PLAYING WITH POWER:
THE AUTHORIAL CONSEQUENCES OF
ROLEPLAYING GAMES

by

Michelle Andromeda Brown Nephew

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in English

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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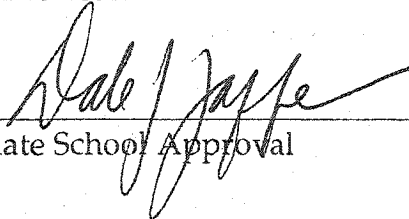Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

PLAYING WITH POWER:
THE AUTHORIAL CONSEQUENCES OF
ROLEPLAYING GAMES

by

Michelle Andromeda Brown Nephew

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003
Under the Supervision of Dr. Andrew Martin

Authorship has undergone drastic revision in the twentieth century. A

fundamental transformation in literature, wherein the author has become a

multiplicity of voices, is evinced by the development of roleplaying games as

both literary and cultural texts.

The literary roots of roleplaying games are self-evident, as they draw on

writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and J. R. R. Tolkien. However, a consequence of

the development of the roleplaying game has been a subsequent departure from

these authorial beginnings; roleplaying games have irrevocably transformed the

role of the writers who inspired them, altering the authorial position to become a

border-blurring multiplicity. Not only do roleplaying game designers

reinterpret literary texts as literary games, often borrowing rules material from

other designers in the process, in modifying the function of the author from a

single creative entity to an empowered storytelling among groups roleplaying

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games further complicate previous distinctions between author and audience. Players create a fictional world as a group endeavor, authoring a complex structure of fantasy that addresses Freudian concepts of dreams and wish-fulfillment. In this way, roleplaying becomes a locus for issues of identity, including questions of performance, spectatorship, and gender construction. And by allowing play in regard to identity, roleplaying games are able to transgressively navigate expressions of difference, encouraging players to subtly work against the traditional split between spectacle and narrative. The thriving fan subculture surrounding roleplaying only emphasizes the transgressiveness of the hobby; this is a social formation that aggressively utilizes new technology such as the internet, through which fans are able to explore culturally subversive methods of authoring in the face of hostility from the surrounding cultural environment. They, too, are active producers and manipulators of meanings, rather than passively accepting dominant ideology.

By fusing the broader perspectives of literary and cultural criticism with personal experiences, this study examines the development of roleplaying games from the fiction of individual writers to the interactive roleplaying based on them, wherein fiction writers, the hobby's creators, designers, editors, publishers, fans, players, and the cultural environment are all invested with the creative power to contribute meaningfully to the narrative.

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Dedicated to John,
for all his patience and love.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BADD   Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons
CAR-PGa   Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games
CCG   collectable/customizable card game
D&D   *Dungeons & Dragons*
DM   Dungeon Master
FAQ   frequently asked questions
Fudge   *Freeform Universal Do-it-yourself Gaming Engine*
GAMA   Game Manufacturer's Association
GDW   Game Designers' Workshop
GM   game master/moderator
GURPS   *Generic Universal RolePlaying System*
IRC   inter-relay chat
LARP   live action roleplaying
LRP   live action roleplaying
MOO   multi-user dungeon object oriented
MUD   multi-user dungeon/domain
MUSH   multi-user shared hallucination
NPC   non-player character
OGC   Open Game Content
OGL   Open Game License
PBM   play-by-mail
PBEM   play-by-email
PC   player character
RPG   roleplaying game
SRD   System Reference Document
TCG   trading card game
TSR   Tactical Studies Rules, TSR Hobbies, Inc., or TSR, Inc.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

"In our play we reveal what kind of people we are."

– Ovid

INTRODUCTION:
A GAME OF AUTHORIAL POWER

Authorship has undergone drastic revision in the twentieth century, as the "death of the author" has given rise to the primacy of the reader/audience; boundaries between categories such as author and audience have been blurred, interpretive communities now reinscript texts, and multiple possibilities are inherent in the consumption of texts. The creative issue of these conditions must be influenced by this instability, however. And indeed, these circumstances have effected a fundamental transformation in literature, as evinced in part by the development of the roleplaying hobby over the last thirty years. This study examines roleplaying games (RPGs) as both a literary and cultural phenomenon, in which the text's producers take the role of an authorial multiplicity.

Following Chapter One's discussion of the basics of roleplaying, Chapter Two: Roleplaying Games and Postmodern Literature argues that RPGs can be approached as literary games. The fact that roleplaying games are self-enclosed, separable from other activities, and possess identifiable text-specific assumptions marks them as texts with similarities to literature, yet their simultaneous status as game is indisputable. RPGs literally translate literature into the medium of a game, and in modifying the function of the author from a single, autonomous creative entity to an empowered, interactive storytelling among groups of participants, roleplaying games complicate previous distinctions between author and audience in a way inconceivable during the lifetimes of many writers whose

works inspire the games. For these reasons, RPGs must be approached as literary texts that also penetrate into the realm of cultural criticism.

The literary roots of roleplaying games are self-evident, Chapter Three: Literary Beginnings elaborates, as their designers often draw settings, character types, atmosphere, and even plots directly from notable writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and J. R. R. Tolkien, and from modern-day novelists like William Gibson and Anne Rice. However, a consequence of the development of the roleplaying game has been a subsequent departure from these authorial beginnings; RPGs have irrevocably transformed the role of the writers that inspire them, altering the authorial position into that of a transgressive, border-blurring multiplicity that is directly postmodern.

But the authorial multiplicity that can be attributed to roleplaying games goes beyond simple distinctions between the seminal writer and those who play the game. As Chapter Four: Fanning the Flames of Authorship shows, the hobby's fan community also proves to have a pervasive impact on the authorship of RPGs. Roleplaying games have nurtured a subculture considered deviant – outside of institutionalized forms of expression – by the dominant culture; roleplaying is a marginalized venue for a thriving fan culture, and a guiding factor in emergent technologies such as online interactive forums, through which members of this community are able to explore culturally subversive methods of authoring. The roleplaying industry's fan participation includes amateur press

associations, semi-professional periodicals, print and online fanzines, web sites, listserves, online discussion forums, MUDs, and conventions that allow fans to interact with RPG designers and publishers as well as with each other. The origins of this dynamic can be traced to the pulp science fiction magazines of the early twentieth century, which featured letters columns that printed fan opinions and brought readers into contact with published science fiction writers, promoting a significant amount of interaction. Popular writers like H. P. Lovecraft developed a fan following – a circle of admirers and imitators – who communicated through the pulp columns, corresponded directly with him, and even "borrowed" elements of his work in their own published stories. Lovecraft's Circle continued to produce a multitude of fictions based on his Cthulhu (khu-THOO-loo) Mythos even after Lovecraft's death. RPG fans have as much, if not more, impact on the roleplaying games that they play as the fans of Lovecraft's time did on his work, using electronic media much as Lovecraft's fans did the letters columns of the pulps. In this way, fans dispute the "legitimate" or privileged authorship of roleplaying games, further blurring the boundaries between reader and author, and becoming vigorous producers and manipulators of meaning.

The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG (Chaosium, 1981) is another result of the post-mortem co-authoring seen in regard to H. P. Lovecraft, wherein the original work has been reinterpreted and reinscripted by the game's designer for

consumption by the writer's fans. Lovecraft's literature acted as a jumping-off

place for *Call of Cthulhu*'s designer just as it did for Lovecraft's Circle after his

death; as explained in Chapter Five: Roleplaying by Design, RPG designers flesh

out the game with a formalized rules system, lending their own creative

inspiration to the game, while the literature provides a ready-made context that's

already familiar to players. Lovecraft's themes are worked into the *Call of*

Cthulhu game, for example, in a complex tapestry of plot, setting,

characterization, and atmosphere, while innovations such as the Sanity trait are

contributed by the game designer. Designers of other RPGs then "borrow"

ground-breaking game elements like the Sanity trait for their own work – just as

Lovecraft's Circle did elements of the Cthulhu Mythos – either informally

without acknowledging their sources, or as part of the RPG industry's open

gaming movement that allows designers free use of certain copyrighted material.

This intermingling of creative juices makes the idea of a singular author

ridiculous: often many creative individuals have a stake in the design of a

roleplaying game.

The goal of the RPG designer is to create rules that break down the

experiential barriers inherent in roleplaying. When this is achieved, however,

roleplaying games often become subject to the larger culture's judgment that

they're a dangerous display of "escapism," which positions the hobby counter to

the cultural enlightenment touted by dominant ideology. Chapter Six: Playing

with Social Norms examines this phenomenon, looking at how attacks by

elements of the conservative religious establishment tend to marginalize and vilify roleplaying, claiming a direct link between these games and suicide, Satanism, mind control, loss of self-identity, and excessive violence. The roleplaying industry responds with studies citing roleplaying's benefits in regard to cooperation skills, problem-solving, resource management, and as a learning tool, saying that roleplaying promotes emotional, social, and intellectual well-being. But these attacks also cause a division between those publishers who avoid controversial content and those who revel in its subversive reputation as a way to better market their products.

Roleplaying's status as an alternative social community in this way leaves it open to deliberate misinterpretation and attempts at reappropriation from the dominant culture, even as it acts as a site of resistance for fans. But perhaps most significantly, Chapter Seven: Acting the Author discusses how roleplaying games provide a framework for the construction of a shared narrative, wherein players take on the roles of characters navigating a created world. Each player contributes to the communal fantasy by determining and describing the actions of his own character,[i] while one player acts as a mediator, weaving the others' individual experiences of the fictional world into a coherent whole. Though the setting may change between one RPG and another, these games share the commonality of testing the abilities of a group of players/characters by setting them against powerful outside forces. In this way, roleplaying is inherently self-reflective, self-reflexive, metafictional, and narcissistic.

Roleplaying also presents a complex structure of fantasy, addressing Freudian concepts of dreams and transmitting a knowledge of self through the wish-fulfillment inherent in character creation. A player's character acts as a latent aspect of himself, played out publicly, that affirms the player's sense of self-worth and power, and indulges his erotic desires. For this reason, the conflict between the initial, unrestrained desires of the player characters and their moral judgment is an aspect of roleplaying that defines it as an ethical forum for the exploration of the nature of human existence, and that inevitably influences the direction the story's narrative takes. Roleplaying games, in this fashion, are a locus for issues of identity, including questions of performance, spectatorship, and gender construction. By allowing play in regard to identity, roleplaying games are able to navigate expressions of difference with a transgressive effect. This flexibility of boundaries also allows players to subtly work against the traditional split between spectacle and narrative. The reader, in effect, is empowered to do more than just interpret and respond to the work, but actually has a hand in shaping its narrative based on his own experience and desires; players become active readers and interpreters of the text. In this way, socially, culturally, and literarily significant behaviors operate within this formation, despite – or possibly as a consequence of – its trivialized status in mass culture; roleplaying games negotiate the terrain between the dominant culture's conflicted suspicion and fear, and the RPG culture's own subversive resistance to disempowerment.

The field of social psychology has given roleplaying a significant treatment as a medical therapy, and roleplaying has since acquired currency in the fields of sociology, social anthropology, psychodrama and simulation games, and, of course, the entertainment industry. But for the most part, RPGs have been somewhat neglected by the academic and literary communities.[ii] One larger goal of this study of roleplaying games is to fuse the broader perspectives of literary and cultural criticism regarding issues such as identity, authorship, performance, and game theory with my own experiences as an academic, a participant in the roleplaying fan culture, and a member of the RPG publishing industry.[iii] Various frameworks of cultural and literary criticism – such as Jacques Derrida's theory of free play, Frederic Jameson's conception of the commodification of industrial products, Laura Mulvey's work on performance and scopophilia, and others – are implemented here to examine roleplaying's development from the original literary works of individual writers, to the interactive roleplaying games based on them, wherein the hobby's original creators, game designers, editors and publishers, fans, players, and the cultural environment surrounding them are all invested with a creative power that allows them to contribute meaningfully to the narrative. Roleplaying in this way becomes a literary game – an intersection between the open/non-linear/game and closed/linear/story, in which the producers of the experiential text take the role of authorial amalgam.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE GROUND RULES OF GAMING

"A roleplaying game is part improvisational theater, part storytelling and part board game," explains the introduction to *Shadowrun*, a near-future science fantasy roleplaying game (Mulvihill 8). Another RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons* *(D&D)* – probably the most widely recognized fantasy roleplaying game in existence – describes roleplaying as follows: "When you play the *Dungeons & Dragons* game, you create a unique fictional character that lives in your imagination and the imaginations of your friends. One person in the game, the Dungeon Master (DM), controls the monsters and people that live in the fantasy world. You and your friends face the dangers and explore the mysteries that your Dungeon Master sets before you" (Monte Cook 6).

Roleplaying games – sometimes called "pen-and-paper gaming" or "tabletop gaming" to distinguish the hobby from computer or video gaming – provide a set of rules in book format that players use to structure a shared fiction created among themselves. Each person involved in the game session contributes to the communal fantasy as a whole, and one of the players acts as rules arbitrator to settle disputes and guide the story. Since Wizards of the Coast – the publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons* – claims the term "Dungeon Master" as a trademark, other roleplaying systems call the arbiter of a roleplaying session by various alternate titles, such as "game master," "storyteller," "keeper," or numerous others; for the purpose of this study, "game moderator" or GM is

used as a generic designation unless the particular game being discussed uses different terminology. Those playing the game – usually from four to six people – are called the "players," while the imaginary characters they create and control are called "player characters" or PCs. The actions of the fictional people and monsters that the PCs encounter are controlled by the GM, and these characters are called "non-player characters" or NPCs.ᵛ

In practice, the game moderator's role is to present an imaginary scenario to the players, which is much like performing an oral reading of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book; the game moderator tells a story he's devised ahead of time, and the players make choices that determine how the plot evolves. The GM can (attempt to) control the developing story through his presentation of the setting and situation; "He or she keeps track of what is supposed to happen when, describes events as they occur so that the players (as characters) can react to them, keeps track of [non-player characters], and resolves attempts to take action using the game system. … The gamemaster describes the world as the characters see it, functioning as their eyes, ears and other senses," Michael Mulvihill explains (10). For example, the game moderator might describe the following situation: "You're traveling on a lonely path through a dark woods – the wind howls through the trees, and unseen creatures skitter through the underbrush. Suddenly, you hear a wailing scream come from somewhere off the forest path!" Then the GM gives the players options for their characters to pursue: "Do you investigate the wailing sound or continue on your way through

the forest?" The players don't know that the scream is really a giant "shrieker fungus" monster that lures overly curious adventurers off the path to their deaths, or that if they just continue ahead they'll be rewarded for staying on track by discovering a sack of gold lying at the side of the road, lost by a too-inquisitive adventurer. Whatever the players' choice, the game moderator molds the plot around their decision, and the decisions the players make are based on the motivations they've developed for their individual characters over the time they've played them. As one web site explains, "Adventures may include play-acting the rescuing of people, the quest for money, treasure, power, knowledge and sometimes even survival of the pretend character. Each player makes ethical, philosophical and moral decisions on behalf of her/his imaginary character as the game develops" (ReligiousTolerance.org).

The plot in a roleplaying game is, then, a dynamic function of the players' own choices; "In a roleplaying game, the players control their characters' actions and respond to the events of the plot. ... The script, or plot, of a roleplaying game is flexible, always changing based on the decisions the players make as characters," asserts Mulvihill (10). The storyline that the game moderator devises for a roleplaying session is only an rudimentary plot skeleton – a simple framework with all of the specific details left out; it is, in fact, only "a general outline for what might happen at certain times or in reaction to other events. It is no more concrete than that until the players become involved" (Mulvihill 10). It's left up to the players to flesh the story out for themselves.

To play a roleplaying game, you really only need to buy some of the specialty dice available at most hobby stores, and the core rulebook for the roleplaying system you're interested in, which usually costs twenty to forty dollars. This book tells you how to create and play your character, and gives basic background information on the game world he will inhabit – it's much like an operating manual in that it contains instructions about what to do and how to do it. Each player creates a character by picking statistics – either randomly by a die roll or through some sort of point allocation system to make each character comparable to those of the other players – and then recording these numbers on a character sheet. These statistics are numerical valuations of a character's abilities. There are usually separate statistics for physical traits like Strength, Constitution, and Dexterity, and for mental traits like Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. A high number in one of these abilities means the character is particularly strong or smart, while a low value indicates he may be clumsy or unattractive. In order for his character to succeed at a difficult action – like climbing up a steep cliff, for example – the player must roll a die and add to it the rating he has in the relevant ability; in our example, this would probably be the Strength trait. For the player character to climb the cliff or succeed at any other action, the result of the die roll plus the rating the character has in the applicable ability (and any other bonuses he might have due to things like weather or magical effects) must beat a specific difficulty target number determined by the game moderator. Simple actions are assigned difficulties that

a player will be able to match easily, while very hard actions are assigned difficulties that are unlikely to be beaten. In this way, the physics of the real world is translated into numerical formulae that the characters inhabiting the fictional world of the game must adhere to just as strictly as we ourselves are subject to the law of gravity.[vi]

Though characters must function within these rules, the statistics and formulae used in a roleplaying game are typically designed to give the player character a distinct advantage. The rules mimic real-world physics, but character generation assumes that the PCs are figures of heroic proportion; if the average person has a 10 in his Strength score, for example, a player character can expect to have a 12 in that ability, allowing him the chance to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Many times the rules for determining non-player character stats are different than those used for player character generation, as well, handicapping the run-of-the-mill people the PCs meet in their adventuring. And if enhanced statistics aren't enough, special abilities are many times added, whether it be magical powers, special technology, or psychic talents, that make a character super-human.[vii]

But this system of defining a set of statistics that represents the character's abilities is only the first step in character generation. From there, the player fleshes out the background and personality of his PC. He invents a family and friends, a job and hobbies, childhood experiences and goals that the character strives to achieve, and then he records all of this on the character sheet. He

determines the motivations for the PC, and in so doing provides himself with guidelines to help determine his character's actions in future situations. Every choice in the game must be logically based on these background factors to convincingly play a PC "in character." A kind of self-policing is many times enforced among players during a game in respect to this – character actions must be logical, or other players contest them with the GM. For example, a character whose father died of drowning might be expected to be leery of swimming, so when the group of characters encounters a raging river they must cross, that player should either find a way around the obstacle that doesn't involve swimming, or at least convincingly portray his character's discomfort if no other solution can be found. On the other hand, taking an action opposed to the best interests of the group is also sanctionable, even if it's something the character would have logically done in character.

One session of a game usually lasts from four to six hours and is played at one sitting, but multiple sessions can also be held one after another to build an ongoing campaign; the player characters might explore a dungeon one night, and the next week continue the same plot line, spending the second session in a town at which they can sell the treasure they collected from the dungeon and resupply for their next adventure. In fact, this continuity from one session to the next is a defining feature of roleplaying games since, much like a computer or video game, players earn experience points that let them improve their characters by giving them better statistics – this means that the more time the

player devotes to the game, the better the chance his character has of succeeding at any particular action. Campaigns can last for years, as players keep improving their characters and developing a life history for them through their game sessions.

There is no way for a single player to "win" a roleplaying game, as there is in a board or card game. Instead of focusing on competitive strategy, a defining feature of RPGs is their emphasis on cooperative play; the gaming group wins as a unit by accomplishing the goals the GM sets out for their characters – by uncovering the truth behind a conspiracy they stumble upon, beating the monsters set to guard a fantastic treasure, or otherwise defeating their characters' foes though their own strength or cunning. The lead designers of the fifth edition of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis, maintain that "Gaming is social. Roleplaying brings together a number of people in order to form a communal fantasy often more verdant and imaginative than one person could ever create" (Petersen 24). Mark Rein•Hagen, the primary designer of *Vampire: The Masquerade,* further asserts that "There is no single 'winner' of *Vampire,* since the object is not to defeat the other players. To win at all, you need to coorperate with the other players. Because this is a storytelling game, there is no way for one person to claim victory" (Rein•Hagen 24). The player's enjoyment comes from being allowed to bring his own faculties into play in determining the progress of the adventure – in becoming a productive member of the group, and so empowered in his own right.

To support roleplaying games like these, and to keep players interested in playing, publishers release a multitude of spin-offs and related products, including collectable card games, game-based fiction, live action roleplaying rules, online gaming, convention support, t-shirts and other merchandise featuring game logos, novelty items, translations into dozens of languages, and sometimes even movies, cartoons, and television programs in the case of the larger RPG companies such as the Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast. But more important to a game's longevity than any of these products are the supplemental roleplaying game books that expand on the basics of the game given in the core rulebook; these are usually either sourcebooks or adventure modules. For example, a sourcebook for a fantasy roleplaying game might describe a particular country in which the game moderator can set the game, including maps of locations such as cities or castles, profiles of some of the most influential people in the imaginary realm, and information on the power relations that might impact the PCs who visit this region. An instance of this kind of sourcebook is the *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting (Wizards of the Coast, 2001) for *Dungeons & Dragons*. Another sourcebook might choose one particular group of NPCs that conspires to take over the world, and give in-depth information on their organization and goals. A sample of this kind of sourcebook would be *Cloak & Dagger* (Wizards of the Coast, 2000) again from the *D&D* RPG. Sourcebooks like these are designed to give GMs raw material to work with to create their own adventures; they present information that the

game moderator uses, disregards, or modifies to suit his own tastes and those of his players.

A second type of roleplaying supplement is the adventure module. These books are much more like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book than the longer, more in-depth sourcebook is. Typically about 32 pages rather than the 224-plus pages that a sourcebook can stretch to, an adventure module is a pregenerated storyline that a GM can use to run one or more game sessions with very little preparation. Instead of detailing information on a particular location or group as a sourcebook generally does, an adventure module might describe a specific problem the PCs face – like presenting a labyrinth filled with monsters that the characters must defeat in order to reach a spectacular treasure, or describing how the PCs are hired to do a job for mysterious employers with suspect motives. The adventure module then guides the GM through his players' possible reactions to that situation until they find a resolution; the adventure often includes specific narration that the GM reads to his gaming group, and lists particular die rolls that players need to make to progress the plot. An adventure module effectively presents material in a subjective mode rather than from the more objective viewpoint of a sourcebook. Playing through one of these adventures means that the group receives a monetary reward that PCs can use to buy new gear and equipment and/or they earn experience points that can be used to improve their characters' statistics for the next session. An example of an adventure module would be *The Sunless Citadel* (Wizards of the Coast, 2000) for

Dungeons & Dragons.

Another important aspect of supplements for roleplaying games is that they are overwhelmingly targeted at game moderators as their audience, rather than at players. Occasionally publishers release a sourcebook that touts itself as a "player's handbook" and expands on things like character creation, special powers that PCs can earn with experience points, new magic spells characters can learn, or equipment they can buy with the rewards they've earned in previous adventures, but for the most part sourcebooks are for the GM's eyes only. This necessarily limits the audience that needs to buy sourcebooks, and so may be one reason that although some 2.25 million people in the United States play tabletop RPGs on a monthly basis, 60 percent of North American manufacturers take in less than $400,000 each year, and 49 percent have a gross sales income of less than $100,000; most of the roleplaying industry is marginal, at best, from a economic viewpoint (Wizards *Adventure Game*; GAMA *Industry Survey*).

The Tolkien-inspired fantasy setting of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast, 2000) lets players take the role of daring adventurers exploring dark forests and underground caverns populated by the elves, goblins, and orcs of European myth on their way to winning fabulous treasure. But roleplaying games have diversified from fantasy favorites like this into a variety of genres, from cyberpunk to gothic horror, and even further afield into wild westerns, horror, space opera, espionage, historical drama, and as many other directions as

dozens of established game manufacturers and hundreds of designers can conceive.

For instance, both *Cyberpunk* (R. Talsorian Games, 1988) and *Shadowrun* (FASA Corp, 1989) take their inspiration from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the cyberpunk genre, positing a near-future dystopian world of cybertechnology and corporate politics. Here player characters are mercenaries-for-hire doing the dirty work of powerful megacorp sponsors; everything from infiltration to kidnapping to assassination is fair game for characters in these games. Alternatively, *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf, 1992) is a game of "gothic horror," in which the characters are tragically sensitive vampires posing as modern-day humans, negotiating the deceits of "kindred" and mundane society in their plays for power while they also struggle against their own darkest desires. Here the focus is on "storytelling" over dice-rolling, and players are exhorted to treat their characters "as unique individuals, as works of art, or as fragile expressions of your poetic sensitivity" (Rein•Hagen 24). Another game in the horror genre, this one set in the 1920s, is the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG (Chaosium, 1999) based on the works of H. P. Lovecraft; in this roleplaying game the characters are investigators who walk the edge of madness to uncover the terrifying alien forces of the Cthulhu Mythos that populated the earth aeons before the rise of man.

But not all roleplaying games take themselves so seriously. *Paranoia* (West End Games, 1984) sets the characters in a Big Brother-dominated world, where

the psychotic Computer *is* your friend ... or else. Player character citizens uncover "Commie mutant traitors" – other PCs whose players aren't quick enough in thinking up suitably obsequious explanations for "traitorous" activities like not being happy enough – who are summarily executed, only to be replaced by "clones" of themselves. *Furry Pirates* (Atlas Games, 1999) places the player characters in the "Furry Age of Sail" as scurvy seadogs ... literally. Characters are anthropomorphized dogs, cats, bears, or whatever other critter takes their fancy, pursuing epic adventure on the high seas. Another example of the oddities possible in roleplaying settings is *Deadlands: The Weird West* (Pinnacle Entertainment Group, 1996), which mixes genres to an almost ridiculous excess as players become irradiated undead gunslingers in a Wild West-themed post-apocalyptic America. (Its spin-off, *Deadlands: Hell on Earth* (Pinnacle, 1998), takes this outlandish premise even further by adding a science fiction angle: imagine a near-future Wild West-themed post-apocalyptic America where the irradiated undead gunslingers use ray guns and have cybernetic implants.)

