term agency she refers to the type of productive interactivity that Ryan believes leads to immersion. Agency, Murray states, “goes beyond both participation and activity” to become “an aesthetic pleasure” (Murray 128).

Just as Aarseth called adventure games a new kind of “textual pleasure” (109), RPGs too offer a different type of textual pleasure. The difference in these pleasures, however, is a difference between selective interactivity and productive interactivity. As I mentioned in chapter two, Ryan defines productive interactivity as anything “that leaves a durable mark on the textual world” (*Virtual Reality* 205). Likewise, *D&D* differs from *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels and text-based adventure games because the interactivity afforded by RPGs

is far more productive than selective. The ability to contribute to the production of texts rather than simply to navigate them gives players a sense of agency that other interactive texts may not provide. This agency not only concerns the player's ability to affect the outcome in the story world, but also affects their sense of agency in the actual world.

Although players can affect the story world, Murray cautions against confusing agency in the narrative with authorship over the narrative. She states, "there is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself" (Murray 152). She recognizes that there are limits to the interactive environments she studies, most of which are controlled by computer. Even in LARPs, she says that unless "the imaginary world is nothing more than a costume trunk of empty avatars, all of the interactor's possible performances will have been called into being by the originating author" (Murray 152). Yet a "costume trunk of empty avatars" is very much the way RPGs can be run. Characters are created almost exclusively by the players, and players cannot only choose pathways but also create them. These pathways need not be anticipated by the DM, or the creators of the game—though, as I will discuss later, neither the DM, nor the game creators can really be considered "originating authors."

DMs often do extensive planning for gaming sessions, but everything is subject to change at a moment's notice depending on what the players do. Although Scott had several different plans laid out for the orc adventure, and we ended up following one fairly closely, the group could easily have abandoned the mission all together and instead sought after the strange cloaked assailants who threatened the group at the very beginning of the session. The DM cannot possibly plan for all possible actions that players may take, though he/she can certainly anticipate those that are most likely. Fine also commented that DMs could not plan

too much in advance because they needed to continually change the story and the world in response to the characters' actions (194).

The bloggers who commented that tabletop RPGs met different needs from CRPGs pointed to this flexibility as the main need that CRPGs could not fulfill in the same way as tabletop RPGs. In response to my blog posting, *Trooper6* states that tabletop RPGs are “unlimited in choices” and that “you have complete freedom in creating your own character” (gwenifyre). *Unquietsoul5* mentions that “without the social interaction with other players, complex character development, long term effect on the game world setting, and wide variety of choices in situations, I really don't classify a game a roleplaying game” (gwenifyre). He continues by explaining that “there isn't a computer game in the world that can give me the chance to play all the options I want in a situation that I get in a roleplaying game” (gwenifyre). These comments show that productive interactivity and a sense of agency are important to gamers who participate in RPGs.

While the variety of choices that players refer to leads to the sense of agency over the narrative world, the need for this type of control is a response to the actual world. The key to understanding how RPGs respond to a rhetorical need in the actual world is understanding why this sense of narrative agency is important to players of the RPG. What makes this need for narrative control a powerful exigence?

Addressing Issues of Separateness

Bitzer explains that an exigence is “an imperfection,” something that needs to be fixed in some way (6). In terms of rhetoric, however, the exigence must be of social rather than individual concern. Miller states that “exigence must be seen... as a social motive”

(158). She goes on to explain that “exigence is a set of particular social patterns and expectations that provides a socially objectified motive for addressing danger, ignorance, separateness” (Miller 158). Clearly, the rhetorical situation for Miller exists in the social sphere.

By offering a sense of narrative agency that is shared by a group of participants in the actual world, RPGs address issues of separateness. Bebergal, a journalist and gamer, explains that for his group of friends RPGs were a means of “creating narratives to make sense of feeling socially marginal.” He also reminds his readers that *D&D* can help them make stories from the world around them, stories that can lend clarity to current political and cultural situations (Bebergal). Similarly, Mackay sees RPGs as a means of bringing unity to the lives of players (116). Murray states that games and narratives both “reflect our desire and sorrows with the heightened clarity of the imagination” (Murray 274). The exigence to create and control narratives is defined by the social motivation to connect with others and impose meaning on the world.

Scholars of both narrative and rhetoric have discussed the power of narrative to make sense of experience. W.R. Fisher’s article “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument” builds on MacIntyre, who argues that it was not reason but storytelling that separated humankind from animals. Thus, Fisher claims that narrative is the dominant paradigm for interpreting and understanding experience (Fisher 1). Similarly, Jerome Bruner sees narrative as “an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (6). In their book *Living Narrative*, Ochs and Caps present “personal narrative” as “a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with at temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized

experience” (2). They stress narrative as “sense-making *process*” rather than a “finished product” (Ochs and Caps 15).

Ochs and Caps portray this meaning-making process in personal narrative rather than group or fictional narratives. The examples they use are of individuals telling life experiences in order to work out possible explanations for what has happened to them, or to explore possibilities for what they should do next (20-23). In *D&D*, the narrative is created not by one individual but by a group of people. However, there is no reason why Ochs and Caps’ idea of narrative as meaning-making cannot be applied beyond the level of the individual to explain how stories help people build a larger social meaning.

One might argue, however, that the world of *D&D* and most RPGs does not reflect real-world experiences as directly as personal narratives. Certainly the world is fictional and the experiences depicted in the story, such as casting spells or speaking with orcs, are not directly analogous to real-world experiences. In contrast with Ochs and Caps’ position, some scholars view stories as a method of escapism from these real-world experiences. Murray explains that “a good story puts us safely outside ourselves” (100). Fine explains that RPGs do just that. They create a “world set apart from the everyday world” (Fine 183). However, it seems to me that the position of narrative as meaning-making and narrative as escapism do not have to be seen in opposition.

Fine admits that even *D&D*’s fantastical events “are grounded in the physical world” (183). Mackay agrees that RPGs establish an “alternate reality” but that this reality is “derived from patterns established in the artifacts of popular culture” rather than actual events (81). While the world of *D&D* is a world of fantasy, a world of magic, and mythical creatures, it must in some way connect to the actual world in order to make sense. Again, the

idea of possible worlds helps to explain this connection. Ryan's principle of minimal departure states that when we create an alternate possible world, other things being equal we tend to interpret it based on our assumptions about the actual world (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 51). For example, in order for us to understand the entangle spell that Smith casts on the orcs, we must assume that, without the spell, orcs move freely about the earth in a manner much as we walk about ours. Because this assumption is in play, we are able to comprehend the idea that the entanglement spell prevents the orcs from moving normally.