From the plain vanilla fantasy of *Dungeons & Dragons*, to the angst-filled neo-gothic horror of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, to the ludicrousness of *Furry Pirates*, roleplaying games span a multitude of genres. The wide selection – ranging from fantasy to science fiction, from horror to humor, and from pseudo-historical to darkly postmodern and beyond – is designed to appeal to a variety of player tastes and roleplaying styles. But one element they all have in common

is that they pit a group of player characters against powerful outside forces, and let them overcome these challenges through their own quick wits and resourcefulness.

CHAPTER TWO:
ROLEPLAYING GAMES AND
POSTMODERN LITERATURE

Approximately 5.5 million people in the United States play or have played

tabletop roleplaying games, and the hobby has existed for almost thirty years

(Wizards *Adventure Game*). This makes the gaming hobby a significant cultural

phenomenon rather than a quickly fading fad, and as such it has been

interrogated as a cultural text to a limited extent; scholars such as R. Rawdon

Wilson, author of *In Palamedes' Shadow*, have examined games within the context

of cultural studies, briefly discussing the sub-genre of RPGs at several points as it

relates to game theory. But often, as in Wilson's work, roleplaying games are

subsumed in discussions of play as it relates to the broader category of

competitive games, rather than being examined closely on their own terms.

RPGs have been acknowledged as relevant cultural texts in this way, but can

they be approached as literary texts, as well?

From a purely practical viewpoint, in a discussion of the analogy between

games and literature, roleplaying games have an advantage over traditional

board or card games in that as physical artifacts they are undeniably books; a

roleplaying game has a front and back cover, which usually displays its title and

the names of its designer and publisher, and between them are bound pages

containing printed content. They also have an incontrovertible literary heritage;

most roleplaying games are heavily based on the work of at least one established

fiction writer. For instance, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was an inspiration for the fantasy setting of the first roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, so much so that early on the Tolkien estate threatened a lawsuit against the game's then-publisher Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) unless they stopped using the term "hobbit;" the hairy-footed "halfling" soon made its appearance in *D&D* in the hobbit's stead (rec.games.frp.dnd). The game's co-creator, E. Gary Gygax, also admits in an interview that Tolkien's trilogy had large influence on the *Dungeons & Dragons* setting: "Just about all the players were huge JRRT [J. R. R. Tolkien] fans, and so they insisted that I put as much Tolkien-influence material into the game as possible. Anyone reading this that recalls the original D&D game will know that there were Balrogs, Ents, and Hobbits in it. Later those were removed, and new, non-JRRT things substituted – Balor demons, Treants, and Halflings" (theonering.net).

Similarly, the Cthulhu Mythos – the body of H. P. Lovecraft's short stories and other writing that defines his fictional pantheon of alien monstrosities – is unabashedly the primary basis of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, which is rife with Lovecraft's fetid black shoggoth ooze-creatures, winged nightgaunts of the Dreamlands, and fungoid mi-go that fly through the interstellar aether to Earth. Even Cthulhu himself appears in the RPG, described with an excerpt from Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulhu:"

> A monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubber-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind. This thing ... was of a somewhat bloated corpulence. ... It lumbered slobberingly into

sight and gropingly squeezed its gelatinous green immensity through the black doorway. ... A mountain walked or stumbled. (Petersen 164)

In the same way, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* not only engendered the cyberpunk genre, but also helped shape the brooding atmosphere and concepts like the computer-generated Net that is the heart of the *Cyberpunk* RPG and the Matrix of the *Shadowrun* roleplaying game, among others. As in Gibson's work, these games position cyberware – mechanical devices implanted in human bodies, transforming people into cyborgs – as rampant among a population steeped in a technology that blurs the border between man and machine, while major corporations manipulate the masses from the shadows.

In all these instances, the novels that sparked the games are not only acknowledged in their bibliographies, but are liberally quoted from in the roleplaying game, as well. The literary work sometimes even makes up a significant proportion of the book, as in *Call of Cthulhu*, which reprints the short story by the same name as a kind of introduction to the game. In this way, the RPG co-opts literature for its own purposes, reinscripting it as game in order to evoke the atmosphere already instilled in the cultural consciousness by the more well-known work.

But justifying an approach to roleplaying games from the standpoint of literary theory as well as cultural criticism requires a slightly more abstract route than just pointing out the similarity in structural conventions such as book-format physical presentation and the literary beginnings of many roleplaying games. George Steiner once said "All literature is play" (Steiner 12); now we

must show that this particular play can be understood as literature, as well. And more specifically, it can be understood as a distinctly postmodern form of literature.

A literary game is "any playful, self-conscious and extended means by which an author stimulates his reader to deduce or to speculate, by which he encourages him to see a relationship between different parts of the text, or between the text and something extraneous to it," asserts Peter Hutchinson in *Games Authors Play* (14). Though this is as broad a definition as one is likely to come across – in this construction pulp mysteries could be said to be the epitome of a literary game – it begs a comparison. Where is the inherent distinction between a mystery novel and an RPG adventure, that only the former can be called a literary game? Consider *At the Mountains of Madness*, H. P. Lovecraft's classic fantastic mystery in which an expedition to uncharted Antarctica discovers the fossilized remains of ancient life-forms predating all known terrestrial beings; mystery turns into horror by the time the truth of their alien origins is revealed. Then look at *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*, the "sequel" to Lovecraft's novella published as a roleplaying adventure module by Chaosium, Inc. in 1999, in which a new, larger expedition braves the mysteries of the icy continent to discover the real fate of the first party. Where is the qualitative difference between the two that makes one a literary game by Hutchinson's definition and the other escapist play? After having read through the roleplaying

adventure, one fan states in a review:

> As a GM, I feel the same excitement now [that] I do when I start a group
> of players off on a world of my own creation, except that the work has
> been done for me, and much better than I could ever attempt. What will
> the players do? Will they try to be heroes? (and if so, will they succeed?)
> Will they succumb to the mind-numbing cold, fall into a crevasse or die
> from oxygen failure if their plans go awry? Which of the half-dozen or so
> major plot elements will they uncover? Will they trust the right people?
> How will they deal with the things – and the other things – and the other
> other thing? (Wills)

This questioning by the text's reader highlights the adventure's status as a

literary game: deduction and speculation on the part of the players are basic

requirements for success. The adventure also provokes the same speculative

response – a mental connecting of different parts of the text in possible outcomes

– in the GM as he reads the text alone. The stimulation of this deductive thought

process is one definition of a literary game, and gamefulness is itself an integral

part of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is also said to be an inherently rule-breaking activity; if

this is true, then roleplaying is an ideal example of that transgressiveness, as well

as being a literary game. R. Rawdon Wilson identifies four modes of

transgression in postmodern literature (31 – 33). The first is as plot device to free

the action, as when characters are faced with a prohibition whose transgression

works to move the narrative forward. In most roleplaying games, the set-up of

the story for a session involves just such a situation designed to stimulate the

plot's progress; the player characters or their arch enemy generally steal

something, kill someone, or otherwise plot to commit an atrocity of some sort.

For example, in *The Tide of Years* (Atlas Games, 2001) – an adventure I wrote for the *Dungeons & Dragons* rules system (d20 System) – a young acolyte steals her temple's most sacred magical artifact, an enormous crystal that can manipulate time itself, and uses it to travel to the future, in the process causing the retroactive destruction of her civilization. The players are called upon to recover the crystal and return it to the past to save the lives of several thousand people. This kind of plot hook, where sacrilegious theft and accidental genocide are prerequisite to the movement and rising narrative tension of the story line, foregrounds a transgression of the prohibitions constraining the players in their everyday lives, played out in a fantasy setting that allows such behavior as a narrative device.[viii]

The second mode of transgression in postmodern literature, according to Wilson, is as a way for the author to play with readerly expectations, as when conventional treatments of themes are broken to provoke a reaction from the audience. Roleplaying is filled with mainstay themes that have become stale with repetition over the years; the "dungeon crawl," in which a group of PCs explores an underground labyrinth in order to kill monsters and find treasure, is the most recognizable and threadbare of them all. Where roleplaying provokes a reaction from the audience is in its presentation of old tropes such as this with an immediacy that only the best novels can parallel. By requiring each consumer of the text to interact with others, to use problem-solving skills and diplomacy, or even just the brute strength of their characters to move the plot forward, the

audience becomes invested in the narrative – a strong, transgressive reaction is in this way provoked from what might otherwise be a passive audience and stale subject matter.

The third mode of postmodern transgression is the author's exploration and testing of conventions, since any manner of avoiding, turning, ignoring, or subverting conventional narrative modes can be seen as innately transgressive. Roleplaying tests the conventions of literary narrative in several important ways. First, it takes a written text and transforms it into an oral re-presentation of the original narrative – in many ways aligning roleplaying with performance theory and theater, as will be discussed in Chapter Seven. Next, RPG adventures are often non-linear in structure, allowing players to discover various elements of the plot in whatever sequence they determine, or even to skip certain locations or events that might have otherwise steered the progress of the narrative. Many times adventures are location-based rather than plot-based, as well, giving maps and a description of a castle, for example, and letting the player characters explore it as they like, rather than relying on scheduled, chronological events to move the action forward. This can also subvert the plot entirely, if the players decide to go "off the map" to explore regions the game moderator hasn't yet developed. This straying is so common an event that sourcebooks such as Atlas Games' *Seven Strongholds* (2002) have been published to fill in these unexpected gaps; the back cover text on this book, in particular, asks "Have your players wandered off the beaten path yet again? Didn't have time to map out that castle?

Just open *Seven Strongholds* to find forts, castles, and other well-fortified locations, fully detailed and ready for insertion into your game world" (Laws *Seven Strongholds* back cover). In these ways, as the players co-author the narrative of their game session, they frequently and transgressively subvert conventional narrative modes. In line with this, RPG designer Greg Costikyan asserts that "Games are inherently non-linear. They depend on decision-making. Decisions have to pose real, plausible alternatives, or they aren't real decisions. It must be entirely reasonable for a player to make a decision one way in one game, and a different way in the next. To the degree that a game is made more like a story – more linear, fewer real options – it is made less like a game. … To try to hew too closely to a storyline, however, is to limit players' freedom of action and their ability to make meaningful decisions" (Costikyan 23 – 24). Roleplaying positions itself between these two extremes, balancing on the knife-edge between linear, narrative story and free-form, non-linear game.

And finally, Wilson's fourth mode of transgression in postmodern literature is language play, since language always subverts, through its inherent abstractness and arbitrariness, the conventions of its use. Though roleplaying generally doesn't exhibit the excessive word play and manipulation of meaning seen in Derrida and others of a postmodern bent,[ix] language does become destabilized by some of the conventions of roleplaying games that position language as an exotic, powerful, or dangerous force. For instance, the creation of new, fictional languages is of central concern in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth

novels, including *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Lost Road and Other Writings*,

Tolkien's son Christopher sets out an extensive "Etymologies" section revealing

the basis of the fictional Elvish tongues created by his father, such as Quenya,

Sindarin, and Telerin. A preoccupation with language similar to – and possibly

influenced by – Tolkien's makes its way into the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying

game, as well, where languages such as Draconic, Dwarven, Elven, and Halfling

are available for characters to learn, and exotic names for characters of different

"races" are suggested. Words also take on an arcane power in *Dungeons &*

Dragons in that they facilitate the use of certain magic spells allowed in the game;

spells with verbal components call up the forces of nature to do the caster's

bidding or summon strange beasts, and are impossible to cast if the spell-user is

rendered mute. In the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game, by comparison,

language takes on a more dangerous cast. Points in the Cthulhu Mythos skill – a

marker representing a PC's knowledge of the "true" universe – are gained by

reading "forbidden" books and other alien and occult writings, among other

things; a high Cthulhu Mythos skill can actually endanger a character's sanity

(which is an ability with a point value in the game – for further discussion of this

dynamic, see Chapters Three and Seven), even as it allows him a chance to

correctly identify the entities of the Mythos and their doings (Petersen 69, 63).

This hazard of the *Call of Cthulhu* game world – the existence of forbidden texts –

is epitomized in the fictional book called the *Necronomicon* – a "blasphemous

tome" that ostensibly went through multiple translations from Arabic to Greek to

Latin and then to English, each with degrading accuracy. The book is said to contain information on malign alien horrors, and even rituals to call up these hideous entities. Just reading the book is enough to drive a mortal insane; vocalizing the incantations within it has been the end of many an overly inquisitive investigator, the game purports. Here, language itself – both oral and written – becomes a transgression against the laws of nature that marks the roleplaying game as uniquely postmodern.

But how can transgression be such a primary aspect of a text such as an RPG that, as a game, is also based on a strict rules set? Wilson makes the argument that the conventions of literature are "looser, less abstract, more resistant to formulation, and altogether more flexible" than the rules that are used in a game (Wilson 85). However, in a roleplaying game, *both* literary convention *and* the formal rules typical of a game can be seen to have an influence on the roleplaying narrative.[x] The core rulebook of most roleplaying games gives specific details on the rules, telling players and GMs how to adjudicate combat and social interactions, and how to perform other actions within the game. Even RPGs that take a "diceless" approach, which is often seen as less rules-oriented, many times use pools of points to determine outcomes rather than relying on a truly free-form storytelling. For instance, *Nobilis* by Hogshead Publishing (2001) gives each player a certain number of points to use to perform magic or miracles. Different magical effects cost different numbers of magic pool points, and when a player uses up his full allotment of points he can

no longer perform any magic until that pool refreshes. Though dice are taken out of the game, there are still strict rules to which player characters and GMs must adhere. The rules sections of some RPGs, like the diceless *Nobilis*, run to more than 100 pages of material.

These game rules are fundamentally inflexible and abstract, but with the introduction of literary elements that are flexible and concrete, RPGs necessarily become a hybrid of literature and game. GMs can "fudge" NPC die rolls to make sure the bad guy doesn't die before the grand finale, make difficulties higher or lower for player characters depending on whether the plot is benefited by their failure or success in an action, or decide to make a player talk his way out of a situation instead of letting him roll his Diplomacy skill. Players work communally with the GM to solve disputes, looking up relevant rules in their core rulebooks with an eye for skewing the GM's final interpretation of them in their own favor. Gaming groups even change the printed rules when they find gaps in them, creating "house rules" that apply only to their personal experience with the game. *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator Dave Arneson exhorts players to use house rules, saying, "If something doesn't work, get rid of it. If something works in another set of rules and you want to put it in your game, go for it. The [game rules'] job is to make the referee's life easier, so he can referee, not harder" (rpgrealms.com). Unlike board games, where straying from the rules is considered cheating, roleplaying games allow for such deviation on the part of individual groups, which means that the game moderator is responsible for

determining how the rules are interpreted, and the players have a strategic role in creating the game's structure as well as its narrative. "If literature is game," Wilson asserts, "readers must always find themselves in the role of being able to say whether the rules have been kept, or significantly deviated from" (Wilson 102). Just as literary conventions and assumptions delimit action in a literary text, making things like character, description, and events possible (Wilson 14), the rules of a roleplaying game restrict or allow the same elements with a high disregard for what may be the case outside of the game text itself, making the rules of an RPG inherently mutable in a way that those of Chess, for example, are not. A roleplaying game's rules are in this way changeable guidelines rather than falling comfortably into the categories of either literary convention or hard and fast game regulation; they are a compromise between the two, and thus another display of the transgressiveness typical of postmodernism. As Wilson notes, postmodernism "calls attention to the problems of constructing, applying, and maintaining categories" (Wilson 113); the boundary-crossing typical of roleplaying between flexible and inflexible assumptions, between convention and rule, and ultimately between literature and game, is an example of this effect.

A transgressive blurring of boundaries may be one of its defining qualities, but to be postmodern is also to be self-consciously flat or depthless, according to Fredric Jameson, born of superficiality. The weakening of genuine historicity, in particular, serves to place the postmodern in the current historical

moment (Jameson 67). Approaching RPGs from this mode of thought, it becomes obvious that classic roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are based on a watered-down conglomeration of European history and mythology, and pure fantasy. Here, the wil-o'-the-wisp and bugbear of English legend mix company with the Greek medusa and centaur, and with the hobbit and orc of Tolkien's fictional Middle Earth. Gods of the sun, nature, death, and mischief with fantastical names like Pelor, Obad-Hai, Nerull, and Olidammara replace the deities of a *mélange* of real-world cultures, such as the familiar Apollo, Demeter/Frey, Hades/Hel, and Loki. Even games like *Ars Magica* (Atlas Games, 1996), an RPG celebrated for its historical realism in portraying the Europe of 1220 A.D., introduce elements of magic that allow player characters to manipulate the history presented to their own benefit. The intertextuality[xi] offered by the multiple sourcebooks for games like this, each presenting historical locations and events translated into an ever-expanding game world, generates the same "connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth" noted by Jameson in regard to postmodernism, "in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (67).

The displacement of the real in a historical sense also bleeds into the postmodern's fascination with reality and illusion; to be postmodern is to be obsessed with uncertainty and ambiguous perception. In roleplaying is found an activity where the randomness of die rolls and the sometimes arbitrary will of the GM determines what characters see, hear, and understand about their

surroundings, and thus how the players can interact with them. In this sense, the

RPG functions as a godgame between GM and player. Wilson explains:

> A godgame occurs in literature when one or more characters create an
> illusion, a mazelike sequence of false accounts, that entraps other
> characters. The entrapped character becomes entangled in the threads of
> (from his point of view) an incomprehensible strategy plotted by another
> character who displays the roles of both a gamewright and a god. The
> master of the game is godlike in that he exercises power, holds an
> advantageous position, will probably be beyond detection (even
> understanding), and may even be ... invisible. (Wilson 123 – 124)

The central dynamic in the archetypal roleplaying session – in which the game

moderator prepares a fictional scenario for the party of player characters to

overcome – easily fits into the mold of a godgame. Indeed, "The godgame

[makes] the player both passive and active, played and playing, caught within a

game structure even while creating it," effectively splitting the subject into player

and character, as in a roleplaying game (Wilson 163). The GM tests the player

characters with puzzles, he applies the rules of the game that the characters (as

opposed to the players) are not aware exist, controls the reactions of the NPCs as

well as the knowledge and perceptions the characters have of their situation, and

all the while remains outside of the narrative of the game, effectively invisible to

the characters who must navigate their way through their predicament. The

game moderator poses questions about the nature of reality – those questions

that, when asked about the status of the text, preoccupy postmodern writers –

while the entrapped characters do not even understand that they are part of an

illusion. "In a godgame," elaborates Wilson, "one character (or several) is made

a victim by another character's superior knowledge and power. Caught in a

cunningly constructed web of appearances, the victim, who finds the illusion to be impenetrable, is observed and his behavior is judged" (Wilson 123). When a party is judged favorably in a roleplaying game, the GM grants experience points and treasure (or fictional lands, titles, or magic items, in many cases) as reward, based on the difficulty of the challenge and how they comported themselves in overcoming it. As referee, the game moderator also determines whether a certain player character receives extra experience for exceptional "in character" performances, if a character must suffer some penalty for acting in a way not consistent with his personality, and ultimately, when the player characters can advance to the next level of power based on the experience he awards. Wilson concludes, "the godgame constitutes an emblem of the postmodern obsession with uncertainty, ambiguous perception, and cognitive entrapment" (Wilson 125). Roleplaying games, like the godgames that appear in postmodern literature, deal with a constructed reality that is itself a puzzle and paradox for the characters who exist within it, navigating and creating its pitfalls at the whim of an omniscient judge.

The convention common to fantasy-genre RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* – that of a party of adventurers exploring an underground dungeon, killing and plundering as they go – begs an interrogation of the labyrinth as literary symbol, as well, as it is also the central, underforming image of the postmodern godgame. A dungeon can be looked at as a spatial labyrinth embedded in the narrative of the roleplaying game, which embodies cognitive confusion. Labyrinths are, after

all, a pattern of turns and twists, they present choices, alternatives, ambiguity – a series of decisions that leads deeper into the maze. "The metaphors of penetration, exploration, dwelling within, inhabiting, and becoming lost (absorbed, swallowed, overwhelmed by) in the text describe the ordinary strategies of readerly articulation," asserts Wilson (171). Similarly, the dungeon of the typical roleplaying game has only the illusion of reality – it is truly a mind-maze constituted in the imaginations of the players and game moderator. And once the dungeon is fully explored/penetrated/absorbed, the meta-labyrinths of the RPG adventure and campaign itself still remain, as the decisions that led the party out of the dungeon lead them only deeper into the larger narrative of the game. The destination of a labyrinth – the exit – is not something that can necessarily be reached; labyrinths are rather positioned as "vehicles of cognitive bafflement, frustration, and anxiety," as models of the human condition, Wilson states (155). The destination of an adventure's dungeon – the exit/treasure/experience that is to be won by successfully navigating its twisting corridors – is similarly only a minor measure of progress in the larger adventure, where the actions of the characters may have an impact on the bracketing plot of the session; the troglodytes that almost overwhelmed the characters in the heart of the dungeon are most certainly the minions of a greater evil awaiting the characters when they emerge from its depths, after all. And the end of an adventure is likewise only a resting point in the larger campaign, the end of which is not something that can necessarily be attained; one adventure feeds

into another, and another, creating an unending narrative labyrinth of interconnected adventure plots.

The complexity of reality and illusion that the labyrinth metaphor facilitates, when contrasted with the relative simplicity (or non-existence) of its physicality, also has implications on the created world of the RPG. Labyrinths "depend upon situations in which necessary decisions must be made, not upon physical complexity; fictional worlds depend upon significant detail, not upon the quantity of textual detail" (Wilson 200). RPGs evoke a similar perception of a complete world on the part of the player as his character pursues the storyline, though that world is often defined by the barest of description on the part of the GM. Despite the excess of textual detail available in the core rulebooks, sourcebooks, and adventures published for an RPG line, the created world of the roleplaying game is constituted only by the information the GM provides to the players, and the players' individual understandings of what the fictional world should be; RPG worlds are ultimately experiential.

Wilson asserts that the term "world," when used in relation to literature, has a multiplicity of denotations: a world is, on one hand, the perception on the part of the reader that is created by the text; but "*world* is also the term by which scholars and critics express their perception of the text's self-containedness and coherence" in relation to the text's convention, mannerisms, motifs, topoi, and themes (Wilson 171); in a more general use, the term "world" serves "to identify and set apart any area of signification that can be thought independently of all

others" (Wilson 172); and the term "world" also implies "a semiotic domain, a conceptual area specifically constituted by a particular category of signifying actions" (Wilson 174). Thus a literary world is any region constituting a relatively closed or self-enclosed system, a spatially independent, experiential area of significance, as the worlds created by roleplaying games have proven themselves to be thus far.

But the human experience allowed by roleplaying games works to transform the semiotic world presented in a sourcebook into a phenomenological landscape, as well. James Wallis, owner of Hogshead Publishing, asserts that good RPG worlds convey a feeling of internal coherence, and a sense of permanence and process not found in other role-playing environments. They must convey "the impression that if the players' characters were to disappear, the background world would continue to exist and function without them. They must contain a sense of free will, allowing the players-characters the impression that they can do anything, provided it is within the limits of the background. Most importantly they must be believable, not necessarily in a rational 'this is a possible past/future' way, but in a way that lets the players lose themselves within it" (Wallis "Realism" 68). These traits allow for a seamless experience of the created world. As Wallis emphasizes, "The best role-playing experiences are the ones in which the participants are able to forget that they are taking part in a game" (Wallis "Realism" 68). When this is achieved, the fictional entities of the game's characters also become real enough to be taken as actual, and their

actions are felt in strong ways by the players as audience; when my first character "died" in a game session (of my own carelessness, incidentally), I at first felt a horrified shock, and then harbored a deep resentment against the GM – a good friend of many years – for weeks, until I finally formed an attachment to my new character. In a literary text, the "semiotic gathering of traits – diffused semes – under the superaddition of a character's name" becomes an "open" construct, which is "capable of provoking significant responses, including the reader's fascination and continuing concern" (Wilson 193 – 194). In roleplaying games, this process is effectively equivalent to the development of a PC during character creation. This process of transformation from semiotic to phenomenological world is seated in the imagination, whether it occurs as a result of reading a book or playing a game.

"Worldhood results from surprisingly little," according to Wilson. "It is a property of imaginative experience and not of the texts that underlie this experience" (Wilson 195). In roleplaying games, this means that the creation of world, character, and story become "real" when experienced during the course of a game session, rather than on the reading of the game rulebook itself. The text necessarily presents the world as incomplete and fragmentary, as no sourcebook can describe every inch of a fantasy world. For instance, when a character "wanders off the path" of the GMs narrative, he would move into an empty nothingness according to the text that has not described that space. But because roleplaying worlds are experiential, rather than encountering void, the

character instead enters a space that has yet to be defined, but yet is defined simultaneously, since space is a function of experience; "the text's world takes shape, both complexly and variably, in the reading experience" (Wilson 207), or in the playing experience, in the case of roleplaying games. The GM describes the empty spaces of the roleplaying world "on the fly" if the players deviate from the expected. Text-space and game-space, then, are experienced as self-enclosed and full, irrespective of the amount of material presented by the game's rulebooks.[xii]

This spatial non-coherence is an inherent quality of textual worlds, then; "A reader must somehow 'be' within them and accept their constitutive conventions as axioms" (Wilson 194). When players of a RPG imagine themselves within a fictional world in a first-person sense – "as" their characters – the game world can then be experienced as vast, immeasurable, and open – as coherent despite its obviously undefined borders – just as a reader would approach a literary text in which he identifies with the protagonist. In both cases, the self-enclosure of the text allows him to cross the boundary between an actual, empirical world and a parallel textual world, mentally "traveling" into the separate domain of experience created through the active consumption of the text. This access to the fictional world, Lubomír Doležel observes, "requires crossing of world boundaries, transit from the realm of actual existents into the realm of fictional possibles" (Doležel 484 – 485).

Working from these assumptions, Wilson is able to define criteria for

creating a viable fictional world:

> What seems to be required to experience a text as a fictional world is that there should be a minimal "landscape." If there are text-specific assumptions that can be understood, some indications of spatiality, a time sequence that can be grasped (not, needless to say, a chronology), a narrative agent, events that have some bearing on each other, and the presuppositions of coherence, then the story can be transformed into a world. (Wilson 200 – 201)

What Wilson describes above are the contents of a typical adventure module, which describes the setting the characters find themselves in, gives some kind of timeline for presenting interrelated events that form the storyline, and speculates on the possible effects of actions the PCs might decide to take, which then lead to the desired ending; the GM himself is the narrative agent bringing all of these elements together. Fictional worlds, whether in a literary text or in the context of a game, are a mental landscape constructed of human creativity.

Once the worldhood created by the consumption of roleplaying games is established, the application of play theory and the concept of commodity fetishism to RPGs become suggestive. Both of these modes of literary theory can be used to further tie RPGs to postmodern literature.

Play, when considered as Derrida's concept of "free play," is limitless, as is the landscape of the created world of the roleplaying game, and the possibilities for narrative within it. Derrida's concept of "free play" has been called "precisely the continual working of the relationship between various 'non-centers' and complete randomness" (Hans 823); applying this literally to the

mechanism of a roleplaying game, we see the author (as multiplicity), vying for narrative control with the chaotic authority of the dice. Free play also "lies beyond stable, centered structures, makes them untenable, decenters them, and deprivileges them" (Wilson 16). Roleplaying is at its most basic level a cooperative experience between individual players, who are both the consumers of the performed text and its authors, in a sense, in that they take a direct hand in determining the narrative. Because of this, the text's relationship between author and reader is complicated, deprivileging the author as it decenters his authority over the text. The writer whose original work the game setting is based upon, the creators of the roleplaying hobby, the designer(s) of the RPG rulebook who translate that writing into a game terms, the editors and publishers of the games, and fans who influence the game behind the scenes, the GM who culls ideas from sourcebooks and adventure modules to create his own setting and plot outline, and the players who are in turn influenced by their social environment as they decide the actions they'll finally take all impact the outcome of a roleplaying game; they all have a hand in determining the meaning of the text, which is continually in flux as the game progresses. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes that one "could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play" (Derrida 50); roleplaying in this way exhibits free play's non-dependence on any irreducible signified and manifests itself in the process of indefinite substitution.

And finally, literary texts can be seen as indexes of the cultures that

produce them. They express the history and culture of a people, and contribute to the moral education of that people by conveying shared cultural beliefs. In this sense, thinkers such as Frederic Jameson see the postmodern as an aspect of the general commodification of industrial products in this late, multinational phase of capitalism. "Aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally," Jameson asserts. "The frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (Jameson 54). Works of art, such as literature, are viewed as commodities by a consumer-indoctrinated society, and in this climate the RPG industry rushes to produce wave after wave of increasingly "new" and "innovative" expansions. Supplements are designed to hit the market every one or two months, to keep players interested in and loyal to a particular "brand" of RPG. Players and GMs keep collections of game books that are never opened, in many cases, just so that they can maintain a full set of their favorite game's supplements. The success of RPGs in the marketplace make them a barometer of social and political attitudes, in this way.

Even the content of RPGs reflects the "commodity fetishism," as Terry Eagleton calls it, of international capitalism. Many roleplaying rulebooks read, at points, more like shopping lists than like great literature, describing armor, weapons, equipment, and other goods and services a player character can

"purchase" as he goes up in level. Roleplaying games are as much about resource management as are simulation computer games like *Civilization* or *Sim City*. Acquisition becomes an illusory obsession, and increasing one's fictional wealth an incentive in itself for playing the game. This preoccupation with collecting is also shown in the lists and tables RPG designers and GMs alike love so much: wandering monster tables, spell appendices, lists of skills and feats; players even "collect" experience to raise their characters to the next level of play. Thomas Pavel writes in *Fictional Worlds,* "literary games enhance the pleasure of taking risks, of feeling oneself more and more in control ... the practising reader senses the growing of his power and dexterity; he enjoys his progress and loves to continue the practice" (Pavel 127). In most roleplaying games, material gain is a reflection of and a metaphor for internal development, just as in fairy tales it is common for the protagonist to begin in poverty but to end up rich; affluence and influence are markers of a developed character. Martin Oliver makes a similar observation in regard to literary tropes: "Part of the structure of the hero-tale is a cycle of questing, testing and reward, and it is this last that enables material gain to mirror development in the stories" (Oliver 62). This dynamic is formalized in *Dungeons & Dragons* and many other RPGs in a system of experience point gains based on the players' progress, so that practice actually does augment a character's power and dexterity, at least on paper; fewer games explicitly emphasize rewards for in-session character development. This practice of systematic advancement encourages players to

continue playing in order to progress even further, rewarding practice of the

game with experience points, though there is never an attainable end point to

their advancement. Susan Stewart observes that "in the collection, the threat of

infinity is always met with the articulation of boundaries." She goes on to say

that the "finite use value" of the collection "is played against the measureless

emptiness that marks their new aesthetic function" (Stewart 159). In "collecting"

experience points, too, the limitlessness of advancement is bound by the

restrictions of the character's stats, creating the desire for ever more experience,

more advancement, more power.[xiii]

The preoccupation with collecting and lists inherent in roleplaying games

functions as a marker of progress in a game that would otherwise be limitless in

scope and possibility, and so facilitates mastery of the game and domination over

the other players – the more equipment/gold/experience/commodities a

character has, the more understanding his player is assumed to have of the

game's rules. Commodity fetishism of these illusory, intangible assets is used as

a method of "keeping score" in a game that is otherwise a collective, cooperative

endeavor. Even in a fantasy world with no boundaries, material possessions are

looked at as a sign of stature just as they are in the day-to-day life the players are

ostensibly "escaping" from. Players, GMs, and the rules themselves work to

reconstruct the boundaries of reality in the game setting. "The desire to

reassemble the world … must lie implicit, always already, within the desire to

collect," observes Wilson (121); collections in both games and literature attempt

to reassemble the world through a mosaic of emblems, which, as they reconstruct the world, inevitably display the minds that collect them. In roleplaying games, to collect is to play the game, but also to define the game/real world and oneself.[xiv]

Kendall Walton asserts that "literary texts are games of make-believe in which the reader becomes a participant, at least insofar as he is present as an observer. The duration of reading corresponds to the duration of play and, for however long it lasts, the make-believe, made possible by the text, is experienced as real" (paraphrased in Wilson 193). The fact that roleplaying games are self-enclosed, separable from other activities, and possess their identifiable text-specific assumptions marks them as texts with similarities to literature, and their transgressiveness, historical depthlessness, fascination with reality and illusion, foregrounding of literary worlds, use of free play, and connection with commodity fetishism links them closely to postmodernism. While the assertion that all literature is play may be stretching the analogy thin, in many instances RPGs literally translate literature into the medium of a game, creating a new participatory literary form. Roleplaying is, in Wilson's words, "a written text displaying the structural conventions of literature, the rules system of a game, and the amorphous exuberance of free play" (Wilson 109). Roleplaying is inherently self-reflective, self-reflexive, metafictional, and narcissistic; it explicates and transforms the conventions from which it was born. As Elizabeth Bruss claims literature is, so is roleplaying a form of game played, for the stakes

of meaning, between author and reader on either a cooperative, mixed motive, or competitive order (Bruss 153 – 172). The greater part of the remainder of this examination of roleplaying approaches it as a cooperative endeavor, and more specifically, a kind of cooperative authoring that is, indeed, a postmodern pursuit.

CHAPTER THREE:
LITERARY BEGINNINGS

A discussion of the changing role of the author and the close relationship between roleplaying games and literature begins long before the creation of the first RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, in 1974. For a complete view, the seminal writer whose work the game is based upon must be given his just dues, and the question of how and why roleplaying games take their inspiration from literature must be interrogated.

Just as roleplaying games run the gambit from fantasy to science fiction, delving into horror, humor, and history, and even mixing genres at times, so too do they draw from the literature of those genres for their inspiration. For example, with its flavor of high fantasy and magic made real, with its goblins and orcs, elves, dwarves, and hobbits, the *Dungeons & Dragons* game draws heavily on J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which in many ways heralded the beginning of the cyberpunk genre, provided the conceptual framework for RPG settings pitting players against opaque corporate intrigue and the shadowy underworld of a high-technology near-future found in games like *Cyberpunk* and *Shadowrun*. And Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* presents a romanticized take on modern-day vampires struggling against their own lusts and the *façade* of normality they must maintain to survive in a mundane world – this is, of course, the basis for the *Vampire: The Masquerade* RPG. At a first glance, it's obvious that literature

provides the seminal concepts for many roleplaying games – the setting, general templates for the base character types in the RPG, and the overall atmosphere, for example.[iv] Indeed, *Vampire* even acknowledges this debt in a section devoted to its inspirations, saying "The efforts and creativity of many created this game; no one person could ever create anything of this scale. Each of us takes the ideas and thoughts of others and passes them along. We may evolve the idea, concept or seed, but we can never claim sole ownership. What we call creativity is actually evolution" (Rein•Hagen 269).

But few other roleplaying games declare their inspiration as obviously as the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, first published in 1981 by Chaosium, Inc. "Horror Roleplaying in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft" is the subtitle of the game, and after a title page, a memorium to Lovecraft takes up page two. The entirety of Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu" fills pages eight through twenty of the fifth edition. The story gives the player an immediate sense of Lovecraft's main themes and atmosphere, and readies the reader/player to enter an imagined world of the 1920s that is based directly on them. Players take the roles of investigators solving terrible crimes perpetrated by the minions of the monstrous Great Old Ones, who are prophesied to awaken and to lay waste to the world "when the stars are right." This overt use of Lovecraft's fiction, and the faithfulness with which the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG approaches Lovecraft's original concepts, makes the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game an ideal example to use in charting the multiplicity of the author in roleplaying games.

Lovecraft is the primary focus of this study's discussion of the seminal writer's influence on roleplaying games for reasons going beyond the RPG's faithfulness to his work, though. Consider also the volume of academic work that has already interrogated his writing and that establishes his position as an author of merit, the relevance of the circle of writers who added to his Cthulhu Mythos even after his death, and the role the pulp science fiction magazines of the early twentieth century – the venue in which most of Lovecraft's stories appeared – in drawing a significant amount of fan interaction and so situating the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game as the locus of a thriving online fan community with the development of the internet. Lovecraft melded horror and science fantasy to create a collective of stories that challenged convention at the beginning of the twentieth century, and became a mainstay of the new science fiction genre, paving the way for *Amazing Science-Fiction* editor John Campbell's humanistic style of science fiction that emphasized characterization over Space Opera action narrative. The advent of pulp science fiction magazines also allowed a new level of contact between writer and reader, and facilitated an unusual amount of spectator influence on the writing itself. After his death, Lovecraft's fiction continued to push into new realms of literary pursuit and intertextuality through the work of his cohorts. His seminal stories have spawned a multitude of fictions and films by other writers, which are directly based on his fantastical Cthulhu mythology. The circle of writers that grew around Lovecraft shows the spread of his influence; but this circle is also a direct

link between Lovecraft's creative inception of the Cthulhu Mythos and the changed authorial role found in roleplaying games. These issues all become important in the course of this discussion of the importance of the seminal writer to the authorship of roleplaying games.

For these reasons, the Cthulhu Mythos – the body of works stemming from and including H. P. Lovecraft's original tales of horror – is an apt illustration of the roleplaying game's literary roots and its subsequent departure from them. H. P. Lovecraft and the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, in particular, can be used as a primary example of the way that roleplaying games have changed the role of the writer that inspired them, shifting the author into a border-blurring multiplicity that is directly postmodern. Exploring this evolution of author from distinct to aggregate, then, first requires a look at Lovecraft's inception of the Mythos, and the cultural framework from which it arose.

Frank Munsey is given credit for creating the pulp magazine field with the publication of *The Golden Argosy* in 1882. This thin, pamphlet-sized magazine contained children's stories that were less sensational than the dime novels of the time. The magazine was unsuccessful at first, and so Munsey retitled it *The Argosy* and refocused its contents to appeal to young adults (Murray "Lovecraft" 103). In 1891, Munsey launched a companion magazine for *The Argosy* called *Munsey's*, which was printed on low-quality paper called "pulp." It was a thick magazine that contained fiction and lacked illustrations, and it was soon selling a

half-million copies a month. *The Argosy* was redesigned to follow the same format as *Munsey's*, and *The All-Story*, begun in 1905, and *The Cavalier*, first released in October 1908, soon followed (Murray "Lovecraft" 103). With this line-up of pulp magazines, Munsey was the leading publisher of pulps for almost twenty years. "The format of all his magazines was identical," according to Will Murray. "They published novels – often serialized – as well as novellettes and short stories. There were no restrictions as to theme or subject matter, except within the assumed boundaries of good taste" (Murray "Lovecraft" 103). The variety of detective stories, romances, westerns, sports stories and more that made up these cross-genre fiction magazines caused the early pulps to be known as "all-fiction" magazines.

Into this field came the young H. P. Lovecraft. Before publishing his work professionally, Lovecraft wrote to the "Transatlantic Circulator," a group of amateur writers who exchanged manuscripts for comment by other members, and was deeply involved with the amateur journals. He also joined the United Amateur Press Association in 1914, and served as vice president around 1915. At this time, Lovecraft claimed, "For the endorsement and interest of the public I care not at all, writing solely for my own satisfaction. Writing for any other motive could not possibly be art – the professional author is the ultimate antithesis of the artist" (Lovecraft *In Defense* 34). His first literary appearance in the pulps was in 1916 – though letters of his had appeared previously in the letter columns of magazines such as *The Argosy* and *All-Story* – when a poem he

wrote satirizing one of the writers featured in the periodical was published in *The Argosy*, and provoked a "veritable tempest of anger amongst the usual readers of the magazine," as Lovecraft describes it (Lovecraft *Selected I* 41). One reader wrote in the magazine's letters page, "I get sore at people like H. P. L. I will pay his fifteen cents a month if he will quit reading *Argosy*. ... I am a cow-puncher, and would certainly like to loosen up my .44-six on that man Lovecraft" (quoted in Murray "Lovecraft" 105).

After 1920, other pulp publishers sprung up in earnest to compete with Munsey. Street & Smith, for example, which had published dime novels at the turn of the century, and put out *The Popular Magazine* in 1903 to rival *All-Story*, in 1919 reincarnated their dying dime novel *Nick Carter Stories* as the first specialized pulp, *Detective Story Magazine*. On its success they followed with *Western Story Magazine, Love Story Magazine, Sport Story Magazine*, and a slew of other pulps. The early specialized pulp magazines published by Street & Smith and others "were patterned on the popular genres. They enjoyed high circulations and, while they tended to be less literary than the all-fiction titles, they were not as blatantly sensational as the pulps would later become" (Murray "Lovecraft" 106).

Lovecraft contributed "Herbert West – Reanimator" to the magazine *Home Brew* in 1921, calling it "frankly artificial hack-work," then was promptly rejected by *The Black Mask* and *The Black Cat* (Lovecraft *Selected I* 152). But in 1923 *Weird Tales* was launched, and would prove Lovecraft's primary professional outlet in

the years to come. Herein appeared, at first, reprints of the Victorian "scientific romance" and scientific fiction of the 1900s, typified by writers such as H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allan Poe – the latter being a major influence on Lovecraft's work. Lovecraft submitted five stories to Edwin Baird at *Weird Tales*, all of which were accepted but which Lovecraft claimed to regard as "stuff done to order for a vulgar magazine, & written down to the herd's level" (Lovecraft *Selected I* 201). He soon became *Weird Tales'* star writer during its formative period, having a story published in most of the early issues. However, he still was not able to break into the more prestigious and better-paying magazines like the all-fiction pulp *The Argosy* – his mainstay *Weird Tales* paid only a penny a word on publication – and so was confined to this one marginal market for weird fiction. Nonetheless, as Lovecraft began to pursue these professional markets, his acceptance by them began to mean to him validation of his literary worth, and his self-confidence and creative output suffered when his work was declined, despite his referring to them in correspondence as "cheap magazines" and his own enjoyment of them as a "reprehensible habit" (Lovecraft *Selected I* 41).

In 1924, *Weird Tales* suspended publication for several months, and Edwin Baird was replaced as editor by Farnsworth Wright. Wright promptly began a pattern of rejecting Lovecraft's work, usually saying that it was too slow and obscure, too long and wordy; Will Murray comments that "unlike professional pulp editors, who simply accepted and rejected stories purely on their merits –

only rarely asking for a rewrite with a borderline manuscript – Wright seems to have returned the majority of submissions with the suggestion that a rewrite might bring a favorable verdict. … many *Weird Tales* contributors during the Wright period complained of the constant rejection-with-suggested-revision experience. Why Wright conducted himself so unprofessionally is difficult to determine" (Murray "Lovecraft" 109). Most contributors to *Weird Tales* followed Wright's suggestions, but some just resubmitted the same story after several months without actually making revisions. "This ploy worked surprisingly often," Murray asserts (Murray "Lovecraft" 110). Lovecraft, however, refused to revise his work, and so found himself without a reliable market for his writing; he offered *Weird Tales* poetry and old stories that had appeared in the amateur journals, instead, and jumped at the chance to submit to any new pulps that appeared during this time.

But *Weird Tales* would not have a rival in its weird stories *niche* for another decade – until *Strange Tales* appeared in 1931 – and the first pulp magazine dedicated exclusively to science fiction, *Amazing Stories*, did not come into being until 1926. Even then, *Amazing Stories'* editor, Hugo Gernsback – the self-proclaimed "Father of Scientifiction"[xvi] – took an approach to science fiction that conflated a sense of personal triumph over the universe with a rather restrictive preoccupation with scientific accuracy. This was an emphasis that effectively made Lovecraft's work, on the whole, unsuitable for publication there.

The publication of *Amazing Stories* began what Gernsback called the

"modern period," or what current scholars might term the "Age of Wonder" – a period of radical development and transformation for American science fiction. Gernsback's perception of the ideal science fiction followed the rather limited formula that "the work must be a narrative; it must incorporate passages of scientific explanation; and it must describe an imaginary but scientifically logical new invention or breakthrough" (Westfahl 340). Scientific accuracy, then, became a dominant principle in American science fiction, guided by Gernsback's ideal of achieving an action-filled, plot-oriented "charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (quoted in Westfahl 342). The advent of the genre-specific pulp science fiction magazine, Gernsback asserted, established it as an individual genre, stimulating a growing awareness of science fiction, as well as interaction between writers and fans, during a period that felt the increased impact of science on everyday life. Writers such as Murray Leinster, E. E. (Doc) Smith, and Clifford Simak, under Gernsback's editorship, would follow this principle to create an American science fiction that offered "a different – an opposite – response to the new science than did literary realism and naturalism" (Clareson 33). Rather than being "caught amid external forces over which the individual has no control and is buffeted by chance" as in much social realism/naturalism, adventure science fiction of this period often presents life as triumphant over the universe – eventually ruling the universe (Clareson 35 – 36). This focus on the ability to overcome hardship was a response to the advancement of technology and, later, to war.

Meanwhile, *Ghost Stories* – which paid two cents per word – rejected Lovecraft's work, and so did *Mystery Stories*. Lovecraft did break into *Amazing Stories* with "The Colour out of Space" in 1927, but Gernsback paid him almost eleven months late, and then only $25.00 – a fifth of a cent per word – which was about one fifth of *Weird Tales'* paltry standard rates of 1 or 1 ½ cents (Murray "Lovecraft" 112; Joshi *Subtler Magic* 185; Westfahl 348). Several of Gernsback's other writers filed lawsuits against Gernsback for similar non-payment of royalties, and Lovecraft's own experience with the man effectively closed the new pulp as an outlet for his writing. At about this time, though, Wright began asking to again see works that he had rejected for *Weird Tales*, like "The Call of Cthulhu" – apparently realizing a year after its rejection that Lovecraft was not going to revise it – and accept them. Lovecraft also began looking for alternate ways to use his writing talent to good effect. With his established name, Lovecraft found he could charge $2.25 per page for ghostwriting, and another 25 cents for typing the original writer's work, as well (Joshi *Subtler Magic* 185). Although this is a quarter of what he could have gotten for an original story – for example, he charged $17.50 for ghostwriting "the Curse of Yig" for Zealia Bishop, though he would have made at least $90.00 from *Weird Tales* for a similar original work – the ghostwriting was a sure thing whether the story sold or not (Joshi *Subtler Magic* 185). In this way, Lovecraft lived meagerly with his two aunts and relied on his inheritance and ghostwriting as his only steady income. Biographer L. Sprague de Camp in his 1975 *Lovecraft: A Biography*, criticizes

Lovecraft for not being more aggressive in selling his work, which would have relieved his poverty and allowed him more freedom to visit antiquarian sites in the Atlantic seaboard. Lovecraft scholar S. T. Joshi refutes this view, saying "Lovecraft's gentlemanly status (not a pose in any sense but a social reality to one born in the reign of Victoria in conservative New England) could not allow him to act as a 'tradesman' and hawk his work about like a pedlar; and more, Lovecraft stated that it was the sheer act of writing – of capturing images clamouring within the artist to be expressed – which was the aim and the end of writing, and actual publication was a distinctly secondary factor" (Joshi "Development" 21).

The end of 1927 was a bit more positive for Lovecraft. Wright accepted "The Dunwich Horror" immediately upon submission to *Weird Tales* for $240.00, the largest amount Lovecraft had so far made from a sale of his writing. "The Horror at Red Hook" appeared in a hardcover anthology, and "The Colour Out of Space" was listed in *Best Short Stories of 1928*. The magazine *Tales of Magic and Mystery* also accepted "Cool Air," which had been rejected by *Weird Tales*, though it promptly folded with the issue after the appearance of Lovecraft's story. The next few years saw many other of Lovecraft's stories anthologized, his early works reprinted in *Weird Tales* with regularity, and many of the revisions and ghostwriting he worked on for aspiring writers published. Later, though, Lovecraft would see the impact that his efforts to publish in the pulp field had on his writing:

My subconscious efforts to meet the Wright standard were having a bad effect on my work. When Putnam's rejected a book-form collection which I had submitted upon their own request, they gave as one of their objections the fact that my tales had an over-explanatory quality – a lack of subtlety – indubitable caused by the influence of the cheap-magazine standard. On reflection, I concurred in this objection – even though I have always (at least since 1925) sought to repudiate the popular commercial tradition. Without doubt, the constant early thunderings of Wright against my debatable endings and obscure implications have had an insidious tendency to make me tone such things down – largely without knowing it. (Lovecraft *Selected IV* 53 – 54)[xvii]

In 1930, *Weird Tales* announced it was reorganizing into a smaller-format, bimonthly magazine because of financial difficulties, which meant that it could no longer print serials and longer stories; Lovecraft's longest story to date, the novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, was promptly rejected. "Wright rejected my best story," Lovecraft recalled in a letter to Richard Ely Morse, "and in so doing revealed such a purely commercial attitude that I have not felt like sending him anything else. He has no sympathy with any story not calculated to please the herd of crude and unimaginative illiterates forming the bulk of his readers – and repeated rejections have such a bad psychological effect on me that I have thought it best to pause for a while" (Lovecraft *Selected IV* 53). During this hiatus, though, *Weird Tales* readers kept asking for more of Lovecraft's work through its letters page, called "The Eyrie." Wright even asked Lovecraft about his fictional endeavors, only to be told that his newest piece, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, was a full three pages longer than even "Whisperer in Darkness" (Murray "Lovecraft" 119).

In 1931 *Strange Tales* was released by the William Clayton Company,

paying two cents per word with regular raises and promising to give *Weird Tales* formidable competition in recruiting the older magazine's best writers. Lovecraft's first submissions were all rejected; while Lovecraft's work focused on place, setting, and background over character or plot, "The Clayton chain preferred stories of action," explains Will Murray. "In fact, with the exception of *Weird Tales* – which had always been a pulp backwater untouched by trends of popular fiction – action was the byword of the pulp field during the depression. ... This new slant was called 'bang-bang' by editors and was a synthesis of the old dime novel heroics and the terse Hemingwayesque writing style. ... H. P. Lovecraft could not have been more ill-suited for the new trend if it had required him to write in Esperanto" (Murray "Lovecraft" 116). Of this style, Lovecraft said, "I can no longer be satisfied with the glib, machine-clipped type of tale which editors demand – & unfortunately there is no likelihood of editors ever being satisfied with the kind of story I now write" (Lovecraft *Selected IV* 24). Only one collaboration by Lovecraft – "The Trap" written with Henry S. Whitehead – ever made it into *Strange Tales*, and that was uncredited. However, Lovecraft still rejected the popular mode of writing that he also saw appearing in *Weird Tales*:

> I know surely a dozen or more followers of the magazine [*Weird Tales*] who would certainly not continue to follow it if its contents uniformly represented the lifeless, mechanical, stock-figure, diagrammed type of hack-work so dearly beloved by the Eyrie-bombarding proletariat – and that dozen can scarcely be altogether unrepresentative. The trouble is, that the readers who do the most letter-writing – in eagerness to publicise themselves – tend to reflect a stratum of taste distinctly lower than that of the best (and by no means negligible) part of the magazine's clientele.