While we apply the principle of minimal departure to the characters in the fictional world, including the narrator, Ryan states that even in the case of first person narration we are able to differentiate the author from the narrator. As an example, she explains that if John Smith wrote a tale about a gnome named John Smith, the reader would not simply picture John Smith as a gnome but would understand that the gnome is a character separate from John Smith, the author (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 59). While a traditional narrative may allow the reader to separate author and narrator clearly, this separation becomes more complicated in the RPG setting where the creator of the character^{xxi} is right in front of you, pretending to be a character that has, quite possibly, a different race or a different sex. Although Catherine originally played the character of Maureen who is seen in the orc adventure, she later switched to a male character, Gareth. However, the group as a whole continued to refer to Gareth as a "she" and at the very least decided that he was a very effeminate male character. Boundaries between player and character are blurred in the RPG, in part due to the lack of a physical or visual text. This sometimes leads to over-applying the principle of minimal departure. If I were to read the description of Cuthalion created by David, I would realize that Cuthalion is, in fact, much shorter and older than David himself. However, when I picture the

character of Cuthalion, it is very difficult to picture anything except David with more elvish features, such as pointy ears. Similarly, seeing Catherine's character as female over-extends the principle of minimal departure in a way that does not happen with visual or print-based texts. However, this tendency may help explain how players are able to escape to an alternate possible world while still being able to use the narrative process to make sense of the actual world. If the only way to understand the fantasy world is by placing it in relation to the actual world, this process can easily be reversed and the fantasy world can be used to make sense of the actual world as well.

Bruner calls narrative an "instrument" (6), and in light of Russell's account of activity theory, it makes sense to refer to narrative as a tool that is used in the RPG genre in order to achieve the outcome of connecting with others through a sense of narrative control. Games offer another tool that is used in a similar way. Murray points out that games, like narratives, offer "interpretations of experience" and that they are rituals used to "enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives" (143). She gives examples of games such as Monopoly, that teach and re-enact the values and skills necessary in society. But just as games and narratives can be used as tools to reinforce cultural norms, thus making sense of them, they can also be used as a way to react against mainstream culture. As Bebergal points out, his group of friends was on the outskirts of mainstream society, and this description seems to fit, in general, with the type of person who is attracted to the RPG genre. While not all of those who play RPGs are outcasts of society, many seem to respond to the genre because they feel the need to connect with others in a way that does, to an extent, rebel against cultural norms.

Since members of the group work together to produce a text, the author/reader dynamic is affected. Aarseth argues that in computer-mediated texts the gap between author and reader is often greater than one might think, but he states that “the politics of the author-reader relationship, ultimately, is not a choice between paper and electronic text, or linear and non-linear text...instead it is whether the user has the ability to transform the text into something that the instigator of the text could not foresee or plan for” (164). This ability to transform the text is the sort of productive interactivity that can be seen in RPGs. Players have the agency needed to transform the story in ways that DM cannot anticipate, and in turn the DM can transform the text in ways that the creators of the game could not anticipate. Transforming the text as a group—including both players and DM—is a creative experience that responds to a social need for connecting with others and thus responds to issues of separateness.

Against Texts as Objects of Consumption

As Bebergal explained, those who play RPGs are often those who feel marginalized by society; however, gamers form their own subsociety. Fine sets up his *Shared Fantasy* book as a study of RPGs as a subculture (25), which he says is analogous to an activity system (2). According to Fine, a subculture must have a network of communication for its members, and both the members and those outside the subculture must recognize it as a separate group (25-26). Fine spends the first chapter of his book showing how RPG gamers fit these criteria for a subculture. Both players of RPGs and members of the larger gaming community distinguish the RPG through their use of terminology that separates it from other gaming forms, which shows that RPG gamers are also recognized as comprising their own

subculture. Although Fine relates subcultures to the concept of activity systems, his study of the culture focuses on the players rather than the activity system as a whole. In order to explain what attracts people as members of this particular subculture, and how the activity system as a whole works, I offer for comparison the subculture of television fandom, as presented by Henry Jenkins in his book *Textual Poachers*.

Aarseth mentions Henry Jenkins's work on fandom as another example of textual transformation (164), and the type of productive interactivity that is seen in RPGs is very similar to the activities Jenkins discusses. It was in fan communities (specifically fantasy and science fiction fans) that *D&D* first became popular, and it has retained its popularity in these communities (Mackay 16). Of course, to say that all *D&D* players are involved in fandom or that all fans are gamers, would be reductive and would undermine the status of each as a distinct subculture. However, identifying an overlap in these cultures begs the question: what is it about this group that has made them receptive to this genre?

Both fans and gamers use different tools—fan-fiction and gaming sessions—but both respond to the dominant mainstream culture and react against the view of texts as objects of consumption. Jenkins and Mackay both refer to Roland Barthes' idea that re-reading is “not consumption but play” (*S/Z* 16). In the case of television fans this re-reading often takes place quite literally as fans continually re-watch episodes of their favorite series. Fans then use incidents and characters in the series to write their own stories, called fan-fiction.

Re-playing an RPG adventure would be so different from session to session that I am hesitant to call this re-playing at all. Instead of considering it re-reading or re-playing, Mackay proposes a Barthean-type process in which role-players created a new reality “derived from patterns established in the artifacts of popular culture” (81). Like fans, gamers

take bits and pieces of popular culture, such as the fantasy worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien, and re-appropriate them to create their own narratives. While organizations such as the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) strive to create a realistic medieval environment, because of the constant frame shifting involved in RPGs, gamers often bring in their knowledge of popular culture to either explain or comment on the gaming narrative. In addition, the new role-playing games that have come about in the last thirty years often use a pop culture setting and are often based on popular television series or movies such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

In a way, RPGs based on popular media are gamers' way of interacting with these worlds, understanding them, and appropriating them as their own. Both gamers and fans reject the sort of aesthetic distance that comes from simply reading or listening to a story—that is, from consumption—and instead seek their own narrative control over the text. Jenkins explains that for many fans rejection of aesthetic distance is a rejection of authority. Instead of simply accepting the texts as they are presented, fans feel they have the right to offer their own interpretations. They “enter the realm of fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore” (Jenkins 18). RPGs offer popular fiction worlds with the full possibility of exploring and inhabiting them during the gaming session, but furthermore, they offer players the ability to completely transform and control these worlds.

Mackay states that role-players aren't consumers because RPG is a process-performance. He explains that “the role-playing game exhibits a narrative, but this narrative does not exist *until* the actual performance” (50). Although players buy products, such as the rulebooks, the outcome of their games—the narrative that is created through game play—rarely becomes a consumer product. Similarly, while fans may invest in buying paraphernalia

associated with their fandom, the texts they create through fan-fiction remain unpublished and are freely exchanged among members of the group. Although they are consumers in the sense that they buy products, fans and RPG gamers do not consume these products but use them to actively produce texts of their own.

A key difference between fans and gamers, however, is the nature of the texts they create. Fan-fiction writers use the original text, such as the *Star Trek* television series, to produce a new text, their work of fan-fiction. This work may remain unpublished, but it is nevertheless consumed by other members of the fandom who read it as a complete text of its own. On the other hand, RPG stories are often not represented in any physical form. My write-up of the orc adventure was done with the purpose of informing Catherine what she had missed in her absence from that gaming session. It is one of only several stories from our Sorpraedor campaign that has been written down, and even these were never intended for an audience beyond the Sorpraedor group. In part, this is because RPG stories are rarely complete but rather continue from session to session. Moreover, even with the pop-up comments I have added to my write-up in the appendix, it is impossible to replicate the complexity of the interaction that occurs in each frame of the RPG. Mackay explains that players continue to play out of a “desire to return to the *presence* of emotion” that disappears when the game stops (Mackay 85). The desire to return to the story that can never end, that can never be consumed, keeps RPG groups going for years. Mackay sees this ongoing process as one that “suspends the desire to consume the texts (ie commodities) of the spectacle of popular culture” (131). The audience, if they can be characterized as such, resist consumption in favor of production. Because the world and characters of *D&D* is created in the minds of the players, there is no physical text to consume.