(Lovecraft *Selected IV* 322)

Meanwhile, friends and correspondents of Lovecraft such as Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth, and Robert Bloch appeared more frequently in *Weird Tales* than he did himself, and several proposed new pulps such as *Galaxy*, which accepted Lovecraft's work, never manifested (Murray "Lovecraft" 117). Lovecraft's revision of Hazel Heald's "The Man of Stone" appeared in Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* in 1932. Indeed, he ended up in *Weird Tales* more often as a ghostwriter for aspiring creatives such as Hazel Heald and Adolphe de Castro than under his own name (Murray "Lovecraft" 122). Again, this had an impact on Lovecraft's psyche and on his writing:

> I have virtually abandoned the idea of attempting professional fiction contribution. The repeated rebuffs I receive from capricious asses like Wright, Babbitesque dolts like that drivelling Clayton, and conventional namby-pamby's like Shiras of Putnam's have about paralysed me into a helpless and disgusted inarticulateness; so that I resolved some time ago to chuck the whole loathsome mess and return to the purely non-professional bases of the pre-1923 days, when I wrote spontaneously and without expectation of marketing. (Lovecraft *Selected IV* 27 – 28)

The 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion of narrow-interest pulp magazines, largely from Street & Smith: *Gangster Stories, Spicy Detective Stories, Underworld Love, Ranch Romances, Courtroom Stories, Fire Fighters*, and even *Submarine Stories* and *Zepplin Stories* (Murray "Lovecraft" 122). Lovecraft complained, "I wouldn't be in the least surprised to see *Undertaking Stories* or *True Plumber's Tales* – to say nothing of *Garbage-Collecting Adventures* & *Real Newsboy Mysteries* – on the stands any day now" (Lovecraft *Selected III* 247). Specialized fiction magazines were now multiplying and entering narrow fields that excluded Lovecraft's writing

style – including the science fiction genre. The United States saw the "gadget" and "space opera" adventure story take precedence in the new science fiction-specific magazines introduced during this period. In addition to *Weird Tales* (1923) and *Amazing Stories* (1926), *Science Wonder Stories* (1929), *Astounding Stories of Super Science* (1930), *Marvel Science Stories* (1938), and *Science Fiction* (1939) all made appearances during this time. Some critics assert that while drawing much reader attention to science fiction, this trend toward genre-specific magazines also had the negative impact of "ghettoizing" science fiction rather than maintaining the former stature it had enjoyed as "literature" published in more mainstream magazines.[xviii] Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss, in particular, asserts that "the segregation of science fiction into magazines designed especially for it, ghetto-fashion, guarantee[d] that various orthodoxies [such the requirements made by Gernsback] would be established inimical to a thriving literature" (Aldiss 209).[xix] And indeed, as early as 1927 Lovecraft wrote, "This market is gradually closing to me on account of the editor's deference to a clientele demanding simple, understandable ghostliness with plenty of 'human interest' & a brisk, concrete, cheerful, & non-atmospheric style" – the hallmark of the new specialized science fiction (Lovecraft *Selected II* 124).

But Lovecraft's troubles had only begun when the country – and the pulp industry – began feeling the effects of the Depression. By 1933, Will Murray explains, "Author payment rates dropped. Circulations plummeted. Magazines, even whole chains, expired, some virtually overnight" (Murray "Lovecraft" 123).

Writers were paid as little as ½ of one cent at the height of the Depression, and

Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, in particular, took to paying authors only upon

publication, rather than on acceptance. The 20-cent cover price, too, became a

hardship on readers, many of whom were younger people, and so circulation

dropped rapidly. The Clayton chain killed *Strange Tales* and *Astounding Stories*,

while other magazines changed owners several times, and by the mid-1930s only

a handful like *Argosy*, *Adventure*, and *Short Stories* remained. "All over the

nation, men and women were thrown out of work," Murray recounts. "With

jobs scarce, many of them took to less traditional ways of earning a living. Quite

a number who, had there not been a depression, would have remained in

business or industry looked to the perpetually story-hungry magazine field as a

way to make money" (Murray "Lovecraft" 123). Among the new writers were

names such as Raymond Chandler, Lester Dent, and Walter B. Gibson. This

flood of fresh writers revitalized the pulp story, but at the expense of many

established writers:

> While the pulps of the 1930s are sometimes justifiably criticized as garish,
> sensational, and juvenile – this is the era when they became known as the
> "Bloody Pulps" – they also became more vital. … As new talent with
> boundless energy entered the field, older pulp writers were pushed out.
> Many of the titans of the all-fiction magazine era, like Edgar Rice
> Burroughs and J. Allan Dunn, unwilling to accept the reduced word-rates
> and unable to retool their somewhat archaic styles, fell by the wayside.
> Only the prolific thrived. No one dreamed that H. P. Lovecraft, quite
> literally at the height of his creative expression, would become one of
> those pulp casualties. (Murray "Lovecraft" 123)

Astounding reappeared after a brief hiatus in 1933, but when its weird

slant quickly gave way to science fiction, Lovecraft wrote it off as another lost

market (Murray "Lovecraft" 123). However, in 1935 *Astounding* accepted

Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* as well as "The Shadow Out of

Time," and Wright accepted "The Thing on the Doorstep" and "The Haunter of

the Dark" for *Weird Stories*. Visionary Press also released Lovecraft's first true

book, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. With this relative success came a reaffirmation

on Lovecraft's part of his core ideals as a writer: "What is valued & insisted

upon by commercial editors is precisely what has no place whatever in authentic

literary expression. Whoever consents to aim for the tawdry effects demanded

by commerce, is deliberately checking & perhaps permanently injuring his

ability" (Lovecraft *Selected V* 327). Furthermore, Lovecraft asserted that "The

commercial or financial side of fiction is of course simply ridiculous to me. I am

no garage mechanic or merchant tailor to use materials of literature in an

occupation not only alien but antagonistic to literature" (Lovecraft *Selected V* 347

– 348).

However, by the beginning of 1937 – the final months of his life –

Lovecraft was again reduced to sending his unsold stories to non-paying

fanzines (Murray "Lovecraft" 127). Lovecraft died in March of 1937 of intestinal

cancer. Only two years later, Street & Smith launched *Unknown*, which proved to

be "literate, iconoclastic, and unconventional," featuring the experimental

fantasy of many of the *Weird Tales* writers. The editor, John Campbell, who also

edited *Astounding*, maintained a humanistic outlook on how science fiction

should be approached. Campbell promoted quality science fiction by steering

away from the technically accurate fiction of Gernsback, and the scientist-

adventurer heroes of writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs. He looked for a

polished, psychologically developed science fiction, dealing with a more diverse

and socially relevant content. Brian Aldiss notes that "he forced his writers to

think much harder about what they were trying to say, and clamped down on

Gosh-wowery" (Aldiss 227). By doing so, Campbell provided a synthesis of the

previous modes of science fiction available to writers – the "scientific romance"

and later "space opera" or "gadget" science fiction – and extracted a higher

caliber of work from his writers. Campbell focused on smoothing out rough

stylistic problems, such as huge expository passages that stopped the story, and

encouraged socially-minded science fiction, emphasizing character development

rather than the fast-paced plot movement of previous adventure stories. With

this push, Campbell "discovered" many of the writers that would form the core

of the new "Golden Age" of science fiction to follow – Isaac Asimov, Robert

Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, and Theodore Sturgeon, for example – and it was this

group that reconceived what science fiction was to become. But even in the

midst of this wholesale reimagining of American science fiction, Campbell

specified:

> I do not want old-fashioned, 19th century writing, the kind that has
> burdened fantasy fiction steadily in *Weird Tales*. I do not want unpleasant
> gods and godlings with penchants for vivisection, and nude and
> beauteous maidens to be sacrificed. I do not want reams of phoney
> atmosphere. I do not want the kind of stuff Lovecraft doted on. He was
> immensely liked – by the small clique that read *Weird* regularly. It still
> wasn't good writing. (quoted in Williamson 5)[xx]

After Lovecraft's death, *Weird Tales* reprinted every possible Lovecraft

story it could – including almost every story Farnsworth Wright had rejected

during Lovecraft's lifetime (Murray "Lovecraft" 129). And soon Arkham House

was founded by August Derleth to print collections of his fiction, poetry, essays,

and correspondence. According to Will Murray, "The ultimate irony of H. P.

Lovecraft the writer was that he was just as much of an outsider – even an

outcast – in the very fiction arena that, curiously, both nourished and starved his

creativity as he was in everyday life" (Murray "Lovecraft" 130). Lovecraft

scholar S. T. Joshi voices a similar sentiment, saying:

> Aside from the incidental vagaries and prejudices of individual critics, the
> essential reasons for [Lovecraft's] unpopularity are perhaps these: firstly,
> Lovecraft, despite his frequent borrowings of concepts and styles from
> other writers, was fundamentally a highly original writer; secondly, his
> style was not at all like that of his contemporaries, tending to reflect both
> the classically correct Georgian and the sober and precise style such as
> that found in scientific journals; thirdly, the weird tale has, until very
> modern times, not generally been regarded as a legitimate form of
> writing; and fourthly, Lovecraft's publishing in the pulp magazines of his
> day and, later, the championing of his work by the fans of the pulps
> caused him to appear a most dubious sort of literary figure. (Joshi
> "Lovecraft Criticism" 20)

This is the cultural framework Lovecraft found himself attempting to

navigate as a professional science fiction writer whose most productive period

was the later half of the 1920s and first half of the next decade – this was a

culture whose literature took an approach that was triumphant over the

universe, that privileged plot-based adventure narratives, and that insisted upon

plausible scientific explanation and foregrounded new inventions for the

duration of his productive artistic life. However, Lovecraft's writing was very

different from this ideal – he focused on macabre tales that emphasized character development and social themes that rejected modernity, thus positioning himself as an outsider in his own field, which wouldn't accept this style of science fiction wholeheartedly, even under Campbell's influence. In this social and literary climate, Lovecraft saw his fiction as being too "uncompromisingly noncommercial for the popular magazines, and yet unworthy for hardcover preservation as serious macabre literature," according to James Turner (Lovecraft *Selected IV* xxx).

In providing inspiration for the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG's setting, characters, and atmosphere, Lovecraft's literature acts as a jumping-off place for the designers of the roleplaying game; the RPG designers flesh out the game with a formalized rules system, and the literature gives a ready-made context for it. This pregenerated background afforded by a literature-based setting is a boon to roleplaying games not only in that it does much of the work of writing the game ahead of time, and provides a creative focus on which to expand, but also because using the literature as a creative base fulfills that wish on the part of the readers of a book, or the audience of a movie, to take the story beyond the ending the original writer provided. "But what happens next!" readers exclaim, and roleplaying games allow them to continue the story themselves. In this formulation, the intellectual property of the literature becomes a significant draw for the roleplaying game, bringing the players into a game world that is already

familiar to them – immediate identification is one intended result of appealing to brand recognition, after all. Thus the roleplaying game industry continues to release RPG settings based upon popular media phenomena such as *Star Trek, Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* for instance, as well as literary works like Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles,* William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,* and, of course, H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos.

However, E. Gary Gygax, one of the original creators of *Dungeons & Dragons,* asserts that "One of the problems with a game using a novelist-authored setting is the basis of the underlying work. That is, the environment for the game must pretty well meet that of the book(s), and what happens in the game must more or less reflect the story environment. This seems too limiting to me to use as a basis for a vital RPG" (theonering.net). Yet, despite this *caveat, Dungeons & Dragons'* basis in a variety of popular literary works, including Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and in common folklore provides a mutually understood, communal framework of shared experiences and knowledge for the gaming groups playing this game. This basis effects a collective construction of meaning; in a social sense, players have encountered the creatures and the setting before.

In the case of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, the designers have stayed unusually true to the literature as a creative base, but rather than finding this limiting, the game revels in the grand scale Lovecraft addressed in his work. *Call of Cthulhu*

has won dozens of game awards, and in 1996 was elected to the Academy of

Adventure Game Designers' Hall of Fame. One reason for this is that the

atmosphere that Lovecraft so labored to evoke is of central concern in the

roleplaying game. Even the back cover text suggests the scope of Lovecraft's

work:

> The Great Old Ones ruled the Earth aeons before the incidental rise of
> man. Remains of their cyclopean cities can still be found on the remote
> islands of the Pacific, buried amid the shifting sands of vast deserts, and in
> the frozen wastes of the polar extremes. Originally they came to this
> world from the stars. Now they sleep – some deep within the earth and
> others beneath the sea. When the Stars Are Right they will rise, and once
> again walk the earth. (Peterson back cover)

In fact, the social themes that were out of popular favor in the 1920s and 1930s

are the very points that translate best into the roleplaying game based on

Lovecraft's stories fifty years later, highlighting the role of the seminal writer in

the creation of RPGs. These themes include Lovecraft's preoccupation with the

past, his "cosmic-minded" approach, and the search for truth, among others.

Lovecraft's sense of identification and fascination with times past is a

primary feature of both his own stories and the roleplaying game based on them,

for example. Lovecraft asserted that "I've always had a subconscious feeling that

everything since the eighteenth century is unreal and illusory – a sort of

grotesque nightmare or caricature. People seem to me more or less like ironic

shadows or phantoms – as if I could make them (together with all their modern

houses and inventions and perspectives) dissolve into the aether by merely

pinching myself awake and shouting at them" (Lovecraft *Selected IV* xxxi).

Brought up in elegance as a member of an eminent Providence family, over the course of his lifetime Lovecraft experienced a gradual impoverishment. As a result of this, throughout his life Lovecraft also felt a sharp longing to return to the idyllic circumstances of his childhood. This desire manifests itself in his writing as a consistent preoccupation with history and a predilection for British spellings and archaic word usage, for instance. Lovecraft himself wrote that "Change is the enemy of everything really worth cherishing. It is the remover of landmarks, the destroyer of all which is homelike and comforting, and the constant symbol and reminder of decay and death. It is change which makes one old before his time by snatching away everything he has known, and substituting a new environment to which he can never become adjusted" (Lovecraft *Selected IV* xxxi – xxxii). This is the kind of intense reaction that critics like James Turner have noted Lovecraft unfailingly exhibited in response to any apparent challenge to the "genteel New England tradition" (Lovecraft *Selected IV* xxxi). August Derleth and Donald Wandrei also comment on what they call Lovecraft's "autistic" attitude toward modernity and the world at large, which was apparent (according to them) in his self-imposed seclusion in Providence, where he felt his aristocratic heritage most strongly. Outside of a brief two-year residence in New York, Lovecraft spent his entire life in the town of his birth, and what travel he did undertake outside of these environs focused on antiquarian sites in places like Maine, Philadelphia, Quebec, St. Augustine, Charlotte, New Orleans, Salem, and Nantucket (Petersen 107). Derleth and

Wandri assert that Lovecraft "became increasingly aware of the social and technological changes taking place in the post-war era of the 1920s, the mechanization and urbanization of civilization, the passing of the old agrarian order. He scorned these developments, their apologists and interpreters, the machine culture represented by the intellectual avant-garde of modern art" (Lovecraft *Selected II* xxiii – xxiv). History became Lovecraft's retreat from the changing world around him.

The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG re-presents this duality in Lovecraft – his identification with a previous era culturally and morally opposed, as he saw it, to his own modern time – by presenting players with the option to set their campaign in either the United States of the present day, the 1920s, or the "more genteel epoch" of 1890s England, as the game's designers describe it (Petersen 24); this last choice is depicted in more detail in the *Cthulhu by Gaslight* sourcebook (Chaosium, 1986). The 1890s option conveys to a modern audience the aristocratic, Victorian sensibilities Lovecraft was drawn to, and evokes the sense of a culture not yet "tainted" by the industrialization of the early twentieth century – indeed, the core rulebooks lists prices for such vintage items as satin smoking jackets, kid button boots, and china silk parasols. The year 1890 is also the year of Lovecraft's birth – thus the game presents a setting in the childhood of wealth and privilege that Lovecraft could never return to, his genteel upbringing slipping further and further away throughout his lifetime. The game itself is also usually set in Arkham, Massachusetts – Lovecraft's fictional point of

departure for classic stories such as *At the Mountains of Madness*, "The Dunwich Horror," and "The Shadow Out of Time" – which in many ways parallels the town of Lovecraft's upbringing, Providence, with its sense of history, decadence, and decay becoming a source of horror. Indeed, in Lovecraft's tales and in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, the "uncanny" – often defined as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud "The Uncanny" 220) – is one of the strongest literary elements in use. According to Freud, the uncanny is "nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (Freud "The Uncanny" 394). The familiar buildings and people of Lovecraft's longed-for childhood in this way became the focus of his uncanny tales once they and the life of gentility and affluence he once led were no longer accessible to him, and are subsequently reflected in the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game.

Another literary theme common to Lovecraft's work and the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG conflates his fascination with the past and his interest in science fiction. Beyond the love of history found in Lovecraft's settings is a sense of the oppressive quality of antiquity; the awesomeness of time and space that itself confirms man's insignificance. Derleth and Wandrei reflect on this, saying that Lovecraft "looked at the pinpoint of the world, the ephemeral motes of people, as from an utmost abyss of space far outside the universe, and from a remote suspension beyond the beginning or end of time" (Lovecraft *Selected II* xxiv).

This quality of "cosmic-mindedness," as it's been called by scholars such as Derleth and Wandrei, is embodied most apparently in the forms of his pantheon of alien creatures.

In his letters, Lovecraft claimed to embrace a philosophy of "mechanistic materialism" influenced by thinkers such as Ernst Haeckel, Hugh Elliot, George Santayana, Joseph Wood Krutch, Friedrich Nietzche, and Albert Einstein. From this deterministic perspective, the world, its inhabitants, and all the material of the cosmos are aggregations of atoms organized by the natural laws of science. The universe is inherently orderly, according to Lovecraft – it is a "cosmos of pattern'd energy" as he called it in his letters: "The ultimate reality of space is clearly a complex churning of energy of which the human mind can never form any even approximate picture" (Lovecraft *Selected II* 262). The vast gulfs of both space and time that man can never fully comprehend necessarily stimulate an objectivity of outlook that recognizes the insignificance of the human race. In a letter to Rheinhart Kleiner in 1921, Lovecraft states: "Determinism – what you call Destiny – rules inexorably; though not exactly in the personal way you seem to fancy. We have no specific destiny against which we can fight … whatever we do is unconsciously the inevitable product of Nature rather than of our own volition. If an act correspond with our wish, it is Nature that made the wish, and ensured its fulfillment" (Quoted in Mosig 105). All human effort is utterly futile, according to Lovecraft; man is inconsequential when compared to the abyss of space and time. Also in a letter to J. F. Morton in 1929, Lovecraft asserts:

> I am *not a pessimist* but an *indifferentist* – that is, I don't make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process. ... [The cosmos doesn't] give a damn one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy. (Lovecraft *Selected II* 39; original italics)

Amidst this ordered, yet incomprehensibly vast universe, it is chaos that is the true locus of terror in Lovecraft's stories; "A source of horror in his stories is the hint that the universe may in fact operate randomly after all – that all is Ultimate Chaos," suggests Steven Mariconda (25). The "gods" of the Cthulhu Mythos, in particular, embody both Lovecraft's sense of cosmic-mindedness, and the horror of chaos. Lovecraft used the words "pantheon" and "gods" to convey the utter alienness and absolute power of these creatures who act totally without regard for human existence, rather than invoking them in a religious sense. As Robert Price explains:

> Extradimensional and extraterrestrial entities are called "gods and devils" by humans *who cannot understand* them and so either worship their greatness as divinity or exorcise their threat to human security and piece of mind by calling them devils. The Old Ones are as indifferent to puny humanity as humans are to insects. But since their greater power is either coveted or feared, humans worship or anathematize them. (Price 249; original italics)

Lovecraft's mechanistic materialism left him devoid of any belief in religion or the supernatural; his alien beings suggest the true limitlessness of time and space in their incomprehensible age and the distance of their origin, rather than seriously positing the existence of a new pantheon. In creating these beings, Lovecraft shows that he "clearly perceived man's abysmal insignificance and

meaninglessness in the vast mechanistic and purposeless cosmos, governed by blind, impersonal ('mindless') streams of force," contends Dirk Mosig (105). In *At the Mountains of Madness*, for example, the carvings of the Old Ones that Lovecraft's explorers find in Antarctica reveal the city there to be many million years old, and its founders to be even more ancient: To them, "mere dinosaurs were new and almost brainless objects – the builders of the city were wise and old, and had left certain traces in rocks even then laid down well-nigh a thousand million years ... rocks laid down before the true life of earth had advanced beyond plastic groups of cells ... rocks laid down before the true life of earth had existed at all" (Lovecraft *At the Mountains* 59). These creatures created not only the city and all earth-life, but also the horrific shoggoths – shapeless, "protoplasmic masses" that are capable of molding their tissues into any formation, making them ideal slaves until they revolted against their masters. The shoggoths are uncontrollable, unshaped, unintelligible beings that only imitate the organs and speech of other beings. These are "blasphemous" creatures, created though the madness of the Old Ones rather than being born of natural forces, and existing outside of the laws that nature imposes. Here the potential for pure chaos inherent in Lovecraft's pantheon takes material form. No higher god rules over Lovecraft's horrific pantheon – not even the laws of nature itself, as can be seen in the creation of the shoggoths. The vast entities of the Cthulhu Mythos in this way underscore the inconsequentiality of mankind that is representative of Lovecraft's cosmic-mindedness, as their actions are

totally without regard for human existence, and imply an insidious chaos that is itself horrific in its disdain of natural law.

The defeat of time and the horrors that result when time is confounded or disordered is another source of horror in Lovecraft's fiction. This generally manifests itself as the theme of unwholesome survival and degeneracy: often in these stories, beings outlive their "rightful" existence, creating an encroaching past that can reach forward to find a helpless humanity even in the present. For example, decadent rural communities like Dunwich, as depicted in "The Lurking Fear," show a tendency toward degeneration. The people in this town are described as "simple animals … gently descending the evolutionary scale because of their unfortunate ancestry and stultifying isolation" (Lovecraft *Dagon* 186). But true horror is stirred by the interference in this process by supernatural beings. For example, the Deep Ones, who breed with humans to continue their species in "The Shadow over Innsmouth," are just one instance of an alien race dwelling on the hidden underside of civilization at the expense of humankind; the creatures that result from these horrific unions are described as an abnormal combination of men and some fish-frog being:

> Their predominant colour was a greyish-green, though they had white bellies. They were mostly shiny and slippery, but the ridges of their backs were scaly. Their forms vaugely suggested the anthropoid, while their heads were the heads of fish, with prodigious bulging eyes that never closed. At the sides of their necks were palipitating gills, and their long paws were webbed. They hopped irregularly, sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four. … Their croaking, baying voices, clearly used for articulate speech, held all the dark shades of expression which their staring faces lacked. (Lovecraft *The Dunwich Horror* 361)

Terror comes when the narrator discovers his own great-grandmother was one of these creatures, and that he himself has the "Innsmouth look" and will soon become one of them, as well: "Some frightful influence, I felt, was seeking gradually to drag me out of the world of wholesome life into unnamable abysses of blackness and alienage" (Lovecraft *The Dunwich Horror* 366). The "white ape" discovered in the Congo that Sir Wade Jermyn takes to wife in "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family" is another illustration of hereditary degeneracy and racism, or "racialism" as some Lovecraft scholars refer to this theme; this nauseous creature was "a filthy whitish gorilla thing with sharp yellow fangs and matted fur. It was the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground; the embodiment of all the snarling chaos and grinning fear that lurk behind life" (Lovecraft *Dagon* 199). Again, the narrator discovers that he himself is the progeny of this creature of unnatural chaos, and cannot bear to live with the knowledge. In "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," Joseph Curwen – a worker of the occult who did not seem to age during his lifetime – is reincarnated by taking over the body of his own distant progeny, Charles Ward. Dr. Willet, who discovers the switch, declares Curwen a "a madness out of time and a horror from beyond the spheres." He goes on, saying "It is no business of mine if any man seeks duality; *provided he has any right to exist at all, and provided he does not destroy what called him out of space*" (Lovecraft *At the Mountains* 232; original italics). Similarly, in "The Thing

on the Doorstep," the wizard Ephraim Waite possesses the body of his own daughter Asenath (who herself has the "Innsmouth look"), and then goes about taking over that of Asenath's husband, Edward Derby, to extend his own life; the narrator asserts that this creature filled him with a "dim feeling of blasphemous alienage and ineffable cosmic hideousness" (Lovecraft *The Dunwich Horror* 198). In all these instances, the natural progression of time, which necessarily brings one race low and raises another up in its place, is confounded by the unnatural, becoming a source of horror. The past becomes a threat to the present when allowed to propagate itself beyond its time, as it imposes an unwholesome, "blasphemous" disorder on the natural world.

Lovecraft's cosmic-mindedness and focus on horror as the result of chaos overwhelming the natural order can be seen in the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game, as well. After all, the game claims that playing *Call of Cthulhu* is "a way to portray Lovecraft's dark philosophy of a humanity which can exist but not surpass" (Petersen 24). In the RPG, Mythos creatures of cosmic proportions, such as the Old Ones and the shoggoths, exist alongside those examples of timeless degeneracy such as the Deep Ones, Joseph Curwen, Edward Derby, and Asenath Waite Derby. All are given character stats – and thus life in the game world – in the core rulebook. As in Lovecraft's stories, "the majority of other-world monstrosities are so terrible and often so invulnerable that choosing open combat almost guarantees a gruesome end for an investigator. Even the merest glimpse of some of the macabre horrors can send one into screaming insanity"

(Petersen 26). The difference is that in the game, it is no longer the narrator who is at risk of being supplanted by some being attempting to outlive its rightful existence, or thoughtlessly destroyed by a greater creature spawned of the vastness of time and space. Instead, it is the reader himself who is in danger of what lurks in the depths of timelessness, since it is the player who faces the unspeakable chaos of Lovecraft's tales in the guise of his oblivious player character.

And finally, Lovecraft's fiction centers on the search for truth and reality. The universe is impersonal and withdrawn, and much larger than the human mind can comprehend. This realization – the heart of the theme of forbidden knowledge running through Lovecraft's work – is appalling and yet thrilling at the same time. In "The Silver Key," Lovecraft asserts that man can hardly bear the realization that "the blind cosmos grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something and from something back to nothing again, neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness" (Lovecraft *At the Mountains* 409). The opening paragraph of "The Call of Cthulhu" also verifies the danger in uncovering forbidden knowledge of this kind:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

(Lovecraft *The Dunwich Horror* 125)

The existential terror that comes with forbidden knowledge provokes horror, despair, and consequent insanity, as can be seen is Lovecraft's unreliable narrators whose experiences drive them mad or whose madness provokes waking nightmares. For example, as with many of Lovecraft's protagonists, Edward Derby is committed to the Arkham Sanitarium toward the end of his struggle to keep Ephraim Waite from possessing his body. The narrator claims he almost wept "to hear his wild shrieks, awesome whispers, and dreadful, droning repetitions of such phrases as 'I had to do it – I had to do it ... it'll get me ... it'll get me ... down there ... down there in the dark. ... Mother, mother! Dan! Save me ... save me ...'" (Lovecraft *The Dunwich Horror* 297). Ignorance, then, is man's only defense against an implacably uncaring universe and his own insignificance in the cosmic scale of things – remaining unaware of the unknown is a kind of mercy in the face of forbidden knowledge, as it allows humankind to maintain the semblance of well being. Illusory surface appearances thus become a veil that protects the fragile human psyche; things are not always as they seem, since that outward seeming often masks a deeper and more terrible reality. Joseph Curwen and Ephraim Waite disguise themselves in the flesh of their respective hosts, while the Deep Ones pose as mundane townsfolk until their change into creatures of horror begins. Horror resides beneath these mundane *façades*.

But the confusion of reality – though providing the temporary shelter of

ignorance – must ultimately produce the chaos that spawns horror. Dreams, fantasy, and illusion intermix with the real world in Lovecraft's fiction. Fictional, yet plausible, locations like Arkham and Innsmouth stand alongside the legendary plain of Leng and the mythical R'lyeh, while Harvard University gains the distinction of possessing a copy of the blasphemous *Necronomicon* in its library – a tome which, like the other Mythos books, when read causes "all that we know as true [to become] like shadow. The burning power of a greater and more horrible reality seizes the soul" (Petersen 71).[xxi] Fantasy towns and places co-exist and overlap with factual ones. Travelers cross over into dream worlds, and back again. History, real-world myth, and synthetic mythos merge into one, obscuring the truth of their own existence. Amidst this confusion, there is at best an ambiguous distinction between dreaming and reality – the world of deep dream may be as real as, or more real than, the waking world, and the shared dream-world of humankind holds awesome secrets about the ultimate nature of things. In "The Silver Key," for instance, the narrator notes that Randolph Carter "had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value the one above the other" (Lovecraft *At the Mountains* 408). The ideas for many of Lovecraft's works came from his own typically vivid dreams. When incorporated into his work, for Lovecraft dreams become "imaginative windows through which the mysteries of time and space may be spied" (Cannon 25). In this way, dreams become one method by which

humans discover hidden knowledge. For instance, Lovecraft's sense of the

fantastic is brought to life with rich language in stories like "The Dream-Quest of

Unknown Kadath," which highlights the confusion between the dream and real

world as its protagonist "travels" in dream to the city of his imagining:

> Sick with longing for those glittering sunset streets and cryptical hill lanes
> among ancient tile roofs, nor able sleeping or waking to drive them from
> his mind, Carter resolved to go with bold entreaty whither no man had
> gone before, and dare the icy deserts through the dark to where unknown
> Kadath, veiled in cloud and crowned with unimagined stars, holds secret
> and nocturnal the onyx castle of the Great Ones. (Lovecraft *At the
> Mountains* 307)

Lovecraft's use of dreams works to obscure and confuse reality, again effecting

the suspension of natural law; and this manifestation of chaos also provokes the

supernatural horror for which the Mythos is known. It is the dream city of

unknown Kadath that harbors the "crawling chaos Nyarlathotep – horror of

infinite shapes and dread soul and messenger of the Other Gods" who pursues

Randolph Carter to the black void on the edge of reality and dream (Lovecraft *At

the Mountains* 397). It is the confusion of the real – the introduction of chaos into

the natural order – that produces horror.

In the face of all this horror, it has been said by critics that Lovecraft's

characters are less than lifelike, and usually wooden and stereotyped. They are

highly educated men, characters "not likely to be taken in by imposture or be

given to hallucinations, their soberly narrated accounts impel reader belief even

as the tale becomes increasingly fantastic and bizarre" (Joshi *Subtler Magick* 262).

In response to these criticisms, Joshi asserts that Lovecraft's characters are

symbols of mankind itself, alone in the face of the alienating effects of an unfeeling cosmos. Consider that Lovecraft asserted the following late in life:

> Individuals and their fortunes within natural law move me very little. They are all momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another common nothingness. Only the cosmic framework itself – or such individuals as symbolise principles (or defiances of principles) of the cosmic framework – can gain a deep grip on my imagination and set it to work creating. In other words, the only "heroes" I can write about are *phenomena*. (Quoted in Joshi *Subtler Magick* 261; original italics)

For Lovecraft, characters are vehicles of alienation and isolation, witnesses to the cosmic horror around them.

When Lovecraft's work is translated into a roleplaying game, however, the role of these characters is necessarily changed. As Lovecraft admits, "although meaning nothing *in the cosmos as a whole*, mankind obviously means a good deal *to itself*" (Lovecraft *Selected V* 241; original italics). When brought into Lovecraft's fictional world, players genuinely identify with their characters – ordinary people who encounter the terrifying forces of the Cthulhu Mythos – so that oftentimes the threat of harm to a character's life is more frightening than the declared horror elements of the game. As roleplaying industry professional Phil Masters notes about *Call of Cthulhu*:

> On the one hand, the game [*Call of Cthulhu*] and the scenarios published for it make diligent (and usually competent) efforts to evoke an authentic air of fear, and mostly pay close attention to Lovecraft's paranoid intellectual nihilism. However, because Lovecraft's universe is so implacably uncaring, and his monsters are so inhuman and powerful, the game simply could not function if the player-characters confronted the main opposition directly with any great frequency. Thus, in many scenarios, the Lovecraftian elements are pushed into the shadows – becoming, in fact, background motifs. (Masters 69)

Instead of confronting evil head-on in combat, as is true for most RPGs, the

investigators that players take the roles of in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG – the

parapsychologists, journalists, antiquarians, or private investigators that make

up the adventuring party – "seek to determine both the nature of the threat they

face and the correct counter-measures to bring against it before they are actually

obligated to confront any horror" (Masters 69). The threat of harm is enough, in

most cases, to provoke horror on the part of the players, whereas actually facing

the inestimable power of Lovecraft's creations would be sheer suicide.[xxii] Joshi

points out that Lovecraft felt sharply "the utter futility of all human effort in light

of the vastness of the cosmos and the inconsequentiality of mankind in it" (Joshi

"Lovecraft's Ethical" 27). In the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game, the

investigators – like Lovecraft's characters – are witnesses to the cosmic horror

around them because of their own weakness and insignificance in comparison,

but in the game they are more than symbols of mankind itself; they become

active opponents of the forces of the Cthulhu Mythos. The game's web site

elaborates:

> It is inevitable that as our knowledge increases and we explore the last
> frontiers of our world we will glimpse terrible truths. We were never
> alone in the universe. In fact, we are not this planet's dominant species.
> Here among us, there be dragons.
>
> There are fools who will worship such unspeakable entities as gods in
> hopes of gaining power over their fellow men. Some of these disciples, in
> their insanity, will seek to release their dark masters upon our
> unsuspecting world.
>
> Yet there is room [for] hope in these times of darkness. As we steadfast
> men and women of science, learning, and faith stumble upon the truth,
> some of us will choose to fight the darkness. These brave and lonely

investigators of things-that-should-not-be must remain ever vigilant. Searching for evidence of these horrible beings and their mortal followers. Once we find them, we must stop them by any means necessary. Should we fail in our duty, we will at least go down fighting for the greater good. (Chaosium Web Site)

Though Lovecraft portrayed the human species as "a sense-chained race of inquirers on a microscopic earth-dot ... faced by the black, unfathomable gulph of the Outside," the roleplaying game goes beyond these limitations to empower the characters in their role as investigators (Lovecraft *Selected III* 295).

One of the real innovations of the *Call of Cthulhu* game from other RPGs, though – the Sanity trait – mimics the refrain of the Mythos that "there are things man ought not to know" by quantifying a character's emotional and mental stability; a character's Sanity measures "flexibility and resilience to emotional trauma" (Petersen 69). The game's primary designer, Sandy Petersen, explains its use in play, saying that *Call of Cthulhu* player characters "typically start sane and mentally competent. In the course of play, however, they confront knowledge and entities of alien horror and terrifying implication. Such experiences shake and shatter belief in the normal world" (Petersen 69). The more the characters are exposed to the unknowable forces of the Mythos, the more tenuous their grip on reality becomes, and the lower their Sanity points; a character whose Sanity dips too far may suffer a fainting or screaming fit, hysterics, or even catatonia or amnesia, among other possible results. In this way, the soul-shattering consequences of self-knowledge are given a game mechanic in the game.

In his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft writes, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft *Dagon* 365). It is this fear that the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game is based upon, using Lovecraft's recurrent, overlapping literary themes – his preoccupation with the past, sense of "cosmic-mindedness," and search for truth, as discussed here – to form "a sort of conceptual web, interlacing [around] … the idea that self-knowledge, or discovery of one's position in the real fabric of the universe, is psychically ruinous," as Donald Burleson puts it (136 – 137). Lovecraft's work touches the genres of science fiction, dream literature, pure fantasy, mystery, and terror; it is border-blurring at its very heart, and in its incarnation as a RPG it stretches its reach further. Lovecraft's themes are all translated true to form in the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game; they are worked into the game in a complex tapestry of plot, setting, characterization, and atmosphere, rather than allowing excerpts from Lovecraft's Mythos to be used as descriptive text alone, and ultimately convey the same sense that man's position in the universe is "that of a meaningless speck adrift in the sea of stars" (Burleson 146).

As Lovecraft said, "The imaginative writer devotes himself to art in its most essential sense. … He is a painter of moods and mind-pictures – a capturer and amplifier of elusive dreams and fancies – a voyager into those unheard-of lands which are glimpsed through the veil of actuality but rarely, and only by the most sensitive. … He is the poet of twilight visions and childhood memories, but

sings only for the sensitive" (Quoted in Joshi *Subtler Magick* 268). This essence of Lovecraft's art also shines though in the roleplaying game inspired by his work, even today.

CHAPTER FOUR:
FANNING THE FLAMES OF AUTHORSHIP

The 1920s and 1930s marked a period of radical change and growth for the science fiction and fantasy genres. As a product of a society dealing with an increase in technology that soon became a part of everyday life, early science fiction was in part a reaction to both scientific and political change. Under the weight of this anxiety, and amid threats of ghettoization, economic disaster, and a limited conception of what science fiction could achieve as a literary form, science fiction prevailed to establish itself as an independent genre of writing, allowing for a tremendous expansion in its overall quality and fan following.

The participation of fans in the creation of literature increased especially during this time. The advent of pulp science fiction magazines allowed a new level of contact between writer and reader, and facilitated an unusual amount of spectator influence on the writing of the genre itself. In H. P. Lovecraft's case, for example, his seminal stories spawned a multitude of fictions and films by other writers after his death, which are directly based on his fantastical Cthulhu mythology. Through the work of Lovecraft's admirers and imitators – many of whom corresponded with Lovecraft during his lifetime – Lovecraft's body of fiction continues to push into new realms of literary pursuit and intertextuality even today, though it also sometimes suffers from the reinterpretations given it by subsequent writers. Roleplaying games that are based on literature can be seen as a kind of reinterpretation of the original work by the seminal writer's

fans, as well. And the fan community and circle of writers that grew around writers like Lovecraft is paralleled by the interaction of fans with modern-day roleplaying games such as *Call of Cthulhu*, for example. But this fan interaction goes beyond the letters columns and fanzines of the original science fiction fan community, using new technology such as the internet to further propagate itself.

Science fiction fandom came into being alongside the pulps of the early twentieth century. The pulp magazine's position as a mass-produced product targeted at the popular culture created an unprecedented connection with its fan base. The genre-specific pulps regularly offered up a fare of what was seen by some as escapism and shallow romance; they drew much reader attention, but also had the negative impact of relegating science fiction's reputation to the position of trashy "pulp," rather than maintaining the former stature it had enjoyed as "literature" published in more mainstream magazines under the "scientific romance" influence of writers such as Verne, Poe, and Wells. For instance, in a single issue of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (November 1934) were included advertisements for the "Prosager" prostate massager, the book *Strange Loves: A Study in Sexual Abnormalities*, a coupon for a catalog of "Books on Scientific Sexualia ... Exotically Illustrated Racial Arts of Love," a bottle of "Loving Drops" secret extract perfume, and a book titled *Sex, Harmony and Eugenics*. Ads such as these seem to support the idea that the science fiction pulp was positioned as a kind of scientific pornography – the very "trash" that the

pulps' detractors despised. To conservatives like Clement Greenberg, in an essay appearing in a 1939 issue of the *Partisan Review*, the pulps were "kitsch" on par with dime novels and tabloid journalism, which only "'looted,' 'watered down,' and 'debased' the richness of 'genuine' culture – serving up in its place 'mechanical' formulas, 'spurious' dreams, 'vicarious' experiences, and 'faked sensations.' It demanded of its customers neither their time not their attention, only their money" (summarized in Pells 337). Yet the stories included in the magazines tell a different story. In addition to using their focus on science "fact" as a way of legitimizing themselves in the face of accusations of immorality, the magazines often produced content with an ideological complexity not found in other genres; the works of H. P. Lovecraft, as discussed in Chapter Three, are evidence of this.

Present-day science fiction editor Lester Del Rey disputes the contention that the science fiction magazine of the 1930s was nothing more than a kind of cheap pulp, as well, despite the judgments of critics of the time. Del Ray observes that science fiction magazines had a positive effect on the genre in allowing "a single interest [to be] gathered in one place, and those possessing it were exposed to each other" (Del Rey 82). The mix of content found in the science fiction pulps attracted a large following as well as criticism, and organized fan support saw an increase during this time as a result. As science fiction author Brian Aldiss notes, "a devoted and enthusiastic readership is peculiar to science fiction, then and now. The fans founded their own publishing

houses, instituted their own international awards ... and organized their own

conventions on local, state, national, and international scales" (Aldiss 216). By

1932, *The Time Traveller* became the first printed fan magazine devoted to science

fiction, and by 1937 the Fantasy Amateur Press Association was formed to

distribute bulletins and fan publications to a larger circulation. Hugo Gernsback,

in particular, supported this fan community by founding The Science Fiction

League in 1934, as a way of increasing reader loyalty and boosting circulation,

and by adding a column called "Discussions" to *Amazing Stories* as a forum for

letters from readers (Del Rey 74). Indeed, Lovecraft himself was known to

publish letters in the columns of *The Argosy* and *All-Story* before publishing

professionally, and later received (not always good) feedback from his own

readers through forums like "The Eyrie" in *Weird Tales*. One *Astounding* reader,

for instance, wrote, "Why in the name of science fiction did you ever print such

as story as *At the Mountains of Madness* by Lovecraft? Are you in such dire straits

that you must print this kind of drivel?" (quoted in Murray "Lovecraft" 125).

These letters played a key part in the science fiction fan movement, as they often

listed the address of each reader, and in this way helped fans to locate others

living in the same area. They also allowed for an unprecedented communication

between writers and readers; many of Lovecraft's numerous correspondents

were "met" through the pages of the pulps, for example. Even the publishers of

the pulps felt the impact of readerly participation; the science fiction fans'

repeated complaints in these mid-1930s "discussions" regarding the awkward

use of science, the annoyance of reprints, and the shallowness of characters worked to provoke many of the changes John Campbell effected at the end of the decade.

The composition of the science fiction pulp fan base was also contributive to its growth. Science fiction fandom encompasses a range of professionals who consider themselves public intellectuals, if not actively involved in academics, and somewhat removed from the common populace because of their interest in science. Furthermore, the claim to intellectualism by science fiction was supported by several of the regular writers of *Amazing Stories* who held Ph.D.s (and displayed them prominently in their by-lines), and letters in the *Amazing Stories* "Discussions" section displaying selectively chosen letters from such places of academic esteem as Harvard University – it featured five British addresses in the February 1937 edition alone, for example. These attempts at academic pretension reinforced the rather elitist stance *Amazing Stories* and other science fiction pulps promoted regarding their own legitimacy due to their focus on science – maligning the fantasy approach in the process. When this construction of an academic *façade* is combined with the aforementioned near-pornographic ads included in the magazines, a wide-ranging middle-class appeal is created upon which to draw fans.

However, as science fiction fandom expanded, it faced growing pains. The New York chapter of Gernsback's Science Fiction League, at least, was plagued by internal squabbles as a direct result of the Depression. As Del Rey

summarizes, "this was a time when a large percentage of the young men of the nation were severely discontented with the lingering depression and the government's apparent inability to do anything about it. Few actually became communists, but many felt strong sympathies for a movement [such as science fiction fan clubs afforded] that seemed to preach brotherhood, propose solutions, and endorse all that was good in theory. Quite a few college students at the time joined the YCL – the Young Communist League" (Del Rey 79). Indeed, Gernsback actually threw a number of fans out the New York League for their "Communist" activities. In another New York fan enclave, a group of soon-to-be-prominent young people, including Isaac Asimov, Frederick Pohl, Cy Kornbluth, Judith Meril, James Blish, and Damon Knight, formed a left-wing writers' group called the "Futurians" in 1938 (Denning 225 – 226). They, too, displayed socialist tendencies that would affect the science fiction of the not-so-distant future; "some of the Futurians were strongly leftist in their beliefs," asserts Lester Del Rey. "Others – or at least, others associated with them – had the typical American fear of anything that smacked of being 'red.' They carried their beliefs over into their opinions of what science fiction should be and how clubs should be organized, and there was a fairly constant struggle for power among many of the New York fans" (Del Rey 79). These fan opinions, in turn, made their way into the letters columns of the science fiction pulps, and into private correspondence with some of the premier writers of the time. Radical ideologies clash again and again with more conservative approaches in these

letters.

The pulp discussion columns also positioned the science fiction magazine as the site of an invocation of symbol that promoted community. Robert and Helen Lynd note that a common reaction to the Depression was to invoke "popular slogans and images which gave the citizenry a spurious sense of unity and common purpose" (summarized in Pells 322). The voicing of fan response to the previous magazine issue's popular stories, then, was a form of collective experience; this was normally posited as constructive criticism with the intention of improving "our" magazine. In the November 1934 edition of *Amazing Stories*, for example, a regular reader wrote in the letters column, "I read your mag, or should I say Our?" Gernsback replied, "We are always glad when AMAZING STORIES is spoken of by a correspondent as 'our' magazine because we want you to like it so much that you will feel a property right in it," thus reinforcing the collective nature of the fan experience. This expression of community actually worked to bring readers together; as 1930s writer Thurman Arnold observed more generally, this sort of system of thought "raised morale, ministered to the 'emotional needs' of a given population, made 'each individual feel [that he was] an integral part of [a] group'" (quoted in Pells 324). In this way, science fiction fandom found a facilitative environment in the pulps of the 1920s and 1930s.

As some science fiction fans communicated with each other and the

writers featured in the pulps though letters columns, others took a more straightforward approach to establishing themselves in the science fiction community, either corresponding with writers directly – Lovecraft, for instance, wrote twenty or more letters a day from his home in Providence, many to friends, admirers, and *protegés*, and sometimes at a length of thirty or more typewritten pages each; these correspondents included Frank Belknap Long, James F. Morton, Elizabeth Toldridge, Maurice W. Moe, Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, Robert E. Howard, Woodburn Harris, and J. Vernon Shea, among others – or actually insinuating themselves into the work of their favorite writers. Just as Lovecraft once imitated the style of Machen, Dunsany, Blackwood, Bierce, and Poe, the writers who would become the Lovecraft Circle paid homage to Lovecraft by producing tales rooted in his works. Hundreds of stories based on the Cthulhu Mythos have been written by authors such as August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Clark Ashton Smith, Carl Jacobi, Joseph Payne Brennan, Hugh B. Cave, Henry Kuttner, Manly Wade Wellman, J. Ramsey Campbell, Brian Lumley, Richard L. Tierney, Lin Carter, Colin Wilson, and James Wade (Joshi "Lovecraft Criticism" 25). These works all have in common the conceit that the world was inhabited by an alien race that declines, but that lives on, ready to take possession of the earth again "when the stars are right." Author/publisher August Derleth coined the term "Cthulhu Mythos" after Lovecraft's death for that body of works by various writers that displayed a unity of plot dependent on the works of H. P. Lovecraft

– though Lovecraft had previously declined Derleth's suggestion that the comparable term "Mythology of Hastur" be used in reference to this body of works.[xxiii]

The first "borrowing" of Lovecraft's ideas was committed by Frank Belknap Long in his story "The Space-Eaters," published in *Weird Tales* in July of 1928, most likely as a playful and friendly gesture. Here Long included Lovecraft as a character, and mentioned the *Necronomicon*. Then Clark Ashton Smith, in "The Tale of Satampra Zeiros," introduced the toad-god Tsathoggua, and Robert E. Howard included Lovecraftian concepts in his work, as well. Will Murray contends that "other writers ran off with Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos before he could bring it to full realization. Rather than be left in the dust of his more prolific fellow scribes, Lovecraft attempted to keep pace with them" (Murray "Uncompromising" 30). In response, Lovecraft worked elements of the Cthulhu Mythos, such as Yog-Sothoth, the *Necronomicon*, Smith's Tsathoggua, and even Cthulhu himself, into some of his revision work – "The Electric Executioner," "The Mound," and "Medusa's Coil," for example. And he eventually came to "borrow back" Mythos elements created by other writers into his own stories – Long's Hounds of Tindalos, Yig from Zealia Bishop's "The Curse of Yig," Kathulos from Robert E. Howard's *Skull-Face*, and Clark Ashton Smith's Tsathoggua all make appearances in Lovecraft's "The Whisperer in Darkness," for instance. From this point on, virtually all of Lovecraft's Mythos stories cross-borrow from other writers. Murray comes to the conclusion that, by

this point, Lovecraft "had lost what is perhaps a writer's most precious right – that of primacy over his own material" (Murray "Uncompromising" 29). He further speculates that this "intellectual bankruptcy" diverted the Cthulhu Mythos from its natural development: "The Cthulhu Mythos may have been going in an explicit direction before others leaped upon it. We'll never know. But there is no question that had others not gotten into the act and influenced Lovecraft in certain less sober directions, the Mythos would not have veered down some of the wayward paths where it ultimately did wander" (Murray "Uncompromising" 31). In this way, the influence of fans of Lovecraft's work may have had a profound effect on his work.

In a letter to William Frederick Anger, from August 14, 1934, Lovecraft explained his own opinion of the phenomenon: "For the fun of building up a convincing cycle of synthetic folklore, all of our gang frequently allude to the pet demons of the others – thus Smith uses my Yog-Sothoth, while I use his Tsathoggua. Also, I sometimes insert a devil or two of my own in tales I revise or ghost-write for professional clients. Thus our black pantheon acquires an extensive publicity & pseudo-authoritativeness it would not otherwise get" (quoted in Murray "Uncompromising" 29). The credibility of Lovecraft's synthetic mythology – and so the depth of his created world – was thus enhanced by its widespread use, at least in his estimation. In a previous letter to August Derleth in 1931, Lovecraft had recorded a similar sentiment, asserting, "The more these synthetic daemons are mutually written up by different authors,

the better they become as general background-material" (quoted in Schultz 44).[xxiv]

Scholars such as Schultz claim that some Mythos writers took this "permission" too far, though, going beyond Lovecraft's consent to include occasional allusions to his work as background, and instead aggressively seeking to contribute to the myth pattern as a means of placing themselves in the same league as Lovecraft (Schultz 45). August Derleth was a prime culprit in this abuse, and is a case in point of how a writer's work can suffer from the reinterpretations given it by fans.