The ability to create texts that cannot be reproduced or commodified is important to gamers. In his article “How ‘Dungeons’ changed the world,” Bebergal claims that “*Dungeons and Dragons* reinvented the use of the imagination as a kid’s best toy.” He comments that looking around at his child’s room full of toys, he wants to shout, “ ‘I created worlds with nothing more than a twenty-sided die!’ ” There is a strong sense of power and ownership involved in creating something that can exist only in a person’s imagination, something that can never be read or consumed by others. Gamer Simon Andrew states, “it’s great being part of an underground world which baffles 90% of people you talk to” (Waters). Gamers pride themselves on creating worlds and stories that are incomprehensible to those outside their gaming group because they pride themselves on creating connections with others who share in this active process of production.

As members of a subculture, RPG gamers connect through their shared desire to produce texts. Because immersive qualities of RPGs give players a sense of belonging to a story world and interactive qualities give players the sense of actively contributing to this world, players see their gaming as a process of production rather than consumption. In her description of immersive interactivity in the context of virtual reality, Ryan explains that productive interactivity is indeed an aesthetic pleasure (*Virtual Reality* 283-286). I have offered RPGs as another example of immersive interactivity, and have suggested that this quality can be viewed as a response to the rhetorical needs of a group of individuals. RPGs have thrived as a genre of their own because they offer the qualities of both immersion in a world and interaction with it. By engaging in this type of creative and productive behavior, gamers create a culture of their own that rejects notions of texts as consumed objects.

Defining the RPG

My central concern in this thesis has been one of definition. How can we define and study RPGs? The question is a complex one. I have shown that RPGs cannot be subsumed under the study of other games, particularly computer games. Although some of the issues that Aarseth, Murray, and other scholars examine in relation to computer games are relevant here, a close study of RPGs shows that they differ in both form and purpose from computer games. I have compared RPGs to traditional narratives, traditional games, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, cybertexts, fan-fiction, make-believe games, and virtual reality. Of all these genres, RPGs fit most closely with make-believe games and virtual reality in form and with fan-fiction in purpose.

Paralleling the experience of virtual reality as Ryan describes it, RPGs are both immersive and interactive. They involve spatial, temporal, and emotional immersion. Looking at the multiple frames referenced in the RPG allows us to see that some of these forms of immersion involve a story world, but others do not. The players respond to a social sphere, a gaming sphere, and a narrative sphere, each of which is immersive. Further, the forms of talk found in these spheres are analogous in form to those of the child's make-believe game as studied by Jenny Cook-Gumperz. Movement between these frames does not disrupt immersion but only adds to it because each frame works in concert with the others. What is said and done in the social sphere is often a response to the narrative sphere. The game sphere causes what happens next in the narrative sphere, and the social sphere adds a collective element that increases players involvement in both the narrative and the game. This interactive immersivity allows for the embodiment of the player in what Ryan calls "genuine simulation" (*Virtual Reality* 286).

Murray states that “whereas novels allow us to explore character and drama allows us to explore action, simulation narrative can allow us to explore process” (181). RPGs are a process, an activity, and it is the sense of active participation that attracts players to the form. By offering a way of engaging in productive rather than selective interactivity, RPGs allow players to have a sense of narrative control. Being able to control the narrative that is created through the gaming system may provide an outlet for players to address real-world issues while enjoying the escapist qualities of fantasy.

Like authors of fan-fiction, RPG gamers appropriate cultural texts and exert their own interpretations and control over these narrative worlds. The need to control already established story worlds responds to the need to produce rather than consume texts. In so doing, gamers make these worlds their own. They become a part of these worlds and pride themselves on their ability to transform works into new texts—texts that cannot be commodified or really even understood outside of the context of the gaming session. There is no way to completely capture the experience of an RPG session. My sample story, even with my explanations, only captures a snapshot of what the RPG experience entails. The RPG is an experience of the moment, the present, and it cannot be fully recaptured. This sense of being present in a moment that cannot be recaptured keeps players coming back week after week.

Although it involves imagination, the experience of the RPG is not an individual experience. Since it is social, the RPG can be considered rhetorical. The need for narrative control is a need that is shared by a group of players. It is an ongoing need that creates a rhetorical situation. Players have found that the RPG offers a way to come together as a group to meet this need. As Fine states, the RPG “provides an opportunity for the

development of collective sociability” (233). The act of cooperatively producing a narrative is a way to address issues of separateness, to bring people together who might otherwise feel social marginalized.

Mackay’s definition of the RPG as “an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system*” (4) accurately describes both the form and the purpose of the RPG as a genre that includes a group of players, using the gaming system to produce a narrative. However, it does not account for the greater rhetorical purpose that sets this communicative event apart from other rhetorical responses. If we view exigence and genre in terms of rhetorical theory, there must be a social rather than artistic motive for engaging in the RPG. It is only by looking at the view of genres as rhetorical—the view of Miller, Swales, and Russell—that we are able to account for the on-going success of the RPG. For a more rhetorical, and complete, definition of the RPG as a genre, I propose expanding on Mackay’s definition. In my view, RPGs can be defined as immersive and interactive story-creation systems that involve a group of players and a gamemaster who appropriate popular culture to create new texts as a way of connecting with each other in a social setting. This definition allows us to see the ways in which RPGs differ from other genres not only in terms of form but also in terms of rhetorical purpose.

The Scope of the Definition

As Russell notes, different texts may function as different genres depending on the rhetorical purpose they address (518). *D&D* does not always have to respond to the need to control stories or react against mainstream culture. Fine notes that “*D&D* players can be divided into two groups, those who want to play the game and those who want to play it as a

fantasy novel” (207). From my research and the descriptions given by other gamers, the desire to play RPGs as fantasy novels seems to be the force that has kept this genre alive in spite of computer games that are far more accessible and may even use the *D&D* gaming rules and structure. The return to more basic storytelling elements that has made the White Wolf games popular as well as the changes in the 3rd edition of *D&D* confirms the popularity of this way of playing RPGs. However, it should be noted that the genre conventions discussed above may not fit every RPG gaming experience.

For example, my experience as a player in a one-time RPG at the NC State game day involved a different method of playing RPGs. As I mentioned in chapter one, this game did not immerse me. I cared little for the characters or the setting and quite frankly was anxious for the game to end. Early in the session I offered a suggestion that might have quickly achieved the goal that had been set out for our party, but it was frowned upon, and the DM did not allow it to succeed. Mackay found that RPGs played in the context of the gaming convention (similar to the game day) were often more restrictive and adhered more closely to the rulebooks than on-going gaming groups (102). He explains his own frustration in not connecting with these convention-based gamers and mentions that it is only when the same group of players meets with the same characters several times across conventions that players begin to create the sorts of narratives that he sees in longer lasting gaming groups (Mackay 102). One danger with generic expectations is that one may try to apply generic conventions to situations that do not actually fit that genre. Both Mackay and I struggled with convention role-playing because we came to it with the expectation of creating a narrative through social interaction. Instead the games we encountered were closer to what gamers call “hack-and-

slash” games, where the goal is to exert skill in combat and defeat the monsters rather than create an in-depth story.

Murray also notes that the same game can serve different purposes depending on the point of view of the player. She explains that the computer game *SimCity*^{xxii} was viewed very differently by a couple who both played it. The husband saw it as an engineering problem while the wife saw a narrative emerging in the lives of the townspeople in her city (Murray 88). The husband and the wife imposed different generic conceptions on the text in order to achieve different purposes. The experience and the pleasure each derived from playing the game differed because each conceived of the game as part of a distinct genre.

Murray’s *SimCity* example shows that the larger debate about the relationship between games and narratives could benefit from applying the rhetorical approach to genre. Viewing genres in terms of social motivation as well as formal features may open the door for re-defining other games as rhetorical texts. In addition, paying attention to the ways in which gamers refer to their activities and the generic expectations they apply to them will give scholars a clearer understanding of the types of textual pleasure gained by engaging in different kinds of games.

Implications

While a rhetorical approach to genre may help clarify the social purposes of games such as *D&D*, defining RPGs as their own genre also brings up larger theoretical questions. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that RPGs defy certain binary oppositions. They are neither games nor narratives, but use structures of both games and narratives. They are neither wholly immersive nor wholly interactive, but rather both immersive and interactive.

They both involve consumerism (buying rulebooks, etc) and rebellion against it (creating stories with no physical form). Furthermore, they complicate our understanding of the relationship between authors and audiences, and our definitions of these terms.

Just as tabletop gamers challenge dominant ideologies, the study of their processes complicates scholars' notions of texts, authorship, and audiences. Roland Barthes distinguishes between works, which are objects of consumption (*Work to Text* 161), and texts, which can be "experienced only in an activity of production" (*Work to Text* 157). Since the entire RPG experience can never be recaptured and exists only in the imagination of the players, it fits Barthes' criteria for a text. To be sure, if RPG players were to tell the tale that emerged from their gaming session, this tale would be easily classified as a narrative. In fact, when participants write up stories from their sessions, such as my sample story of the orc adventure, they read very much like traditional stories. However, Mackay notes that no matter how it is written up, the work cannot re-create the social experience of the RPG (84). While the authorship of the write-up may be attributable to one player, because of the RPG's status as a text, issues of audience and authorship are far more complex in the actual gaming session.

The distinction between author and player is much clearer in a computer game, where the story line is predetermined, than in RPGs, where the participants have nearly limitless choices. Still, Mackay considers the gamemaster in the position of author and the players as readers (134). Fine also states that the GM is often thought of as a storyteller^{xxiii} or playwright. The GM makes decisions regarding the setting of the game and the scenario that is presented to the players (Fine 73). It is the GM who creates and maintains the story world and the continuity of the plot. He/She has final say over which actions succeed in the game

and which do not. Yet, Mackay also notes that as a GM, he never had access to the entire story and that players might withhold information from him (87). Although any decisions that affect the gaming session must be run through the GM, players can have private conversations with other players and characters may ally themselves with others in private. The story that each player comes away with may be different because everyone may not be privy to the same information. For example, I know that Maureen had her own adventures in Gateway while the rest of our party negotiated with the orcs, but I was not given information regarding her affairs.^{xxiv} Depending on how it would affect the game, the DM himself might only ask Catherine for a brief description of her actions in town, and not deal with the specifics unless they affect the rest of the game.

The participants as well as the GM, then, do have a measure of authorial control over the narrative. However, in the majority of instances it is the exchange between the participants and the GM that causes the “collective creation of a story” (Mackay 7). The GM may have final authorial say, but the participants are hardly a passive audience. They actively shape what happens next. Because the players have a degree of agency in the creation of the story, the GM cannot simply be thought of as the author. Instead, the GM could be considered another member of the audience; for, while he/she has control over the stories being produced, he/she is often the one addressed by players’ contributions to the stories.

If the purpose of the RPG is to create stories without consuming them, this is a purpose that must be shared by the entire group and cannot be executed by an individual. If the entire story were shaped by one individual, one “author,” the authority that gamers are resisting would only replicate itself in their games. The GM defines the fantasy world and presents the situations that arise in the story world to the players. In this sense, he could be

said to have authorial control, but players add characters to the world and make the decisions as to what those characters do. Fine observed that the GM accepts decisions made by the players but “shapes them in directions that he believes are profitable and constructs a good ‘story’ which he can control” (Fine 88). Yet, his control is never absolute as he must continue to respond to the input of the players. In order for this genre to fulfill its purpose, the members of the group must work together.

If the GM is considered a part of the audience, can the game designers be considered authors? Since RPGs rules are treated more as suggestions than hard-and-fast rules, the answer is no. The foremost “rule” in *D&D* is that the DM has ultimate say over the rules. Even co-creator Gygax states that when he is the DM and players argue and show him his own rule book he responds, “ ‘Who cares? I just told you otherwise; it doesn’t make any difference what the book says’ ” (qtd in Fine 111). Mackay notes that “the game system...establishes the setting, tone, and direction of each narrative;” however, there is a great deal of interpretive control on the part of both the players and the GM (47). The authority of the game creators does not carry over into the narrative created in the gaming session.

At the level of the narrative, it is unclear who is the narrator, who is the author, and who is the audience. As participants switch back and forth between the multiple frames of the RPG, they both take and relinquish control over story-creation. In the narrative speech frame, the DM addresses the players. In turn, narrative suggestions are often addressed to the DM. In-character speech and off-record speech both involve a situation in which DM and players alternate between addressor and addressee depending on who is speaking. The roles of author

and audience are constantly shifting across frames, and sometimes even within the same frame.

Viewing the RPG as a response to a rhetorical situation does not make distinguishing author and audience any easier. Bitzer argues that a rhetorical situation must have an audience and that this audience must “consist only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (8). If the exigence that the RPG addresses is the issue of separateness, then it seems that each member of the group is capable of addressing this issue, but only insofar as they are able to work together. One individual cannot act to bring the group together, just as one individual cannot author the RPG narrative. As Fine notes, both the players and the DM “wish to shape the fantasy, but in doing this each needs the cooperation of the other” (85). This act of cooperation to create a fantasy world and its story is what brings players together. The players and the GM make up the audience of the RPG because they are the ones motivated to bring about change. But who initiates the rhetorical situation? Who points out the problem and convinces gamers to engage in RPGs as a way of solving it? Again, the answer seems to be the gamers themselves, as they are the ones who invite new members into the gaming group. Thus, the concepts of audience and rhetor seem as difficult to tease apart as those of reader and author.

Jenkins offers one solution to the problem of defining audiences. He joins with Janice Radway in criticizing “the tendency of academics to regard audiences as constituted by a particular text or genre rather than as ‘free-floating’ agents who ‘fashion narratives, stories, objects and practices from myriad bits and pieces of prior cultural productions’” (qtd in Jenkins 36). As free-floating agents, fans and gamers are neither strictly audiences nor authors, neither consumers nor producers. Instead, they are continually engaged in a process

of free-play, taking bits of works and incorporating them into new texts. Jenkins suggests that looking at fandom enables us to see that while not all audiences are active, they are certainly not all passive (287). Both fandom and RPGs support this view of audience, and imply that notions of authorship and audience need to be revisited.