After Lovecraft's death, August Derleth quickly formed Arkham House Publishers, and dedicated himself to publishing Lovecraft's work in book form; this larger distribution led to greater recognition of Lovecraft's talent as a writer, but Derleth also took upon himself the role of a rather biased gatekeeper. As David Schultz relates, following Lovecraft's death Derleth actually informed "would-be 'Mythos' writers that the Mythos was protected by copyright and that only with infrequently given permission could someone be allowed to write a Mythos story" (Schultz 49). Derleth also reformulated the basic assumptions of the Mythos in his own stories, and in what he called "post-mortem collaborations" with Lovecraft, to correspond with his own erroneous understanding of it. Dirk Mosig speculates that it was in part August Derleth's Catholic background made him "unable to share Lovecraft's bleak cosmic vision" (Mosig 108). Mosig explains:

> [Derleth] conceived instead an anthropocentred universe, wherein benevolent Elder Gods and malevolent Old Ones would engage in

ludicrous battles for the sake and welfare of man, much in the same way as the Judaeo-Christian God and his angels confronted Lucifer and his daemonic hordes. While Lovecraft's hapless protagonists were left alone and defenceless in their chilling confrontations with an incomprehensible Reality, Derleth supplied his heroes with ... rescuing Elder Gods which arrived with a timing reminiscent of the U. S. Cavalry in cheap Western films. (Mosig 108)

In addition to manipulating the Mythos through his own (perhaps short-sighted) imitations, Derleth prefaced major collections of Lovecraft's work, as reprinted by Arkham House, with expositions of his own flawed interpretations of Lovecraft's philosophy. In these introductions and in his own stories, Derleth applied a revisionist good vs. evil scenario to the Mythos, creating the Elder Gods to protect the human race against the Old Ones, and twisting the Mythos to draw a parallel between the story of Cthulhu trapped on earth and the "Christian Mythos" presented in the Judeo-Christian framework of the defection of Satan from the kingdom of God.[xxv]

This re-conception of the Cthulhu Mythos to fit into a more traditional religious pantheon is obviously discordant with Lovecraft's vision first of all in that it imposes a sense of artificial order on the Mythos. Rather than describing his monsters directly, Lovecraft instead used ambiguous descriptions and obscure suggestions to create an overall atmosphere of horror; "he allowed the reader to piece together scattered intimations and to discern the terrible scientific truth through the distorting medium of legend," as Price explains (251). David Schultz also claims that Lovecraft's "pseudomythology" was left unstructured, with intentional inconsistencies, in order to create a greater sense of realism; he

points to a tentatively cautionary letter Clark Ashton Smith wrote to Derleth in 1937 as evidence of this: "As to the varying references to the mythos in different tales: I wonder if they weren't designed to suggest the diverse developments and interpretations of old myths and deities that spring up over great periods of time and in variant races and civilizations? ... HPL wished to indicate the natural growth of a myth-pattern through dim ages, in which the same deity or demon might present changing aspects" (quoted in Schultz 46). Nonetheless, Derleth approached the inconsistencies and vagaries of the Mythos as a mistake on Lovecraft's part, rather than an intentional literary technique to heighten the horror of the beings he depicted.

And secondly, Derleth's interpretation of the Mythos to match the Judeo-Christian system of belief is utterly inconsistent with Lovecraft's attitude toward religion. S. T. Joshi asserts that Lovecraft's original works created an anti-mythology that subverted religion's justification of the ways of God to men – a perspective that Derleth obviously didn't understand or appreciate. Joshi explains Lovecraft's vision:

> Human beings have always considered themselves at the center of the universe; they have peopled the universe with gods of varying natures and capacities as a means of explaining natural phenomena, of accounting for their own existence, and of shielding themselves from the grim prospect of oblivion after death. Every religion and mythology has established some vital connection between gods and human beings, and it is exactly this connection that Lovecraft is seeking to subvert with his pseudomythology. ... what [humans] deem "gods" are merely extraterrestrial entities who have no intimate relation with human beings or with anything on this planet, and who are doing no more than pursuing their own ends, whatever they may happen to be. (Joshi *Subtler Magic* 132)

Lovecraft himself was (almost painfully) explicit on the point that his work and personal philosophy – wherein the desires and existence of humankind were trivial in comparison to the cosmos at large – was incompatible with established religion. In 1918, Lovecraft wrote:

> So far I have seen nothing which could possibly give me the notion that cosmic force is the manifestation of a mind and will like my own infinitely magnified; a potent and purposeful consciousness which deals individually & directly with the miserable denizens of a wretched little flyspeck on the back door of a microscopic universe, and which singles this putrid excrescence out as the one spot whereto to send an onlie-begotten Son, whose mission is to redeem these accursed flyspeck-inhabiting lice which we call human beings – bah!! Pardon the 'bah!' I feel several 'bahs!,' but out of courtesy I say only one. But it is all so very childish. I cannot help taking exception to a philosophy which would force this rubbish down my throat. (Quoted in Joshi *Subtler Magic* 246)

In Lovecraft's cosmology, humans are ephemeral, insignificant specks in the vast gulf of space and time that makes up the universe. God has no place in this world-view except as a fiction mankind created to justify and add meaning to its own existence. In an often-misquoted passage of a letter to Farnsworth Wright in 1927, Lovecraft "defines" this overall theme explicitly:

> All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (Lovecraft *Selected II* 150)[xxvi]

As Price notes, Lovecraft's work shifted "the focus of fear from the concrete threats of ghosts and vampires (unbelievable, and therefore unfrightening, in a

scientific age) to the very real threat to human egocentrism and religion posed by science itself" (Price 248). Alien entities of incomprehensible power are called "gods" or "devils" by humans, since they can't understand these creatures' true nature. The Old Ones are indifferent to humanity even as mankind worships them. As Price notes, "When Lovecraft's characters see the Old Ones as gods or devils it is because they refuse to see the terrible truth that the Old Ones are simply beings who do not care about humans (though they may in fact be dangerous to us). Gods and devils, by definition, do care about us, whether to save or tempt us" (Price 249). August Derleth was unable to accept Lovecraft's philosophy of indifference, and so using his authority at Arkham House, re-modeled the Cthulhu Mythos to include his Elder Gods – "gods" in a truer sense of the word – to suit his own more traditional Christian religious beliefs.

Lovecraft's body of fiction continues to enjoy popularity even today, as fans of his work take up pen and paper to continue his stories. But it was also impacted greatly by the reinterpretations given it by subsequent writers, as August Derleth's misguided efforts illustrate. Similarly, another kind of re-conception of Lovecraft's original literature – its translation into a roleplaying game – can also be approached as a kind of reinscription of the text by the seminal writer's fans.

The Cthulhu Mythos' conversion into a roleplaying game – the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG – incorporated the works of the Lovecraft Circle as well as Lovecraft's own stories. The game's designer, Sandy Petersen, explains, "The

parts of the Cthulhu Mythos originated by Lovecraft himself define this game. Certain concepts and creations by some of Lovecraft's friends are also used, and since original publication the circle of inclusion has gradually widened, in imitation of his own widening circle of correspondents" (Petersen 24). For example, alongside Lovecraft's imaginings, Derleth's creations also appear prominently: in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG the deities of the Mythos are divided into three categories, one of which is Derleth's Elder Gods, "the deities of the Mythos which seem uncaring of humanity [as opposed to outright malevolent], or even friendly toward it. They are often enemies of the Great Old Ones and the Outer Gods ... [and some] have been worshiped as mostly benevolent human deities" (Petersen 160).

Also, many of the lesser creatures and greater deities created by the Lovecraft Circle appear in *Call of Cthulhu*: August Derleth's fire vampires, Zhar, Ithaqua, Cthugha, Tcho-tchos, servitors of the Outer Gods, and hunting horrors make an appearance; Clark Aston Smith contributes his serpent people, Quachil Uttaus, Abhoth, Atlach-nacha, Ubbo-sathla, and Tsathoggua; Brian Lumley is included for his chthonians, Shudde M'ell, and Yibb-tstll; Robert Bloch provides the dark young and star vampires; Ramsey Campbell supplies Glaaki, Daoloth, Eihort, the insects from Shaggai, and Xiclotl; and Frank Belknap Long furnishes the hounds of Tindalos and Chaugnar Faugn. And more of the creations of Lovecraft's Circle appear in the *Creature Companion* supplement to the game by Chaosium, Inc., first published in 1994. Petersen describes these inclusions as a

conscious choice, positioning the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG as a product of fan

interaction with the Mythos:

> [Lovecraft's] tales fired the imagination of other authors, mostly protégés and friends of Lovecraft, and soon they were adding to his mythology. Today, Cthulhu stories are still being written by heirs to Lovecraft's literary legacy.
>
> This game continues the tradition. Young writers from around the world have contributed to or independently written well over a hundred new books of scenarios and other supplements. (Petersen 23)

Fan participation has always been important to the RPG industry both

because of the independent promotion of products and the critical response that

a solid fan base can provide. Amateur press associations like the Order of Dagon

and the Necronomicon and semi-professional periodicals like *Whispers* and

Nyctalops have enhanced Lovecraft's renown by publishing Lovecraft-related

material such as biographical, bibliographic, and critical research on the writer.

Print fanzines, too, have been created for almost every roleplaying game

published; *The Unspeakable Oath* is an example of just one of these RPG fanzines,

which publishes columns, articles, scenarios, and special features relating to the

Call of Cthulhu RPG. Other roleplaying games have inspired the creation of a

multitude of fan-published online magazines – like d20reviews.com, which

follows d20 System (*Dungeons & Dragons*) roleplaying publications – and an

explosion of fan web sites, mailing lists, and online discussion forums that

facilitate player communication with each other and with the designers, editors,

and publishers of their favorite roleplaying games, who frequent the sites to read

reviews of their work and feedback from readers; though these professionals

often quietly "lurk" without posting, many roleplayers realize that they are, nonetheless, present. Indeed, though not fan-created, every RPG publisher of note has an email address that readers can use to communicate directly with the company that publishes their favorite game, to report things like errata, and most of them have some kind of official online discussion forum that company representatives frequent regularly, though the majority of the postings are fan-generated. Roleplaying game publishers also use these sites and email to conduct playtesting, in which a group of fans is asked to look at an unpublished RPG adventure or sourcebook, to play through it, and then to submit their comments to the editor or designer so that revisions can be made based on their experience. Participants in non-playtest roleplaying sessions also write up records of their sessions and publish them online or in amateur press associations for RPGs like *Alarums and Excursions* or *The Wild Hunt*. And finally, fan-organized conventions let industry luminaries and fans mingle and exchange ideas. David "Zeb" Cook, lead designer of the 2nd Edition of *(Advanced) Dungeons & Dragons*, acknowledges his debt to fans in the introduction of the *Player's Handbook*, saying:

> None of this would ever have come into being without interested and involved players. The people who really decided what need to be done for the 2nd Edition are the players who mailed in questions, everyone who wrote an article for *Dragon Magazine*, and everyone who button-holed me (or other designers) at conventions. These were the people who decided what needed to be done, what needed fixing, what was unclear, and what they just didn't like. I didn't sit in a vacuum and make these decisions. As the designer and developer, I had to make the final choice, but those choices were based on your [fan] input. And your input is the most valuable asset we have going ...

> I've talked to interested players many times, hearing their concerns and sharing my ideas. It was at the end of one of these talks ... just as I described some rules change, that one of the listeners smiled and said, 'You know, we've been doing that for years.' And that is what the 2nd Edition is all about – collecting and organizing all those things that we, as players, have been doing for years. (David Cook 3)

In these ways – through fan-produced print media, online communications, and conventions – fan input becomes a crucial influence on the roleplaying industry; RPG fans have as much, if not more, impact on the roleplaying games that they play as the fans of Lovecraft's time did on his work.

However, as Henry Jenkins observes, "the fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire ... whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality" (Jenkins 15). Although dominant culture attempts to trivialize the RPG fan culture by crediting judgments that defuse the subculture – such as those of some conservative religious groups that roleplaying generates Satanism, increased violence, identity-confusion, and self-delusion, as is discussed in Chapter Six – gamers themselves actively work to subvert this marginalizing effect through participation in their hobby. Rather than submitting to attempts on the part of the dominant culture to control what is sometimes seen as a potentially dangerous or subversive formation, gamers (like science fiction fans) evince themselves as "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who

transform the experience … into a rich and complex participatory culture" (Jenkins 23). Perhaps more so than any other fan culture, roleplayers have the ability to actively engage in the construction of the terrain of their subculture, not only through the creation of multiple ongoing small-group dialogues within the larger discourse – the individual roleplaying campaigns (game sessions) that are a subset of the larger fan narrative, which are thus fictional "events" of lesser import that engage with the broader "history" of the published (authorized) storyline of each game system – but also by demanding authorization of these individual stories through less entrenched methods of publication such as fanzines and online discussion or gaming groups. "From the perspective of dominant taste, fans appear to be frighteningly out of control, undisciplined and unrepentant, rogue readers," Jenkins speculates (18). Nowhere is this more true than in the roleplaying fan community's quick appropriation of emergent technologies, such as online interactive forums and internet fanzines, for their own pursuits. In this way, distribution of roleplaying material becomes a requisite of active engagement in the fan community, whether it be among the members of a gaming group, within the larger arena of fanzine and online discourse, or the most privileged avenue of formal publication authorized by the company holding the publication rights to the game. As Jenkins maintains, "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (24).

However, because of the peculiarly active approach gamers take as a fan

community, certain of Jenkins' assertions regarding fans in general may no longer hold true to the roleplaying culture, and perhaps to other subcultures as well. Jenkins maintains that "fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness. Like other popular readers, fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence [the] entertainment industry's decisions … readers 'may actually be powerless and dependent' rather than 'uncontainable, restless and free'" (Jenkins 26 – 27). Yet, gamers do manage to produce and distribute home-made roleplaying products on a fairly regular basis. For example, two of the gamers in my college roleplaying group actually developed their own systems, then used professional (but inexpensive) layout and design programs to produce a fairly high-quality product, had them copied and bound locally, and distributed them at roleplaying conventions for a small profit. In addition, homebrew rules variations for many games can be found on personal web sites on the internet, and many ideas posited by gamers in online discussion groups have actually found their way into subsequent published sourcebooks and revised editions for various popular game systems. For example, as a line editor I myself keep a copy of Atlas Games' *Rune* RPG updated in pencil with all the errata that has been submitted by fans, so that when it comes time to reprint the rulebook these corrections can be included as part of the new edition. In this way, roleplaying fans tend to go beyond Jenkins' limited conception of fans as constituting "a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose

activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation" (Jenkins 27), but rather to actively seek out unprecedented opportunities to influence the commercial cultural production targeted at them, including actively producing roleplaying material. They dispute "legitimate" or privileged authorship, appropriating the game as an outlet for their own creative, authorial urges even outside of the context of the game session, and so pulling themselves out of the "marginal weakness" of many of the fan cultures Jenkins observes.

One cultural and technological phenomenon, in particular, has proven itself incredibly facilitiative of this trend in the roleplaying fan culture; this was the development of online communication. Indeed, just as the new print medium of the pulp magazine allowed science fiction fans to identify themselves and organize as a community, so too does the RPG fan community take advantage of new technologies, using vehicles like the internet to further propagate itself. As an illustration, take the progression of remote roleplaying from play-by-mail (PBM), to play-by-email (PBEM), and finally to online roleplaying. "Wayne," a founder of the British PBM Association, credits Kevin Cropper with creating the first play-by-mail RPG campaign in 1980 when he turned his long-running roleplaying campaign, *Crasimoff's World*, into a postal game:

> [Kevin Cropper] advertised [the game] in White Dwarf [a professional magazine that at one time featured RPG material] and was inundated with replies and applications to join. Eventually he had to give up his full-time job in order to write hand-moderated role-playing turns for a living.

The way his game worked was simple. Using his rules – which cost around £2.50 each – a player created a party of ten fictional individuals, who were either priests, fighters or mages. Once a party had been created, the player returned information about it to Kevin, who placed it somewhere in his fantasy world. He sent the players a written description detailing their starting location, news, recent local events and a page full of rumors. The players had to write down the equivalent of what they would have said to Kevin if he had been the referee of an over-the-table RPG session, and return it to him through the post.

Kevin, using a combination of his refereeing and literary skills, would write a response to the player's actions and return it via the post, charging the player £1.00 for this service. The player would read the turn and write another reply, which would be returned to Kevin, and the circle would continue.

If one player's party met another player's party, Kevin would give each player the other's address and they could communicate with each other outside the game to swap information, news and other pieces of information. Hundreds of people joined *Crasimoff's World* and enjoyed the atmosphere of the campaign world – the game is still being run to this very day, albeit by different referees from another company. (Wayne 12 – 13)

Play-by-mail circumnavigates the problem traditional roleplaying games fall into of having to arrange for a group of people to get together at a certain place at a certain time, which requires effort and organization. It allows the players time to think about their situation before reacting, and to create a more unique response to the game's events.

From these beginnings, the jump to cyberspace was the next logical step. Play-by-modem or play-by-email games, using email to communicate rather than the postal service, soon led to an entirely new category of internet-based, computer-moderated roleplaying games. One of the first of these, MUD1, which ran at Essex University, "was probably the greatest initial influence on the

development of MUDs, including giving the genre its name," asserts Alan Cox, the main developer of AberMUD (16). According to Cox, a multi-user domain (MUD) is a computer program that "accepts connections from a number of simultaneous users over a computer network and provides them with access to a shared 'adventure game'; that is, a shared textual virtual environment where players can move between rooms, interact with each other and manipulate virtual objects; all of which is described in text" (Cox 15). MUDs are computer-generated virtual worlds in which multiple users can communicate with each other and interact with the environment, which is described textually, to some extent.

The typical landscape of the MUD is one that roleplaying has had an immense impact on. Gamers were some of the first users to manipulate the multi-user domain into a useful environment, renaming them "multi-user dungeons" as they appropriated this site of cultural performance for their own uses; they actively transformed the MUDs into interactive roleplaying games complete with quests to be won and players to converse with, much as in a more traditional RPG. This can still be seen in MOOs (object-oriented MUDs) and MUDs that use elements of fantasy as a part of their terrain.[xxvii] The most common types of roleplaying MUDs are "computer-moderated games which resemble multi-player adventure games with a role-playing element," though these games are limited in the number and type of actions players can perform (Cox 17). They include some type of character advancement, interaction between

players, and are often based on the rules and setting of an RPG like *Dungeons &*
Dragons. In MUDs, though, "the most obviously unrealistic and jarring element
of tabletop gaming, the rulebook and tables, are hidden from [the players]," since
rules are contained in the programming of the MUD (Cox 18). In traditional
roleplaying, players and game moderators must trust that "rules atrophy" will
work slowly to break down barriers between identities, RPG designer and
publisher James Wallis asserts; "as a player becomes more familiar with a set of
game mechanics, those mechanics should become more intuitive and more
automatic; in other words they cease to be a set of rules and begin to become
part of the game background" (Wallis "Realism" 78). Game moderator
descriptions of locations and events, and discussions of the rules and die rolls,
counteract the performative aspects of RPGs in a way that MUDs have
circumnavigated; the performative induces fantasy, while the descriptive recalls
reality.

The most noticeable difference between a MUD and an RPG, however, is
in the textual versus verbal transmission of the created world, yet both have the
end result of using the human body as an interface to fashion an easily
manipulated space in the mind's eye. For example, for my character "Gaia" on
the MUD 3 Kingdoms, I developed my allocated "house" space with the
following description:

> Plants and greenery cover every available niche of space ...
>> tendrils even trail down from the rafters in the vaulted ceiling far
>> above.
> Enormous windows stand ajar on the south and east walls ...

> these stretch upwards to the rafters and a rain-scented breeze plays
> with the billowing translucent curtains.
> Rays of warm sunshine stream through the windows from the primeval
> forest encircling the Bower, and pause to dance across the polished
> floorboards from which wafts a fresh cedar aroma.
> In the midst of the foliage, two luxurious futons are positioned so as to
> afford a panoramic view of the surrounding forest.
> An intricate mural depicting the same forest scene covers the north and
> west walls and encompasses the northern kitchen and western
> bedroom archways.
> This room exudes an aura of peace, tranquility, and harmony with
> nature...

However, I might just as easily have read this to a group of traditional RPG players as being the description of a location in their game world. In this way, a comparable world can be created by either the textual "consensual hallucination" that William Gibson describes cyberspace as being, or the verbal interaction typical of pen-and-paper RPGs. This is in large part due to the dependence of both media on language. Beth Kolko notes that "in text-based virtual worlds, words are the only matter of the place. Like the artifacts of print culture, virtual worlds depend almost exclusively on language to create a world" (Kolko 105). Because language is the stuff of creation in both instances, as both are worlds of pure narrative, Kolko's assertion that "language is the only thing in [a] MOO that has power," and Novak's that online communication presents the "promise of control over the world by the power of the will," become equally true when applied to the traditional RPG, where people similarly come together in a virtual world that is perceived as real but doesn't exist in real space (Kolko 114; Novak 228).

Language is also used in online roleplaying and pen-and-paper RPGs to

construct characters as well as worlds. In online roleplaying, however, a central advantage is that you never see the people you talk to. "Therru," a player on GarouMUSH, explains that online "I am much more free to become my character. No one can see what I actually look like – gender, age, appearance, and demeanour are all incredibly flexible. Although in theory this is possible in face-to-face role-playing as well, it is much more difficult to pull off!" (quoted in Goetz 35). Indeed, James Wallis notes that in traditional roleplaying, "Players grow comfortable with the other members of their group, and generally tend to imagine the other players' characters as appearing like the players themselves" (Wallis "Through" 92 – 93). This makes it difficult to play characters of another gender or race convincingly, when the other players insist on confusing the pronouns between player and character, for example.[xxviii] Online roleplaying in many ways frees players from these restraints; as Roger Caillois asserts, "A performer may use a mask at a carnival or in a theatre as a license to get away with different types of behaviours. In an analogous way the computer can become a mask that disguises the conventional self and liberates the true personality" (quoted in Lancaster "Cyber-Performances" 23). Similarly, Michael Benedikt describes the fluidity of identity in cyberspace, saying that "no individual is appreciated by virtue only, if at all, of their physical appearance, location, or circumstances. New, liquid, and multiple associations between people are possible … and new modes and levels of truly interpersonal communication come into being" (quoted in Lancaster "Cyber-Performances"

23).

Mikhail Bakhtin's translinguistic theory of language asserts that meaning is created by the exchange of voices, by collaboration in social contexts; it stresses the multiplicity of voices, asserting that meaning resides temporarily in the fluid, unique space of social exchange that exists between those voices (summarized in Wilson 35). While both traditional RPGs and online versions of them rely on the free flow of communication between players to create a meaningful narrative, cyberspace conversation may in some ways also move beyond the capabilities of face-to-face exchange. For example, online roleplaying games are characterized by non-linear, multiple, parallel conversation, while pen-and-paper RPGs must necessarily institute systems such as Initiative rolls to determine turn order, else a chaos of multiple competing voices ensues. Phil Goetz relates his experiences on GarouMUSH in an issue of *Interactive Fantasy*,[xxix] recounting, "I wanted to express my character (Blinks)'s fear of spirits, so I privately nudged Sepdet (via page) to give me a line to work off of. This type of co-authoring happens all the time on a MUSH [multi-user shared hallucination], while in a face-to-face game it's considered bad form to prompt other players out of character" (Goetz 38). "Kibbitzing" is the word that's been coined by gamers for the act of "helping" other players by giving them hints out of character while playing a pen-and-paper roleplaying game; this is considered a form of cheating. But in online roleplaying, online co-authoring such as this "shows that the players are thinking like writers, planning ahead instead of reacting," Goetz

asserts (38).

Another notable contrast between the online and pen-and-paper roleplaying games is apparent when Kolko notes a limitation of the MOO as being somewhat linear due to the technical nature of the form (Kolko 118); actions must be programmed into non-player characters, and allowable directions of movement are predetermined by the programming. Here, the RPG outstrips the computer-generated virtual reality in its ability to be a truly three-dimensional space – at least for now; although the GM might guide the players toward choices consistent with his own desires for outcome of the plot, RPG players are in the end free to manipulate their environment in whatever way they see fit, taking advantage of hypothetically limitless endings. This many times leads to drunken pub crawls and other tangential actions not actually contributing towards the plot, but rather toward the camaraderie of the group – which is impossible in a computer environment that only allows players to move in the "directions" North, East, West, or South, look at the few "objects" that have a description programmed in, and use a limited set of graphical character symbols to convey emotion.

And video games are even more limiting than MUDs: "Looked at as an interactive narrative ... most computer 'role playing' games are decades behind the best table-top games: they represent not the future of role-playing, but its past," asserts Andrew Rilstone ("Editorial" 1.4 4). For example, the *Doom* series of animated "adventure roleplaying computer games" are not much different

from a blood-thirsty *Dungeons & Dragons* "dungeon crawl" with none of the characterization possible in the RPG. Character interaction and freedom of action is forfeited in exchange for action and a sense of immediacy. This type of player chooses options on a menu and navigates a set course he finds himself in by working a joystick, but ultimately has no authorial influence – video game players are unable to create their own actions out of limitless possibilities. Ironically, then, it is the text-based forums common to MUDs and MUSHs that take a more sophisticated approach, developing a sense of community similar to that which traditional RPGs accomplish ... a sense of social depth and intensity of emotional involvement.