The process of creating texts is a process of free-play, the goal of which is to see “not the *real* text, but a plural text” (Barthes *S/Z* 16). The only way to discuss the RPG is as a plural text, that is a text that incorporates a complex system of frames and worlds. RPGs are social structures, game structures, and narrative structures. Barthes states that texts “cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres” (*Work to Text* 157). As texts, RPGs can be defined but they cannot be classified. They remain categorically ambiguous by exceeding current definitions and defying binary structures. Thus, studying RPGs raises many questions, not only about how to distinguish narratives from games, but also about more general practices of defining and classifying texts. In order to deal with these questions, RPGs need to be studied both as a separate genre and in relation to other texts. I have offered one method of studying the RPG, but this study is far from complete. The question remains: now, what do we do?

ⁱ Ryan refers to both virtual reality as a medium and as the text that is produced through that medium. Since my concern is more with the story that arises from the virtual reality session, I use the term virtual reality to refer to this text rather than the medium in which it was created.

ⁱⁱ The game designers at Trinoc*con (Lewis et al) noted that LARPS more often take place in one confined event rather than over the course of multiple gaming session and that roles and plot points are far more defined than in tabletop games.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of RPGs, *D&D* is probably one of the more rule-bound games. The rules of 2nd edition *D&D* were particularly complex; however, one of the goals of 3rd edition was to simplify the rules in order to get back to the original fantasy elements of the game (Rausch).

^{iv} Pre-made modules may be purchased for most RPGs. These modules offer a pre-made world for the GM to work with, although characters are still allowed to make decisions within this world. Modules offer options that give the GM ideas of how to respond to different choices players may make. For example, they may present a character with a certain motivation and may suggest how this character will act in response to player characters, such as being hostile, friendly, etc. In this sense, module RPGs function more like computer games with set limitations, although they still allow for greater freedom of imaginative responses by the players. However, my study will focus on campaigns in which the GM creates his/her own world.

^v The gamemaster in *D&D* is referred to as the Dungeon Master.

^{vi} The original name of this character was David, but I have changed it to avoid confusion with the player David.

^{vii} Halflings are similar to Tolkien's hobbits and are approximately half the size of humans.

^{viii} The scale of many miniatures is 28mm:6ft.

^{ix} Massive Multiplay Online Games (MMOs) are like RPGs in that they allow players some ability to help create the world by actually adding code to game design. However, there are always limitations to what can be done with the computer code, and most games have preset plot points for the player to follow.

^x Goffman talks of "flooding out" as a release of emotion that can no longer be contained (56)

^{xi} Ryan also includes a category for the narratorial actual world (NAW), which is the view of the TRW provided by the narrator (vii). I have chosen to use TAW rather than NAW, although it is important to note that distinctions between authors and narrators are problematic in the RPG.

^{xii} This speech is referred to in the story in the appendix but is not included because the story was written from the point of view of Whisper, who was not present when the speech was delivered. However, other speech in the story is represented, many times word for word, as it was delivered in the gaming session.

^{xiii} Experience points are rewarded to players for successful activities. Usually this involves combat, but in some games, DMs will grant experience for outstanding success in other areas. When a character gathers enough experience points, he/she levels up, and the player may decide how to upgrade his/her character.

^{xiv} Each of these terms is problematic; however, I am not focusing on the role of the author in adventure games, so I offer these three terms as a way to refer to one concept: that of the force behind the creation of the story.

^{xv} In order to get better than a score of twenty, a player must have points in skills that can be added.

^{xvi} For example, we were never told that if we had fought the orcs and defeated them they would later band together and attack Gateway.

^{xvii} The company, started by Gary Gygax, that originally owned *Dungeons and Dragons*.

^{xviii} Adventure games began in the late 1970s and pretty much died out by the late 1980s (Aarseth 100-101). Although they stopped being marketed to the general public as games, they have experienced resurgence under the term interactive fiction. However, as I have noted, a name change can indicate a change in genre. Although the form of interactive fiction is the same, an interesting study might be made to determine the differences between its rhetorical purpose and that of the earlier adventure games.

^{xix} Again, MMO games are beginning to push the technology to the point where players can create and add objects to the world. However, it seems to me that there will always be some limitations to what players can create because there must still be a way to program the code and visually represent the player's creation.

^{xx} Again, the nature of RPGs makes it difficult to separate out frames. Ideally, the disagreement with the DM would not carry over into the actual world, but in reality, the player may hold a personal grudge against the DM for such actions.

^{xxi} Again, I hesitate to use the term author in this context.

^{xxii} A simulation game in which users create and maintain their own city.

^{xxiii} In the White Wolf gaming series the GM is actually called "storyteller."

^{xxiv} One reason I was not told of Maureen's affairs in town was because this may have affected my character's perception of her. Later, when Whisper thinks Maureen has stolen from an official in town, she turns her in. The incident leads to Maureen's death, but had Whisper known of the enemies Maureen made in town, she may have been more cautious in trusting the "authorities" to whom she reported Maureen.

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Appendices



Appendix A: The Orc Adventure

This is a write up I did of two gaming sessions that took place in Jan-Feb 2003. I took detailed notes during the sessions, including writing some dialogue down word for word. Other dialogue and details I filled in as best I could from memory. I composed this tale and posted it on the Sorpraedor yahoo list on 3/18/03 as a synopsis for my group members and to inform Catherine, who was absent during these sessions, what she had missed. I added a few clarifying remarks and deleted a few bits of extraneous information for this document. The original text in its entirety can be found at:

<<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sorpraedor/files/Journals/Whisper%27s%20Stories/>>

How the gang defeated the Orc army through cunning and diplomacy

The magistrate of Gateway had informed us that the outpost Blaze Arrow had not been heard from in over a week. A new bastion of guards had recently been sent there, but had never checked it. Considering all of the talk of attacks along the borders, the Magistrate was understandably worried and sent us to investigate. Fletch, Smith and I headed in that direction. Maureen vowed to catch up with us as she had some “personal” business to attend to. 

On our way out of Gateway, another ranger approached us. This one was an elf who called himself Cuthalion.  Given my past experience, I wasn't keen on another elf, or another ranger, but Cuthalion soon proved useful as he captured some wild birds for our dinner. 

Smith returned from the hunt with bunnies, which may very well satisfy a halfling appetite, but was not enough for the rest of us.


Other than a large ant snapping at us, our journey was uneventful. The main path veered to the East, but we needed to continue across the hills to BlazeArrow. Concerned that Maureen would have trouble finding us if we went much further, we made camp and settled in to eat the feast our rangers had prepared.

Not long after we drifted off to sleep, we were disturbed by a caltrop being thrown into our camp. We readied our weapons and called out into the darkness, but there was no response. As Smith and the wolf crept out into the woods to check it out, Fletch was struck by a tickle. We heard the familiar giggle of Maureen.


“Maureen!” I exclaimed, “don’t scare us like that.”


Maureen sighed, “Would you all like some almonds? Smith?” 



Smith grumbled, “You take the second watch. Now,” and returned to his bedroll.

Maureen shrugged her shoulders and agreed to watch camp. So, we all snuggled back into bed, only to be awakened once more. Maureen had spied three figures in black robes approaching us. As Smith readied his sling, two arrows whizzed past Maureen and Cuthalion. The figure in the rear hurled a sack into the camp, which landed at my feet. I immediately began to investigate by poking it with my rapier. The sack seemed to be made from a fine cloak and was closed by gold-woven cord. I cut it open and two heads  rolled out. I jumped back in shock... it was the half-elven twins, Mirador and Mardowin! In addition to the heads were two hands tied to a long black arrow, and a scroll tube with the markings of Erbin, the god worshiped by those evil religious zealots we had encountered in Gateway. I wondered immediately what Maureen might be up to and grabbed the scroll tube and stuck it in my cloak. My thought was to see what it said before she did.

I found that Maureen had charged one of the assailants with her rapier, and he appeared to have fallen. By this time, Maureen and the others were chasing one of the other attackers, and I saw my opportunity to get some information without the others finding out. But Maureen must have had the same thought because she returned to the body as well. The

guy was unconscious, so I sacrificed one of my healing potions in hopes of getting some useful information from him. 

As he came through I challenged him, “Who sent you?” 

He spat at me.  Without hesitating, Maureen cut off his ear and asked again, “Who sent you?” 

The prisoner glared at us, “You know who sent me: the one who will be your death.”

Maureen went for his other ear, but I stopped her. After all, we needed him to be able to hear us. She cut off his finger instead and asked, “Why were you sent?”

“To deliver a warning. Had they wanted you dead, you would be dead.”


“Did Thaddeus send you?” I asked, trying to make my connection between the mysterious man I encountered in Travensburg and the Obsidian Brotherhood, the underground group that we fought in Gateway.

He scowled, “Thaddeus is not my master.”

“But you know him?” I prodded.

“Of course, I know him.”

“So, who *is* your master?” Maureen proceeded.

“Soren. He will come for you.”  At which point the prisoner faded into unconsciousness. We decided to end his suffering, so I gave Maureen my dagger to slit his throat. Much to my shock, she also carved her initial in his chest.

We returned to camp to find Fletch still there. The rangers were still in pursuit of the enemy, and knowing what a powerful enemy it was, I decided it would best to warn them and sent Poe, my raven familiar, to tell them to come back to camp. Meanwhile, Maureen offered us a much-needed drink.

The rangers returned to camp and asked about the attacker we had pursued. We hadn't thought much about how the party would respond to our interrogation of him, so we quickly said that he had been taken care of. They asked if we had searched the body, and I admitted that we hadn't.

Smith immediately wanted to check it out. At which point, Maureen and I stood in his way and tried to convince him it was of little importance. But this only piqued his and Cuthalion's curiosity, and they seemed in none too good a mood to begin with. So, they went and searched the body and were quite unhappy to find him with an "M" carved into his chest.

They returned to camp and demanded to know who these attackers were, who the heads were, and what was going on. At this point I had no choice but to trust my new party members. Maureen and I explained who the Obsidian Brotherhood were and our various dealings with them. Maureen even showed the group her tattoo.

Cuthalion thought that perhaps the tattoo was a tracking device that had allowed the Obsidian Brotherhood to find us so easily. I recalled the snake tattoo that was on one of the members of the Brotherhood we had captured back in Gateway and how the tattoo had come alive and strangled him when we began questioning him. I decided to detect magic on the mark. The brand did indeed radiate magic for a second and then faded. As I detected the magic, the magic amulet I wear grew warm and throbbed but the sensation faded as the magic faded.

"It's definitely magic!" I exclaimed as I looked suspiciously at Maureen, "How do we know you're not a spy?" For that she did not have a very satisfying answer.

Cuthalion instructed us in ways of interrogating prisoners less violently, and as he spoke the nature of Maureen's actions began to disturb me, and I trusted her less and less.

I felt more uncomfortable with Maureen around. I figured she probably wasn't a willing spy but that the tattoo could very well be a scrying device and that she might inadvertently be allowing the enemy to hear or see us. So, I suggested privately to her that she return to town and seek out my magician friend, Ingie, to attempt to remove or deactivate the tattoo. She agreed. I sent Poe with her, instructing him to take her to Ingie and if anything went wrong to find Ingie or return to me.

In the morning, the rest of the party proceeded to BlazeArrow. Now that Maureen and her possible spying device were gone, I relayed the rest of my adventures to my new friends. Then, as a show of honesty and good will, I whipped out the scroll tube and opened it in front of them for all to see. Unfortunately that didn't turn out to be such a good idea.

The scroll tube opened with a hiss. Inside, I found a scrap of very old parchment that crackled with age as I unrolled it. As soon as I looked at it, a flash of light came from the paper and struck each of us, and we heard the following words:

"A curse upon you all in the name of ERBIN! For your meddling, you have now been marked so that any follower of the great god will know you for what you are. When we find you, your death will be most exquisite. You will be dragged to our new temple when it is completed, and you will be punished in the name of ERBIN. We will find you when we are ready for your death, but if we find you or any of your party here in Gateway again, you will not live to regret it. So sayeth the high priest of ERBIN!"

The voice and glow faded and both the scroll and the tube crumbled to powder.

Well, the party was not real happy that I had shared *that* bit of information with them, and there was a bit of bickering back and forth. I detected magic on us, and found that there had indeed been some sort of magic cast upon us, though it seemed of a more clerical nature

than arcane. We decided there was not much to be done about it at that point and proceeded to BlazeArrow.

We were nearly there when we came up a hill to see a bunch of Orcs hiding in a grove of trees. I put two of them to sleep with a spell, and Cuthalion shot arrows at them. Fletch also started attacking and killed several. Smith killed one. We noticed that the Orcs had a symbol on their shields that looked like a bloody hand and Fletch identified them as a local tribe called "The Blood Fist Tribe."

Smith rode over the hill to find many more orcs and smoke coming over out of the BlazeArrow tower. The halfling thought quickly, knowing he would be no match for so many large orcs, and used his spell power to entangle the lot of them.

Luckily, Cuthalion speaks orc and could communicate with them. First he insulted them, "You sylvan unicorns, what are you doing here?"

An orc responded, "Trying to get rid of Skullbash." Fletch recognized this as the name of one of the other local orc tribes.

"Why are you taking out Skullbash? And why at this time?"

"Smatter was destroyed. We go for vengeance." Fletch told us that Smatter was an orc village off to the west, about a week away.

"How do you know it was Skullbash that took it out?" The elf continued his questioning.

"We saw them."

"Who's in the tower?"

"Us."

"Who told you to take the tower?"

“Chief Grumbach.” Fletch informed us that Grumbach was the leader of the Blood Fist tribe and that he was an ogre who had decided to take up farming.

Cuthalion proceeded, “How long ago did you take the tower?”

“This morning. He told us take tower. Don’t want to raise alarm on way to Skullbash.”

“Where is Skullbash?”