But the freedom of choice allowed by RPGs can also lead to power struggles between players, and between the game moderators and players, to determine the outcome of their actions. For example, in simultaneous response to a certain situation two players might want to attack a foe, another could decide to cast a spell at him, and a fourth may decide to flee. It becomes the GM's responsibility to negotiate the chronological cause and effect between all these actions and the non-player character's reactions. Similarly, Kolko asserts that in the computer-generated landscape, users must work together to avoid actions that might conflict; in the online environment the problem of two people accidentally sitting on the same chair due to simultaneous typing is an example of this. In this instance, "negotiation of these usually unstated conventions necessitates a particular struggle for control" (Kolko 118). Even in their

differences, pen-and-paper RPGs and online MUDs work in very similar ways, as in both the player is a "liminal agent in a state of flux between the virtual and the real (Lancaster "Cyber-Performances" 23).

In providing a performance space suitable for adaptation into a roleplaying forum, as well as an instantaneous mode of communication, the internet has promoted the RPG fan community in a similarly profound way to the letters columns of the early science fiction pulp magazines that so influenced the work of writers like H. P. Lovecraft. Just as the 1920s and 1930s saw the science fiction fan community grow through the use the emergent technology of the time – the pulps – so, too, has the roleplaying fan community grown through its own use of the MUDs, email, web sites, and online discussion forums of the internet, a technology that has now become a part of everyday life. The internet is especially facilitative of this use in that computer-generated multi-user domains correlate closely to more traditional pen-and-paper RPG narratives, as both are constructed around virtual realities that foreground the power inherent in language, as well as the struggle for control of that power. The internet also allows fans to "meet" and interact online in a way that supports roleplaying games, just as the fans of the science fiction genre interacted through letters at the beginning of the twentieth century, promoting the contact between writer and reader as well as between fans, which allows the fan to influence the writing of the genre directly. As Henry Jenkins notes, methods of resistance such as these work to blur "the boundaries between producers and consumers, spectators and

participants, the commercial and the homecrafted, to construct an image of fandom as a cultural and social network that spans the globe. Fandom here becomes a participatory culture that transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community" (Jenkins 46). In effect, the RPG subculture positions itself as active producers and manipulators of meanings, rather than passively accepting dominant ideology.

CHAPTER FIVE:
ROLEPLAYING BY DESIGN

Just as William Gibson can be said to have defined the parameters of the cyberpunk genre with his novel *Neuromancer*, roleplaying's own founders – Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax – developed the framework for what RPGs would become. By looking at the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and thus of the roleplaying hobby, as well as examining how subsequent RPG designers have impacted not only the roleplaying industry, but also how these games are played, a clearer picture of the multiple author inherent in roleplaying games emerges.

The year 1974 marked the beginning of the popularity of roleplaying games in the United States with the release of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This innovative game was created by Dave Arneson – currently a lecturer at Full Sail University in Florida and an Associate Professor at Louisiana State University – and E. Gary Gygax – a self-confessed fan and collector of pulp science fiction and fantasy magazines since 1950 (theonering.net). Both had been avid tabletop wargamers, using lead miniatures to reconstruct historical battles or to create their own skirmishes. The variant of wargaming that they created – originally called *The Fantasy Game* – singled out individual game pieces and constructed a storyline around them in a fantasy setting; Arneson and Gygax's rules allowed them to take a few of the figures from their army, give them individual physical and mental traits, and devise a story in which these characters went beyond the

battlefield, creating adventures on their own as a small group. Because they were unable to find a publisher for their "fantasy wargame to be played with paper and pencil," the two used a company formed by Gygax, Brian Blume, and Don Kaye, called Tactical Studies Rules (TSR), in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, to publish it themselves. They had sold the original run of 1,000 copies of *Dungeons & Dragons* (as Gygax's wife suggested it be renamed) by the end of the year, and Random House began distributing it in 1979, which quickly added to its popularity and TSR's success (Rec.games.frp.dnd). In 1980, TSR grossed $8.5 million (Kellman 34 – 35).

As Wilson explains, roleplaying games "allow players to experience an open, ongoing, narrative situation in which a variety of roles may be lived from within an invented character's imagined experience with maximal openness and intensity ... The charm of highly complex role-simulation games lies in the combination of openness and imaginative detail that massively promotes the free, exploratory, and creative dimension of play" (Wilson 11 – 12). When the potential of *Dungeons & Dragons* was realized, imitators quickly followed. *Tunnels & Trolls* by Ken St. Andre was the first to appear in 1975 (and was soon picked up by Flying Buffalo Games), followed by a host of others.

As roleplaying became an established hobby, innovations in RPGs sprang from the designers of the new games, changing the focus of the industry as it grew. Some of these were single elements of a game's rules system or setting that became popular and were "borrowed from" by other games to a limited

extent. For example, *Call of Cthulhu* won the three major national awards for excellence in game design in the United States when it was first published in 1981 by Chaosium, Inc. Lynn Willis, as the original designer of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, contributed the Sanity trait to roleplaying, simulating the character's emotional and mental stability, and gave rules for playing insane characters. Subsequent designers used analogous devices in their own games. For instance, in *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf, 1991), Mark Rein●Hagen uses Humanity points as "a measure of the gulf that separates humans from vampires; the extent to which a vampires has resisted the Beast" (Rein●Hagen 80). Characters who lose a point of Humanity risk gaining a Derangement like Multiple Personalities, Obsession, Paranoia, Amnesia, or Manic-Depression. Similarly, John Tynes and Greg Stolze in *Unknown Armies* (Atlas Games, 1998) use "madness meters" to track how "hardened" a character is to Violence, the Unnatural, Isolation, Helplessness, and his own loss of Self. Again, they provide rules for characters who slip into madness. This apparent progression of Lynn Willis' original Sanity trait is just one example of how discrete game elements travel from one roleplaying game to the next, reinscripted by each designer for his own uses.

Though it's rather common for an isolated element of one roleplaying game to turn up in the games of other designers, a few RPG designers are known for the far-reaching innovation they introduced in terms of setting or rules system – concepts that provoked entirely new styles of roleplaying and

influenced the whole of the roleplaying industry years to come. Some of these include "storytelling" games, "generic" or "universal" rules systems, "diceless" games, and "open gaming," each of which is discussed here.

In the RPG *Ars Magica* (Atlas Games, 1988), Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein•Hagen contributed significantly to the trend in roleplaying games toward storytelling rather than accurate simulation of real-world physics through precise rules. Statistics "are only a device" they say; "The soul of your character lies in the details you invent to make him or her interesting and entertaining" (Tweet *Ars Magica* 16). The Storyteller System, also designed by Mark Rein•Hagen and drawing on elements of the core rules of *Ars Magica*, is the basis of White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), and other titles in the company's World of Darkness setting. This system continued in the narrative over rules vein, making an emphasis on storytelling in roleplaying games widely popular with *Vampire*'s widespread success.

In another instance of wide-reaching innovation, game designer and publisher Steve Jackson's *Generic Universal RolePlaying System* (Steve Jackson Games, 1986) introduced a modular system that allows "layers" of new rules to be added to the core. As the back cover of *GURPS* explains:

> GURPS ... is THE most flexible roleplaying system ever created. With just this Basic Set, you can adventure in any world you can imagine. Rules are included for all types of weapons from clubs to lasers ... for wizards and magic, with more than 100 spells ... for psionic powers. No more switching game systems whenever you want to change campaigns! GURPS lets you learn ONE set of clear, comprehensive rules to cover ANY background. And the GURPS system is fully supported. Over 80 different worldbooks, sourcebooks and adventures are available for all

kinds of campaigns" (Jackson back cover).

Kevin Siembieda's *Rifts* (Palladium, 1990) emerged as competition to *GURPS* by pushing the idea of a "megaverse" in which all other settings can exist simultaneously; instead of just using compatible rules for different settings, Siembieda tied the settings together at the level of the fictional world by devising an apocalyptic future in which the Earth is ravaged by interdimensional rips in the fabric of space and time leading to other worlds. As the *Rifts* RPG explains:

> The Earth has become a place of contradiction and infinite possibilities. Alien and supernatural beings trod the planet. Ancient gods, creatures of legend, vampires, faeries, dragons and alien monstrosities co-exist with human cyborgs, androids, giant robots, high-tech mercenaries and dimensional raiders. Creatures of legend, demons, and faeries use technology to bolster there [sic] already formidable powers, while humans augment themselves with implants, bionics, power armor, chemicals, magic and alien technologies.
>
> Beyond Rifts Earth is the entire Megaverse® – infinite worlds accessible through the dimensional Rifts! (Siembieda back cover)

Similarly, Steven S. Long's *HERO System* (Iron Crown Enterprises, 1990) uses a universal roleplaying system for various different genre settings including superheroes, science fiction, fantasy, and the modern day. And Steffan O'Sullivan's *Fudge* (Grey Ghost Press, 1995), the *Freeform Universal Do-it-yourself Gaming Engine*, is another generic system in that there are no fixed character attributes or skills; the GM determines these based on his own needs for his campaign, making it a fully adaptable roleplaying game. As the RPG claims on its back cover, "completely customizable, Fudge provides the building blocks you need to create your own game system" (O'Sullivan back cover).

A third trend in roleplaying is the advent of the "diceless" roleplaying game. The first of these, *Amber Diceless* (Phage Press, 1991), was created by Eric Wujcik using the cosmology created by Roger Zelazny in his *Amber* novels. The roleplaying game uses a system of comparing abilities and describing actions narratively to resolve situations. Later, Jonathan Tweet devised *Everway* (Wizards of the Coast, 1995), in which symbols and imagery are used to moderate game play. Character creation is aided with a set of "Vision Cards" that depict various situations, creatures, and people found in the game world. Game play is guided through simple attribute comparison, determinations of story appropriateness, and a set of symbolic cards called the "Fortune Deck."

In creating new game mechanics such as those mentioned here, the designer of a roleplaying game is able to exert significant influence on the RPG industry and hobby. Roleplaying in this way blurs the boundaries of authorial power by investing creative control not only in the seminal writer of the literature the RPG is based on, as well as in the creators of the roleplaying hobby, the fans who influence the writer/designer, the editors and publishers, the GM and players who reinscript the text to their own uses (as will be discussed in Chapter Seven), and the cultural environment of which they are a part (see Chapter Six), but also in the designers who reinterpret the literary work as game. The final expression of roleplaying – the game session itself – displays a merging of these influences, as the writer and fans determine the setting of the game world, the GM and players determine the actions characters take as influenced

by the cultural environment surrounding them, and the designer, directed by his editor and publisher, determines the methods through which these two elements interface, mediating the character's experience of the game world though the rules system he has created to fit that world.

Indeed, in a similar line of thought, Gary Allen Fine in *Shared Fantasy* describes three frames of experience inherent in roleplaying games, which span the difference between game world and character interaction:

> First, gaming, like all activity, is grounded in the "primary framework," the commonsense understandings that *people* have of the real world … It is a framework that does not depend on other frameworks but on the ultimate reality of events.
>
> Second, players must deal with the game context: they are *players* whose actions are governed by a complex set of rules and constraints. They manipulate their character, having knowledge of the structure of the game … Players do not operate in light of their primary frameworks – in terms of what is physically possible – but in light of the conventions of the game.
>
> Finally, this gaming world is keyed in that players not only manipulate characters: they *are* characters. The *character* identity is separate from the *player* identity. In this, fantasy gaming is distinct from other gaming … Sir Ralph the Rash, the doughty knight, lacks some information that his player has (for example, about characteristics of other characters, or spheres of game knowledge outside his ken such as clerical miracles) and has some information that his player lacks (about the area where he was raised, which the referee must supply when necessary). (Fine *Shared Fantasy* 186; original italics)

In this way, the identity of individuals sitting around a table socializing, the identity of players of the game, and the identity of characters in a fantasy world are all taken up during a roleplaying session, and the participants move between the three frames during the event. In referencing Fine's definition of these three frames, noted game designer and publisher James Wallis asserts that "the way to

enrich the game environment as much as possible is not to remove the second frame [but] to break down the barriers between the second and third frames; between the 'player' and the 'character.'" Wallis claims that this is accomplished by the designer of the roleplaying game in two ways. First, the designer can make the rules as "transparent as possible," and second, he can make the background, characterization, and rest of the game environment "as rich and interesting as possible" (Wallis "Realism" 76). In particular, Wallis contends that the character rules (character generation, for example) and background rules (such as combat mechanics) must be compatible: "Incompatible mechanics leads to a feeling of being out of place and headaches for a referee who has too many rules to remember; incompatible background leads to no idea of how the characters actually fit in to the game world, or what they are meant to be doing there" (Wallis "Realism" 78). In designing rules that break down these experiential barriers inherent in roleplaying, the designer of an RPG lends his own creative inspiration to the game in as influential a method as those available to the seminal writer, to the GM and players, or to the others who exert authorial control over the text.

As revolutionary game mechanics such as "storytelling" games, "generic" or "universal" rules systems, and "diceless" games evolved, the growth of the roleplaying industry prompted a similar rapid expansion of the old favorite, *Dungeons & Dragons*. By the middle of the 1980s, *Dungeons & Dragons* was a

writhing mass of literally hundreds of core rulebooks, sourcebooks, adventures, and magazine articles. In 1989, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition – *D&D* had been renamed *AD&D* in the late 1970s for legal reasons – was released by TSR in an attempt to clarify and revitalize the game. As David "Zeb" Cook, the 2nd Edition's lead designer, explained in his introduction to the new *Player's Handbook*, "At the very start, we outlined the goals: to make it easier to find things, to make the rules easier to understand, to fix the things that did not work, to add the best new ideas from the expansions and other sources, and, most important of all, to make sure the game was still the one you [the fans] know and enjoyed" (David Cook 3). The game was reduced to three core books – the *Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual* – and the proliferation of *D&D* began again.

Though 2nd Edition may have made *Dungeons & Dragons* accessible to new players by lowering the entry cost and intimidation factor involved in purchasing the excess of rulebooks and other materials for the game, the innovation of the "open game," as tied to the release of *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition (Wizards of the Coast, 2000), may prove to have the most impact on the RPG industry and roleplaying in general of any other trend. Not only did the release of the new edition accomplish a comparable "cleaning house" effect to that of the 1989 2nd Edition, *D&D* 3rd Edition also followed a similar strategy to that of Steffan O'Sullivan's *Fudge* RPG in its release. *Fudge* was the first complete RPG originally published on the internet, and released under an open license as a

kind of "freeware" so that others might publish their own books based on the copyrighted *Fudge* rules; the idea was that the free distribution and use of the rules by independent publishers would enhance the widespread popularity of the game. As long as the publishers of derivative *Fudge* material gain no profit from the publication of such materials, they are free to do so without notifying the game's designer beforehand; they are required to include an informational notice and disclaimer, however, with the *Fudge* copyright, in the front of their publications. For-profit publishers must register for a royalty-free "License to Publish Fudge-related Material for a Fee or Charge" from Steffan O'Sullivan, under the same general terms. In either case, the publisher is required to send two copies of the work to Steffan O'Sullvan and abide by the terms of the license (see Appendix A).

Ever since *Tunnels & Trolls* was first released in 1975, *Dungeons & Dragons* had been at the center of a kind of phenomenon of copyright infringement in the roleplaying industry. It's said that imitation is the sincerest compliment: in this case, an entire category of "generic fantasy" sourcebooks and adventures were produced by independent publishers as thinly veiled *D&D* material, and hundreds of home-brewed RPGs that fans published out of their basements with their life savings reinvented the wheel over and over again, often coming suspiciously close to the *D&D* core rules. *Dungeons & Dragons'* publisher, TSR, took the approach of suing the worst of the offenders – incidentally gaining the nickname "T$R" among its own fan community. One of the most publicized

lawsuits was actually against one of the original creators of *D&D* – E. Gary Gygax. Gygax had left TSR, and soon after arranged to publish a game he'd designed called *Dangerous Dimensions* (later renamed *Dangerous Journeys*) with Game Designers' Workshop (GDW). TSR alleged that the game was a copyright infringement, and that some of the work was written on company time before Gygax left TSR. This dispute was resolved out of court in 1994, when TSR bought the rights to *Dangerous Journeys* for an undisclosed amount. GDW went out of business two years later, partially due to the financial burden caused by *Dangerous Journeys*.

When Wizards of the Coast bought TSR in 1997, the development of the 3rd Edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was quickly brought underway and Wizards, under vice president Ryan Dancey, simultaneously pursued the idea of releasing the d20 System – the core rules of the game, stripped of the fictional background and setting of the *D&D* world – through an open license similar to that used by *Fudge* and certain freely distributed software. Dancey oversaw the tabletop RPG business for Wizards and was brand manager for *Dungeons & Dragons*. In addition to supporting the development of 3rd Edition and contributing comments to the designers of the game, Dancey asserts, "My largest contribution over the long term may be the concept of the d20 System as a usable engine for many types of adventure gaming products. Pushing the team to think beyond D&D and to believe in the objective of having one really good game with complete support across many kinds of genres and many styles of play has been

a rewarding experience, and I hope that it flowers into a rewarding play experience in the years to come" (Wizards "Ryan Dancey"). By releasing the d20 System under an open license that could apply to many different genres, Wizards of the Coast would be encouraging independent publishers to write game material that required the use of the *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition *Player's Handbook*, thus driving sales of Wizards' product with little or no effort on the company's part, and avoiding the lawsuits for which TSR was infamous.

The Open Game License (OGL) devised by Ryan Dancey is a perpetual, worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive copyright license to use the d20 System in published products. It makes a clear distinction between *Dungeons & Dragons*, which is a trademark of Wizards of the Coast, and the d20 System as two separate identities: "Dungeons & Dragons will mean the specific brand identity of that game, and d20 System will mean the common shared rules and systems used by many different games" (Wizards "The d20 System Concept"). To make this division clear, Wizards prepared what's called the System Reference Document (SRD), an abstract version of the d20 System game mechanics as released under the OGL; the SRD is "a comprehensive toolbox consisting of rules, races, classes, feats, skills, various systems, spells, magic items and monsters compatible with the d20 System version of Dungeons & Dragons and various other roleplaying games from Wizards of the Coast" (Wizards "d20 System Definitions"). The SRD is available as an online document located on Wizards of the Coast's website – www.wizards.com/d20 – and contains all of the

material from *D&D's* 3rd Edition *Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide,*

Monster Manual, and more recently the *Psionics Handbook,* that is designated as

Open Game Content (OGC) – d20 System material that is distributed using the

Open Game License and any material that is derived from Open Game Content

(Wizards "The Open Game License"). The difference between the SRD and the

core *D&D* rulebooks is "mostly the 'flavor' elements," Wizards explains in an

online FAQ: "There are no named gods, none of the spells have significant NPC

names, there's no mention of [the default *D&D* world setting] Greyhawk, etc."

(Wizards "System Reference Document"). This kind of restricted content is

protected by copyright. Wizards doesn't just say that the *D&D* books are Open

Game Content, "Because they aren't. Those books are full of examples, artwork,

trademarks, and characters and settings we don't want to give a royalty-free,

worldwide, nonexclusive right to copy modify and distribute. The SRD makes it

crystal clear what Wizards of the Coast considers to be Open Game Content and

what it does not" (Wizards "System Reference Document"). The concept of

Product Identity was described as part of the Open Game License to allow other

publishers to also restrict their own world setting-specific elements from general

usage.[xxx] Companies who use the d20 System under the Open Game License are

also allowed to use the d20 System trademark logo – an eye-catching graphic

depicting a square frame with the words "d20 System" enclosed within it –

under a separate license (see Appendix C) as a way of associating their products

with *D&D* without infringing on the *Dungeons & Dragons* trademark. This logo

also appears on the covers of all Wizards of the Coast d20 System roleplaying game products, including *Dungeons & Dragons*.

To use the d20 System logo on an Open Game License product, an independent publisher first sends in a Confirmation Card to Wizards of the Coast that gives his contact information. The game designer then creates a product that is at least five percent Open Game Content, either from material presented in the System Reference Document, OGC by other publishers, or that the designer created himself. In using this material, the designer and publisher must abide by the restrictions presented in the Open Game License, the d20 System Trademark Logo License, and the related d20 System Guide located at www.wizards.com/d20/files/d20guide.rtf. The publisher then reproduces the entirety of the Open Game License (see Appendix B) in his product, indicating his acceptance of the terms of the license, and adds his own copyright notice to Section 15 of the license, where Wizards' copyright notice is located, along with the exact copyright notice from any OGL products the publisher used other than the SRD. This way, the publisher retains the copyright to his product, but gives others permission to use the material designated as Open Game Content in other OGL products. The portions of the work that are Open Game Content must then be clearly designated; usually this is done by putting the OGC in boxes, italics, or in some distinctive location in the layout of the product, and by including a Product Identity statement in the credits page. Finally, the publisher must include the d20 System logo on the cover, at a size no smaller than one-half inch

in width by one-half inch in height, along with the following statement:

"Requires the use of the Dungeons & Dragons® Player's Handbook, Third

Edition, published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc."; and the following notices

inside the book:

> "d20 System" and the "d20 System" logo are trademarks of Wizards of the
> Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc., and are used according to the
> terms of the d20 System License version 4.0. A copy of this License can be
> found at www.wizards.com/d20.
>
> Dungeons & Dragons® and Wizards of the Coast® are registered
> trademarks of Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc., and
> are used with permission.

The Open Gaming Foundation created by Ryan Dancey believes that a

license must provide for two important features in order for it to be a true open

game license. First, the license must allow game rules and materials that use

game rules to be freely copied, modified, and distributed. And secondly, the

license must ensure that material distributed using the license cannot have those

permissions restricted in the future. The group explains:

> The first requirement precludes an Open Gaming License from placing
> any limitation on the licensed content beyond those necessary to enforce
> the terms of the license itself. This prohibition includes a restriction
> against commercial distribution, a requirement for review or approval, the
> payment of a fee of any kind to a 3rd party, or any other term that would
> seek to limit the free use of the licensed material.
>
> The second requirement means that the license must have a mechanism to
> ensure that the rights it grants cannot be taken away, either by the original
> contributor of the material, of the copyright holder of the license text itself,
> by an action taken on behalf of a 3rd party, or any other process (Open
> Gaming Foundation).

The Open Game License's chief advocate, Ryan Dancey, further explains:

> Generally, Open Games are provided to the public using a copyright license. The terms of that license may vary from game to game depending on the inclinations of the original creators of the game in question. Each license may impose additional terms, but in order to be considered an Open Game, any such license must give the recipient the right to freely copy, modify, and distribute the licensed material, and the license must provide a mechanism to ensure that Open Game content cannot become Closed (meaning that the freedom to copy, modify and distribute the content cannot be rescinded). (Wizards "Open Game Definitions")

According to this definition, the *Fudge* License doesn't meet the requirements of being an open game license. Dancey asserts, "The problem with the FUDGE license is the requirement that any commercial distribution first obtain a separate license from a third party [the system's designer] prior to release" (Wizards "Other"). Also included in that license is a payment of a fee to Steffan O'Sullivan in the form of two copies of any publication using *Fudge* material, and a requirement for review or approval in the form of the restriction that "the material contains no instructions which, if carried out by the reader, would cause physical injury to any person" (*Fudge* License Appendix A). Instead, the Open Game License used by Wizards of the Coast styles itself upon software distribution licenses such as the GNU General Public License found at www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl.html. Indeed, the term "Open Game" is derived from the software development community; "In that community, the term 'Open Source' is used to refer to computer software that is provided to the public using licenses that require the source code to be distributed, and provide permission to the recipients to freely copy, modify and distribute that code as well," asserts Dancey (Wizards "Open Game Definitions").

But what would convince the industry leader to provide free access to its intellectual property to competitors? What was the purpose of releasing the heart of *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition as an open game, and how has that decision impacted the roleplaying industry and hobby? As mentioned previously, the 3rd Edition of *D&D* was designed to make the game accessible to fans by cutting through the deluge of 2nd Edition products, and once again reduce the entry cost into the hobby to the three core books. In addition, the designers hoped to make the d20 System a usable game engine for many genres of adventure gaming products. The Open Game License, then, was designed to eliminate the need for continual lawsuits against copyright infringement while still protecting Wizards' intellectual property, and at the same time enhance sales of Wizards' products by guaranteeing a wide distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons*-related material. By "altruistically" releasing their game mechanics, Wizards was in this way forwarding its own interests. But it is this last reason – furthering the distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* – that reveals some of the basic dynamics of the roleplaying industry and its consumers, and the true impact of the Open Game License.

The roleplaying industry is one that fluctuates widely at times. For example, the tabletop RPG industry lost 60 percent to 70 percent of its unit sales from the period from 1993 to 1997 (Wizards "Open Game Definitions"). In statements on the subject of open gaming, Wizards of the Coast asserts that "the major factors which caused the collapse of the commercial tabletop RPG market

... [were] the proliferation of different, incompatible, core game systems" and the "dissatisfaction consumers had about the products game publishers made available for sale" (Wizards "The d20 System Concept"; Wizards "Open Game Definitions"). Wizards explains that the Open Game License is an opportunity to limit the number of systems on the market, and so secure *Dungeons & Dragons'* continuing success by stabilizing the fluctuations in that market:

> When many different game systems proliferate in the market, they cause significant problems [in sustaining] ... a long-term, commercial market for RPG products.
>
> [Wizards of the Coast] has decided it is possible that consumers can be educated to understand the problems of system over-proliferation, and for those consumers to apply pressure to publishers to use standardized systems.
>
> Wizards of the Coast believes that by ... educating consumers about the benefits of Open Games, the fundamental economics of the tabletop RPG category will be improved. One (obvious) consequence of this strategy is that if it works, Wizards will see significant, long-term financial benefits. Thus, the company sees this as a win-win situation, where it can benefit along with, rather than at the expense of, other publishers. (Wizards "The d20 System Concept")

Wizards believes that the roleplaying market is one where diversity of game mechanics is more harmful than beneficial, and the OGL is its attempt to reduce the number of widely distributed roleplaying systems. Their goal with the OGL is to shift the RPG industry from producing competing RPG *systems*, to producing competing RPG *products* utilizing only a few common systems; "Wizards of the Coast hopes that the systems which are widely available in the market also become Open Games, and that instead of supporting dozens or hundreds of different games, the market chooses to support a just a handful,"

primary among these the d20 System (Wizards "The d20 System Concept").