“Over mountains.” Fletch confirmed that this is where he had heard the Skullbash tribe lived, up in a series of rugged mountains that most traders avoided because stone giants lived there.

“Why would humans tell Skullbash you were coming?” Cuthalion continued.


“Humans no like us.”

“Is Chief Grumbach in the tower?” The orc shock his head “no.” “Where is Chief Grumbach?”

“Me tell, you no kill?” We agreed. “Orders were take forts, meet Chief in Barrenstone.”

“What about Black Tower.”

“Other group there.”

We discussed amongst ourselves the political repercussions of the situation and decided that if at all possible it would be best for humans to stay out of this orcish war. 

Cuthalion once again spoke to the entangled orcs, “Send this message to Chief Grumbach: tell him to find a way not to involve humans in this conflict. If you do, we will kill both tribes. Get your people out of both towers. One of you go... the rest stay.” Smith

released the entanglement and six orcs stayed, sitting and glaring at us, while the one speaking went to the tower.

Eight orcs came out of the tower and seven started to the east. The leader returned, “Ok, we go tell Grumbach,” he said, “Meet other orcs and tell message.”

Cuthalion smiled, “Tell Grumbach you made a wise choice.” The orc nodded and headed off with his comrades.

We ventured into the now empty tower to find several piles of bodies. It appeared as if some orc bodies had undergone ritual cremation while 12 humans lay about haphazardly. One ballista was in pieces, the other loaded and pointed at the gate while its operator lay among the dead. The smell of burning orc profaned the air, reminding us of the battle that took place only a few hours before. The gate was broken, but the tower was intact.


Cuthalion closed the remaining working gate as we entered and headed for the top of the tower; Fletch accompanied him. Smith and I looked for the message box the magistrate had told me about. We found it on the second floor and the key I had been given fit perfectly. The box opened and inside were three tubes: one labeled “Gateway,” one labeled “Black Tower,” and one that was unlabeled. Next to the tubes there were paper and ink for writing messages.

I immediately sent a warning off through the Black Tower tube. “About 40 orcs are headed your way. We’ve sent seven to tell them to turn back.”

I slide the message down the tube and a whooshing sound carried it away. I then composed a message to Gateway, “Orcs took BlazeArrow, 12 dead. Orcs after Skullbash group in the mountains near Barrenstone. We told them to leave humans alone. So far they

have complied.” As I dropped this message in the tube it made a sputtering sound like it had gotten stuck.

I looked at Smith. We decided to send a “Test” message to the Black Tower tube asking them to confirm receipt. About three minutes later a note arrived back saying the message was received. I replied that the tube to Gateway seemed not to be working and asked them to forward my message and ask the Magistrate to reply directly to me.

While we were waiting for a response, Smith began examining the machine. He discovered that the label for Gateway was loose. “Perhaps it has been switched,” he suggested. 

We decided to try a test message through the third unmarked tube.

Almost immediately we received a letter back, “Message received. What status?”

I repeated the story once again and told them the tube had been mislabeled. The operator on the other end replied that they had been attempting to connect the tubes to Barrenstone but so far had been unsuccessful.

Well, we were of course suspicious as to why the labels had been changed--that someone was purposely trying to screw up communication. Smith decided to ask about the guard rotation, “When was the last rotation? When can the next rotation come?”

The response came, “A day or two ago. They didn’t report in when they got there.”

We wondered if they had arrived and if not who the dead men in the tower were.


“How many were in the rotation. Could be get a roster to identify the bodies?”


“10-12 people.” That matched the number dead. “We are sending new people now. Will take one week. How bad is damage?”

“One ballista and one gate destroyed,” we reported.

“What is the status of the second outpost? When will the orcs arrive there?” Gateway questioned.

We discussed the possible timetable. “About an hour. Warn Barrenstone too. We’re on our way to Black Tower.”

We decided to send a message to Black Tower as well as Gateway to tell them we were on our way. However we added that we might not make it in time due to our injuries. We didn’t have any injuries, but Smith and I thought we might need more time to solve the mystery of the switched labels. 

However, no more evidence presented itself and the group agreed to head off for Black Tower.  We figured we would have to work it out carefully so that we could defend the tower if needed, but not make the orcs that were going to call for peace think we didn’t trust them. Smith volunteered to sneak ahead and find the orcs. He returned shortly explaining that there were orcs ahead in the trees having an argument that he could not understand. The argument appeared to be between the orcs we had sent and the orcs we had not yet encountered.

Cuthalion agreed to accompany Smith so that he could interpret what the orcs were saying. Fletch and I waited, trying to determine how long we should stay put before thinking something had gone astray. At last, the two rangers returned, and Cuthalion announced that the majority of the orcs had been swayed to meet up with Grumbach. Smith suggested we bypass the tower all together and start heading for Barrenstone in case the orcs decided to attack there, since it was their meeting spot. But the rest of us were worried about the few dissenting orcs that were sure to attack Black Tower.

We snuck quietly toward the tower. Unfortunately, I always seem to trip when I'm trying so hard to move silently through the brush. The orcs heard me, and we took off running for the gate. We made it to the tower and explained the situation to the guards inside.

Smith asked the Lieutenant to take us to the message box, and he did so without hesitation. The labels appeared to be in firmly in place; communication here had not been compromised. Fletch and Cuthalion reported that the orcs had retreated.

We communicated with Gateway, and Lieutenant Parros received his orders. He was to leave three men to man the ballistas while he and the remaining nine followed us to Barrenstone.

As time was now quite short, we decided to run toward the town, taking only short breaks to rest. It was a tiresome journey, but we made it intact and appeared to have beaten the orcs. We immediately located the town official and informed him of the situation.

Cuthalion and Smith again decided to check on the situation with the orcs. I'd been practicing the art of invisibility and offered to make them both invisible. I called the energies around me, recited the words, and suddenly Cuthalion and Smith were gone.


Fletch and I waited in town for them to return and convinced Lt. Parros to start evacuating the town.

After more than a bit of nervous waiting on our part, Cuthalion and Smith returned. They were again visible but in one piece.


"I spoke with Grumbach," the elf explained. "I told him that the magistrate knows what he's been up to and that we have plenty of soldiers in the village to challenge him; therefore, if he attacks the village he would be greatly weakened for his battle with Skullbash. I asked him what his reason for wanting to take the village was."

“What did he say?”

“He said he wanted prisoners as bargaining chips and to carry goods and supplies. So here’s the deal... he’s willing to bypass the town in exchange for twenty pack animals to carry his things. He’s going to come to the gate in 12 hours for our decision.”

“Well, the town is nearly evacuated now. I don’t know what they’ll think of this,” I explained, and added, “It was Fletch’s idea to go ahead and evacuate.” 

Fletch shrugged his shoulders in his easy-going manner and said, “It needed to be done.”

So, we went about the task of finding any pack animals that had been left behind and chasing after the villagers that had taken theirs and convincing them to give them back. It turned out with everyone so scared of the orcs it wasn’t as difficult a task as we anticipated. 
We reassured the townspeople we would have twenty-five pack animals sent from Gateway to replace their twenty, and they thought it was a fair deal.

Having gathered the livestock, we settled down in a few of the abandoned houses for some rest. It had been a very long day.

We were awakened by the news that some eighty orcs were headed for the town gate.

I wiped the sleep from my eyes and combed my hair and headed out to see. We brought the cattle out from the gate and met the orcs. Cuthalion greeted them in the orc language, but we did not see Grumbach.

Out of nowhere, the voice of the ogre returned the orcish greeting in our own common tongue. With a lopsided grin, Grumbach's shiny black teeth appeared, as did the ogre himself. He towered above even the tallest orcs by several feet. His light blue skin and white eyes contrasted his black hair and teeth and a pair of vestigial horns adorned his brow.

I noticed his fancy club and thought that my old friend Boris^{🗨️} would be quite jealous for it was nearly five feet in length and quite shiny. I couldn't quite tell if it was made of metal or of wood.

Cuthalion presented the livestock as our gift of peace, and Grumbach told his men to take the animals. Then he turned to us. "What stops me from taking the town, too?" he asked.

I exchanged a nervous glance with my friends, but Cuthalion did not waiver. He replied defiantly, "Us."^{🗨️}

Grumbach laughed,^{🗨️} but it was a friendly laugh. He didn't believe us, but he respected our courage. "Maybe some other time," he said.

Cuthalion responded, "And when will you be returning through here?"

Grumbach replied, "It should not take long to kill Skullbash. Three weeks."

"Then we will tell the humans not to disturb you on your return," Cuthalion replied with all the diplomacy of his elven ways.

Grumbach once more flashed a blacked grin, and the orcs continued on without incident.

Giddy with the joys of success, we headed back toward Black Tower where we sent a message relaying our accomplishments to the magistrate.

The magistrate returned a note, "Congratulations. Twenty-five horses and cows seems a small price to pay for the safety of Barrenstone."

Although none of us were injured, we decided we would like a cleric to meet up with us and have a look at the curse before entering Gateway. However due to the nature of the communication, and our fears that it would somehow be compromised, we simply requested

that a cleric meet us outside of Gateway to attend to our injuries. Naturally the magistrate had no problems arranging this.

As promised, a half mile outside Gateway a jolly old cleric named Celegorm met us along with four guards who spouted the diamond district emblem. We explained our situation to Celegorm, but unfortunately he was not a skilled enough cleric to help in the removing of curses. The guards insisted that we were to come straight to the magistrate upon our return, and though I was nervous about entering town with the curse still upon our heads, we had little choice but to follow.

As we walked through town, it seemed everyone was looking at us. A ragged old man stared intently and then ran off suddenly, as did a young boy. But we made it to the Magistrate without incident.

Once in his chambers, I introduced my new comrades to Eldonerand, the Honorable Magistrate of Gateway. He was pleased to meet them and thanked all of us for overcoming the orc situation.

“I am working with the council to deal with the possible problem when the orcs return,” he told us.

Smith stepped up, “I was wondering, sir, did the last group of guards at Blaze Arrow report in? We found that the message array there had been mislabeled.”

The magistrate looked somewhat concerned, “Hmm... we will look into that. Any ideas?”

“Oh, nothing specific,” Smith responded, “I just found it odd.”

“Indeed.”

“There is one more thing I wish to speak with you about, Magistrate,” I interjected. I proceeded to tell him my concerns about the curse that had been cast upon us. “Would it be possible to get an escort to the temple of Heironeous, where they may be able to help us?”

“Why certainly! This is most unfortunate.”

“Yes. I think that we should lay low for awhile, Magistrate.”

“Yes, yes. Certainly. The council will be meeting soon, and I will put in a request that you be rewarded for your efforts.”

“Thank you, sir.”

After finishing our pleasantries with the honorable magistrate, we were escorted to the temple of Heironeous where I was recognized and well received. We were placed in the hands of an experienced cleric by the name of Brother Timothy. After telling our story, he smudged us with incense, sprinkled us with holy water, and muttered some prayerful words.

“There is indeed a blackness that touches you,” he said. “I have seen many curses in my time, but nothing quite like this, nothing this powerful. Yet, it does not seem to be impairing you.”


“Then there is nothing you can do?” I asked mournfully.

“I am afraid this is beyond me,” he replied, still quite perplexed.

“Then, perhaps a blessing upon us, Brother Timothy?”

“Of course, of course.” He blessed us but refused to accept any offering in exchange. “It is an honor to help you,” he said with a courteous bow in my direction.

My friends insisted on stopping at the temples of their various gods since we were in the temple district. Every stop made me increasingly nervous, for everywhere we went

people were staring at us. But the others seemed not to notice and accused me of being paranoid. 

At last I relaxed a bit as we entered the familiar surroundings of the topaz district and Scalamagra's Tower. The bouncy blond-haired Ingie greeted me warmly, and once more I introduced my comrades. Poe flew from the back room and landed securely on my shoulder. "Bout Time," he squawked.

Ingie chuckled, "He's missed you."

We inquired about Maureen. Ingie informed us that she was going to remove the tattoo, but that didn't seem to be the thing to do. She suggested that Maureen try the temple, but had not heard back from her. "I believe she was staying at the Weary Wanderer Inn," she informed us.

"Thank you, Ingie." I led the party out of the shop and to the Weary Wanderer Inn where we were given Maureen's room number.


As the others settled down at the bar for a drink, I proceed up the stairs to find my friend. Everyone in the bar also appeared to be staring, and I felt the need to leave Gateway as soon as possible. As I approached her room I heard what sounded like a struggle within. Without stopping to knock, I burst open the door. There was Maureen, naked, whip in hand, mounted on top of a bound naked man.

In no uncertain terms I said, "We need to leave now. Finish up and meet us at the bar." I then shut the door and went back downstairs for some alcohol.


But even the drink was not enough to make the staring eyes go away, and I grew increasingly agitated. After about twenty minutes of this, Smith decided to check on Maureen himself and charged up the stairs on his wolf.

He burst into the room to see Maureen whipping her naked love slave, and this was not a sight he particularly wanted to see. “We’re leaving,” he announced curtly.

Maureen playfully snapped the whip at him, to which he did not take kindly. Maureen was at this point quite annoyed at the disruptions in her pleasure and reached for Smith as if to lift him by the scruff of the neck. The halfling hit her straight in the jaw as his wolf companion snapped at her.

Cuthalion heard the commotion.  “Smith’s in trouble!” he yelled as he tore up the stairs. I followed none too quickly having seen more than my share of excitement at the top of those stairs.

I did manage to catch a glimpse as Maureen released her grip on Smith, and Cuthalion cut loose the young man, who grabbed his clothes and ran.

Her lover gone, Maureen lightened up, and she and Smith reached some sort of reconciliation. We told her of our adventuring, though she said very little of hers,  and we discussed what to do next. I, for one, did not want to spend the night in Gateway; however, Maureen said that Ingie wanted to have a look at her tattoo in relation to my amulet. I admitted that this was an interesting connection to explore, and we agreed to meet at Ingie’s at ten the next morning. Maureen wanted to stay at the Weary Wanderer, and Fletch wished to run home to see his family. The rest of us continued on to the Elven Village hoping to stay just out of harm’s way.

Appendix B: Map of Sorpraedor