As an open game, then, *D&D* was expected to appealing to a broader range of players, while competition between independent d20 System RPG products improved the general quality of roleplaying releases:

> One way to help publishers make products that will be more interesting to consumers is to allow them to use standardized systems that have large networks of players. Designing a product targeted at a large network of players gives that product a better chance of being commercially successful than designing a product targeted at a small, or a new network of players.
>
> … In addition to the potential improvement in the business of game publishing, Open Games will be subjected to a large, distributed effort to improve the games themselves. Because Open Game licenses allow publishers to make any changes they deem necessary to the material they are using, a publisher who thinks they have found a better way to write a game rule will be free to do so. And, if that new way is perceived as better than the existing alternatives, other publishers will be able to take that new rule and use it as well. In this way, the overall design of an Open Game should improve over time, and be the benefit of far more development and testing than any one game publisher, no matter how large and successful, could hope to apply by themselves. (Wizards "Open Game Definitions")

The idea of targeting a large network of players, in particular, is one that has been a guiding force in the development of open gaming. Wizards gives the theory of "network externality" as a major reason in its decision to support open games: "In the case of companies who own trademarks and brands associated with large player networks, one school of thought holds that Open Games which link to those large networks will tend to reinforce them and drive value to the owners of those trademarks and brands" (Wizards "Open Game Definitions"). By appealing to communities of players with different roleplaying preferences –

the desire to play in varied campaign settings – and providing them with a shared rules knowledge – that of the d20 System, which can theoretically be applied to any game setting – the OGL is designed to benefit both independent publishers and Wizards of the Coast.

The first release of an independent OGL product was Atlas Games' *Three Days to Kill*, a low-level adventure released at the GenCon 2000 convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin[xxxi] – where *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition also made its first appearance. *Death in Freeport*, a d20 System adventure by Green Ronin Publishing, was released at the convention the day after *Three Days to Kill*, due to problems with shipping. Since then, the roleplaying market has seen an explosion of d20 System releases, including a version of *Call of Cthulhu* (Wizards of the Coast, 2002) that applies the d20 System rules to H. P. Lovecraft's setting. About two dozen new d20 System products were announced in March of 2002 alone, as a look at the Alliance Game Distributors catalog *Game Trade Magazine* reveals, and the number is rising steadily – over forty new releases were announced in just one month by December of the same year. But the argument that a parallel rise in quality has been seen is seriously debated.

Some d20 System independent releases are bound to become classics in roleplaying: *Three Days to Kill* and *Death in Freeport*, as the first d20 System adventures produced; *Creature Collection* (White Wolf, 2000) as the first sourcebook released by an independent publisher, actually beating Wizards' own *Monster Manual* to stores by a few weeks; and *Traps & Treachery* (Fantasy

Flight Games, 2000), following closely behind the *Creature Collection*, are all

prime examples. But for the most part the releases that are most well known

among gamers are those that were released in the first year after 3rd Edition was

published; those that sold the most because of the limited availability of d20

System materials. For instance, according to its publisher *Three Days to Kill* sold

out almost immediately after it was released and had to be reprinted.

Comparable adventures released today are expected never to be reprinted, and

typically sell less than a tenth of *Three Days to Kill*'s numbers over their lifetime.

In this environment, it can be argued that the independent publisher who

releases the most books makes the most money, while the one who makes

higher-quality books – investing more time and resources into the product – will

soon be forgotten by distributors and retailers, who need to make shelf space for

next month's slew of releases.

But not only has the OGL had a tremendous effect on the RPG market, it

has also impacted the role of the author in roleplaying games. If the RPG

designer is invested with authorial power, as discussed above, the OGL, when

applied to game design, effects an even greater disruption the traditional concept

of a central, unified author, in that the designer also becomes a plurality. The

"borrowing" of rules elements from other designers becomes a common practice

when allowed by the Open Game License, for instance, and is even required as

the cost of participating in the OGL movement. An OGL designer borrows from

the d20 System as presented in the SRD, only to have another designer borrow

design elements from him, whose work is then borrowed by yet another designer, each time adding another copyright notice to the list printed in the newest release. And freelance game designers – the unattached writers used by most game publishers in addition to on-staff talent – work for various publishers, many times referencing their previous work in another publisher's new release. This intermingling of creative juices makes the idea of a singular designer ridiculous: Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax in first creating *Dungeons & Dragons*, David "Zeb" Cook in developing the 2nd Edition of the game, Jonathan Tweet as lead designer of the 3rd Edition, Ryan Dancey in transcribing the d20 System rules into a comprehensive System Reference Document and developing the Open Game License, every independent designer who uses the d20 System to create a new RPG product, and those subsequent OGL designers who then include his work in their own, all have a stake in the authorship of an open game product.

From the seminal designers who created the roleplaying hobby with the 1974 release of *Dungeons & Dragons*, to isolated game elements developed by one RPG designer that are "borrowed" by others, to the development of industry-wide phenomena like "storytelling" games, "generic" or "universal" rules systems, "diceless" games, and "open gaming," RPG designers exert a tremendous influence on the direction the roleplaying industry takes and the way that RPGs are played. In the roleplaying game designer, then – as well as in the seminal writer of the original literature, the game's editor and publisher, RPG

fans, and the game moderator and players as influenced by the cultural

environment – is invested a share of the authorship role inherent in roleplaying

games.

CHAPTER SIX:
PLAYING WITH SOCIAL NORMS

The cultural environment in which Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax

created *Dungeons & Dragons*, and today's game publishers produce and market

their products, also has a direct impact on the content of roleplaying games.

Specifically, attacks by some elements of the conservative religious establishment

tend to marginalize and vilify roleplaying. Organizations that have attacked

Dungeons & Dragons, in particular, and other RPGs in general include Media

Spotlight, Chick Publications, Pro-Family Forum, Christian Life Ministries, the

Daughters of St. Paul, the National Coalition on Television Violence, and

Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons. Groups like these frame roleplaying as

an occult activity, claiming that there is a direct link between these games and

Satanism, mind control, and excessive violence (Richardson 108). To the

opponents of roleplaying, *Dungeons & Dragons* represents "a decisive moral

realm through which Satan gains control of individuals and unravels the social

fabric of communities" (Richardson 109).

Along with *Dungeons & Dragons'* success in the late seventies and early

eighties came accusations of links to occult activities, Satanic cults, and suicide

pacts between teenagers – these claims continue to surface periodically even

today. The Game Manufacturers Association (GAMA), the trade organization

for the adventure gaming industry, contends that most of these concerns stem

from a lack of information on the part of concerned parents, as well as bad

publicity resulting from media sensationalism regarding a few troubled teenagers. The first of these incidents was the case of 16-year-old "genius" Dallas Egbert, who the media claimed played "live action" *Dungeons & Dragons* in the steam tunnels beneath his university, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, which they linked to his suicide. Although his family later denied any correlation between the two, and allegations of drug use and confusion regarding his sexual preference also surfaced, the rumors persisted (Soc.religion.christian).

Perhaps the most publicized case was that of the suicide of Irving "Bink" Pulling in June of 1982. Reportedly, in addition to playing roleplaying games, Pulling also had sympathies toward Adolph Hitler, and was fighting a bout of depression over a failed attempt to run for school council. After his death, his mother, Patricia Pulling, organized BADD (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons) and asked the Consumer Product Safety Commission to place warning labels on RPGs in the mid-1980s. The agency investigated, but determined that the games did not present a hazard to the public (ReligiousTolerance.org). Despite this, in 1987 Tipper Gore added to concerns such as these by condemning *Dungeons & Dragons* in her book, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Gore asserts that "like a cancer, Satanism has come a long way ... From *The Exorcist* to the Dungeons and Dragons fantasy role-playing game, Americans chased one occult fad after another. The popular Dungeons and Dragons game has sold eight million sets. The game is based on occultic plots, images, and

characters which players 'become' as they play the game" (Gore 118). Gore goes on to attribute Pat Pulling as an expert on the subject, claiming that "the game [*Dungeons & Dragons*] has been linked to nearly fifty teenage suicides and homicides. Pulling's own son killed himself in 1982 after becoming deeply involved in the game through his school's gifted students program. A fellow-player threatened him with a 'death curse,' and he killed himself in response" (Gore 118). However, Michael Stackpole – a popular game designer and science fiction writer who investigates cases such as this for GAMA – notes that "Though she presents herself as taken utterly unawares by her son's death, at least in BADD publications, Mrs. Pulling was aware of her son's problems. During a seminar at the North Colorado/South Wyoming Detective Association … she said her son had been displaying 'lycanthropic' tendencies like running around the backyard barking. Within the month before his death, 19 rabbits Bink had raised were inexplicably torn apart, and a cat was found disembowled with a knife. It seems clear that Bink Pulling was a disturbed youth" (Stackpole 272).

In further answer to charges such as these, GAMA points out that separate inquiries by the Center for Disease Control, Association of Gifted and Creative Children, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and the American Association of Suicidology were able to find no evidence of a link between gaming and teen suicide. In addition, Michael Stackpole calculated the expected suicide rates by gamers during the early years of *Dungeons & Dragons*, using BADD's estimate of 4 million gamers worldwide for the total population of roleplayers; "Assuming

that fantasy role game playing had no effect on youth suicide rate, one would have expected about 500 gamers would have committed suicide each year. As of 1987, BADD had documented an average of 7 per year" (ReligiousTolerance.org). Studies like this one – which, granted, is not a rigorous scientific inquiry – could be interpreted as saying that roleplaying drastically *lowers* the suicide rate. As ReligiousTolerance.org notes, "It would appear that playing *D&D* could be promoted as a public health measure." An outside test that correlated the number of years a gamer had played *Dungeons & Dragons* with emotional stability found that the levels of association were not statistically significant, however; the test's coordinator, Armando Símon, concluded:

> Nothwithstanding, newspaper reports of fundamental religious parents denouncing on the one hand that D & D is Satanic and on the other hand policemen and district attorneys blaming D & D for individual cases of runaways, suicides, and various crimes, our findings show a more mundane picture. Increased exposure to D & D is not positively correlated with emotional instability. Indeed, as a whole group, D & D players obtain a healthy psychological profile, as measure by the 16PF. It appears, then, that in those cases wherein the individuals had previously played D & D, the game may have simply been an incidental, irrelevant aspect, rather than an etiological factor. (Símon 332)

Keith Hurley also notes that studies have been undertaken to assess emotional stability (the aforementioned Símon study, 1987), feelings of alienation (DeRenard and Kiline, 1990), and general personality profiles of gamers (Douse and Macmanus, 1993). Like Símon, Hurley also maintains that "The results of these studies show little difference between the personalities of gamers and those of non-gamers. [Though] research has concentrated on the possible detrimental effects of role-playing" (Hurley 45). Studies such as these seem to disprove the

contention that roleplaying has any direct link to suicidal tendencies.

Also in direct contrast to the assertion that roleplaying is dangerous, GAMA claims that RPGs promote "group togetherness and cooperation to achieve group goals. They teach optimization: minimal effort for maximal results. They teach problem solving and statistical relationships. They reward the organized planner and point at positive correlations between planning and winning. They appeal to the intelligent and inquisitive mind," which the trade association says is also indicated by the many gaming clubs based out of universities (Godfrey). Furthermore, GAMA touts roleplaying's ability to stimulate reading skills, library and research skills, math skills, and social activity, the last of which is especially counteractive to the antisocial tendencies typical of suicidal persons. Educator Paul Cardwell Jr. also argues in *Role-Playing Games and the Gifted Student* that when students become involved with RPGs, they develop their skills in following directions, research, conducting independent and self-directed study, planning, choice and decision-making, evaluation, co-operation and interaction with others, leadership, problem-solving and critical thinking, predicting consequences, figural and spatial reasoning, taking other points of view, asking questions, prioritizing, interrelated learning, and continuity of learning, as well as enhance their vocabulary, creativity and imagination, and sense of ethics (Cardwell 4 – 6). For example, players strategize and cooperate to create more imaginative ways to persevere against foes. Creative problem-solving and team cooperation can come into play

in solving riddles and completing quests. And those who are poor strategists can be helped by others in the group, bolstering their own social skills.

Research tends to uphold this view of roleplaying as being beneficial socially and as a learning tool,[xxxii] even if it seems to have little correlation with emotional stability; for instance, a study by Eli Saltz and James Johnson that examined fantasy play among socially and economically disadvantaged preschoolers established that children involved in the roleplaying of imaginary stories tested higher in social and cognitive development, and standard IQ tests (Saltz and Johnson, 1974). A research design by Robert Fink also found that kindergarteners experienced increases on pretest-posttest measures of understanding kinship relations and free-play imaginativeness. He determined that "Imaginative play can be generative of new cognitive structures, under certain conditions, by the enhancement and accommodative use of psychological processes such as reflection, role-integration, language, role conflict and representational activity" (Fink 895); in this way, roleplay aids in the process of learning. Deborah Rosenberg suggests that the inability of preschoolers to engage in fantasy play should be considered a kind of social handicap; "those children who showed weaker skills in fantasy, who did not come to some satisfactory resolution of conflict, or who did not practice skills and interactional repertoires in fantasy play, did not function well in nursery school settings" (Rosenberg 89). In a study specifically relating to *Dungeons & Dragons*, Luis Zayas and Bradford Lewis observed latency-aged boys (ages 6 to 12 years) who

experienced episodes of hyperactivity and "acting-out"; they found that when selected to play *Dungeons & Dragons,* the game seemed to foster "adaptive social interaction" because it "provided for mutual aid situations" (Zayas and Lewis 61 – 62). While BADD publishes lists of suicide victims who were allegedly involved in playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and other roleplaying games, GAMA asserts there is no way to know how many potential suicides were prevented by the same games, which have the ability to bring lonely teens together in a social community.

However, some opponents of roleplaying games continue their accusations despite being unable to prove any real connection between roleplaying and suicide. For instance, David Brown, who holds a master's degree in theology, claims that because "D&D got its story line, symbols and characters from the occult and pagan mythology," all RPGs are dangerous, especially to children. He continues, saying, "Games are powerful tools for capturing the minds of children. Games point the thinking of those who play them in a definite direction and if that direction is not a wholesome direction, there can be problems ... The fact is, we should not mimic things that are an abomination to the Lord. No one should even pretend to be a child of the devil, an enemy of righteousness. When they do, they pervert the acceptable ways of the Lord!" (Brown "Beware of Magic"). A similar perspective is held by some conservative religious groups that assert "One may find that a deal has been struck [with Satan] without one's full knowledge or consent of the transaction.

… [They] claim that such deals may be struck by fantasy game players whose engrossment in *Dungeons & Dragons* makes them unwitting and, hence, vulnerable customers to their salesmanship" (Richardson 109).

In response to these kinds of claims, *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator E. Gary Gygax asserts, "I made up all the spells out of my head. How could anyone take them seriously?" (quoted in Phillips 129). TSR's internal policies also demanded that magic spells for *Dungeons & Dragons* "are to be portrayed as artificial and used for dramatic effect. They should not appear to be drawn from reality. Actual rituals (spells, incantations, sacrifices, etc.) … shall not be presented or provided as reference" (Appendix D). The allegation that *Dungeons & Dragons* is a "gateway" to Satanic or dangerous practices is "utter rubbish!" according to Gygax. He also points out that "there isn't a single documented instance of any such 'Satanic or dangerous practices' anywhere" (theonering.net). He goes on, saying:

> That dedicated Christians might believe that the mention in a game of "magic", and "Demons and devils" and the like is bad can be understood. However, in all, it is actually nothing more than a game. The "magic spells" are all make-believe, don't work. They, along with the demons, devils, dragons, swords, thieves, gold and gems – the whole kit and caboodle – are fictitious. Imaginary things are not evil nor harmful. As to "occult", how can a game played by millions be "hidden", "Secret" and the like? Complete nonsense.
>
> As to being dangerous to the minds of players, there is no basis for such assertions either. The vast majority of qualified mental health experts have no such concerns in regards normal persons. That a group playing a fantasy RPG will lose touch with reality, or become "mind-controlled" is completely fatuous. This is obvious to any observer of or participant in RPG activity. Those who claim such an effect is possible are the ones who have lost touch with reality. (theonering.net)

A GAMA informational leaflet also argues, "It is claimed that the games contain spells, incantations, and other descriptions of how to work magic but all are acknowledged to be imaginary. Most importantly, these 'magical' activities are presented as things to be done by a player's character as part of the game … no game assumes that a player will actually … cast a spell or call up a demon" (Stafford). In this way, supporters of roleplaying contend that it's a case of misunderstood suspension of disbelief when outsiders hear players talking about encountering fantastical creatures, not a dangerous confusion of fantasy and reality.[xxiii]

In their article "Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Dungeons & Dragons," in *The Satanism Scare*, Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine note the underlying irony of confrontations such as this between RPG players and opponents:

> Claims made by *Dungeons & Dragons* opponents that fantasy game play is an occult activity appear at first glance to be consistent with the imagery developed by gamers themselves: dragons, sorcerers, elves, slayers, and soothsayers are part and parcel of the mystical, enchanted, dangerous voyages that players embark on during the game. Thus, the claims have a surface plausibility. According to these claims-making groups, because such play represents "consorting with the Devil," one should expect insidious and diabolical consequences, corrupting naïve players who become involved in the game without knowing its dangerous effects. These claims, which gamers dismiss, are ironic in that critics wish to give the games more importance than do the games' defenders. Players argue that these are only 'games' having little effect on players, but critics see them as powerful tools of education and socialization. … It is ironic that prior to the critic's charge, participants recruit others by arguing that these activities promote skills and training, and are worthy of public notice. (Daniel Martin 108)

Indeed, the arguments presented by GAMA and the supporters of gaming, as

discussed above, that roleplaying is beneficial emotionally, socially, and intellectually, seem only to strengthen the resolve of detractors who reappropriate this argument for their own purposes, saying that games *are* powerful tools of education and socialization that are used to corrupt young minds. When E. Gary Gygax says roleplaying "is actually nothing more than a game" and that "imaginary things are not evil nor harmful," he not only negates and contradicts GAMA's attempts to validate gaming in the face of the conservative religious establishment's reinscription of that message, he also misses a central point of roleplaying's detractors: the fragile human mind is the battlefield on which souls are won or lost. For example, one of BADD's promotional pamphlets claims:

> It is very possible for the subconscious mind to overpower the conscious mind. Suddenly you are no longer in total control of your mind. The "fantasy game" becomes a "reality game." You begin to live it for real. Everything you do, or say involves or associates to the game itself. You no longer play the game for enjoyment, you must have it (play it) just like a person on drugs, alcohol or tobacco must have them. It is an addiction and your mind is under the control of the game. It is possessed by the game. ... It has happened to many college students that have committed suicide or done some serious bodily harm to themselves and/or others. The destruction it can cause to the mind and soul is incredible. (Molitor)

From this perspective, the mind has a fragile bond to the self, and it is possible for the two to become detached from each other. Martin and Fine comment on this, saying that "The fact that the game is played 'entirely in the mind' gives it a power that other leisure activities do not have. ... Because thorough engrossment and theatricality during fantasy play makes for a good game, a strong identification with one's fantasy character is desirable. Critics argue that

it is precisely this engrossment in imaginative play that leads to overattachment to the *personae ficta* of fantasy games, displacing normative behavior in everyday life" (Daniel Martin 111 – 112). In this way, the fact that roleplaying is not "real" – that it's conducted in the minds of the players – only confirms its danger in the eyes of those who see a "loss of self" as a very real threat to the tenuous connection between the human mind and soul.

However, proponents of the game say that it's perfectly natural for players to become attached to characters that they may have spent days or weeks developing; it's only human nature to care about your character and what happens to him in the game. Also, most players retain elements of their own personality when playing in an RPG, drawing on their own experiences to direct their character, and this way investing the fictional persona with a kind of realism and sense of self-hood (see also Chapter Seven). Martin and Fine assert that "few if any players are able to render performances bereft of vestiges of their nonfantasy selves. Although players who play themselves may be invested in the game, one could not claim that the character has taken over their lives. In that sense they are immune from Satan's beckoning" (Daniel Martin 116). By way of defusing their opponents' claims, it could be said that RPG players, in effect, play themselves, in this way actually strengthening their sense of self rather than endangering it.

Another common condemnation of roleplaying focuses on the violence common in these games. Darren Molitor, for instance, claims that:

> Not only is the game based on magic and the supernatural, it involves violence, serious violence! The type of violence not allowed on TV. There is hack and slash murder, rape, thievery, pillaging and terrorism. And in the game it is natural and expected for a character to do those things. A character must, at least, murder and rob in order to survive. (Molitor)

While it's true that many RPGs are extremely violent, the effect of this kind of fantasy aggression is open to debate, and the same argument can and has been made and similarly questioned in regard to television, movies, and especially video games where participants "act out" violence. Defenders of the games and other media assert that this kind of violence is cathartic – a release from everyday stresses and hostility. Violence is also limited in RPGs by things like the composition of the group playing, the best interests of the party, and the players' fear of putting their characters in danger; group dynamics and a sense of self-preservation, then, work to reign in overtly destructive behavior and turn it instead to more productive pursuits that benefit the entire gaming group.

Martin and Fine also speculate that fictional violence actually bolsters the RPG players' innate sense of good and evil:

> The play frame developed during fantasy games defines what would be brutal and savage attacks in real life as part of a typical routine of fantasy role-playing. Outside the game context, gamers are not overtly aggressive. Yet, some players obviously do act out aggressive impulses within the fantasy game framework. ... Although gamers may be oriented toward killing and death, fantasy play in the game embodies the struggle between "good" and "evil" where "evil" is defined and personified as a fantasy character that must be exterminated. Thus, good remains good, even when characters, like theatrical performers, portray "evil." (Daniel Martin 113)

In most cases, players do choose to define themselves as good characters who fight against the forces of evil; for example, among the fantasy gamers observed

by Gary Alan Fine, about 80 percent decided to roleplay "good" or "lawful" characters (Daniel Martin 117). *Dungeons & Dragons* even has a built-in system of attributing "alignments" to characters and creatures, transforming good and evil into black and white traits as game statistics carried by all living (and undead) beings. An alignment is said to be "the character's place in the struggle between good and evil. ... Good and evil are not philosophical concepts in the D&D game. They are forces that define the cosmos." A person or creature's alignment – its "general moral and personal attitudes" – in this way reflects its "capacity for morally right or wrong behavior" (Monte Cook 87 & 88; see also Chapter Seven's additional discussion of alignments). Because of this dynamic, roleplaying can be said to actively maintain a solid moral education in its portrayal of fantasy violence.

But in the midst of all this discussion is the (false) assumption that a very real danger exists in the form of a rampant Satanism infecting the United States. James Richardson asserts in *The Satanism Scare* that the construction of Satanism as a contemporary social problem during the 1980s had several sources, fundamentalist Christianity and the anti-cult movement primary among them; "monotheistic religions require a concept of an evil power doing battle with an all-powerful god, in order to relieve that preeminent entity of responsibility for evil and suffering," he maintains (Richardson 13). From this perspective, the conservative religious establishment positions RPGs as evil in order to bolster

their own faith; their attacks are due to a conflict within their own theology that leads them to seek out evil where it doesn't exist, not because of some threat inherent in roleplaying games. Approaching the issue in this way, Richardson locates the topic of Satanism as a social construction, wherein the process of making claims is the essence of social problems. He points out that since claims are made that Satanism exists, it becomes a social problem regardless of its objective reality; "For instance, when the press, law enforcement, and psychiatrists appear to take satanism seriously, others are encouraged to do so. If the secular press and the usually antireligious therapeutic community seem to accept the objective reality of satanism, then the satanism scare gains considerable momentum" (Richardson 7). Satanism has in this way gained its power due to its shock value and widespread acceptance as a real movement, rather than any basis in fact.

The media, in particular, appears to be the most influential culprit in validating and exploiting public fears about Satanism and roleplaying. E. Gary Gygax has made comments along these lines, asserting that the media is the prime offender in constructing the Satanism scare relating to roleplaying by running baseless negative stories on the hobby:

> In all, the majority of attacks on RPGs seem to have stemmed from cynical media exploiting matters so as to take advantage of sensationalism to attract viewers and readers, a small group of persons who likewise sought to exploit the sensationalism for profit, and then some larger number of sincere but misguided persons reacting to the initial coverage. Of the lot, concerned parents are the main element, and the group that can be most easily shown that the game is at worst entertaining, at best developmental and educational. (theonering.net)

For example, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* ran a story in 1984 in which *Dungeons &*

Dragons is described by a detractor as a game of fantasy that opens up "A whole

realm of occult to players. ... These are games that Satan has connived to bring

about war on God's Kingdom" (*St. Paul Pioneer Press* C5). In another instance,

following a suicide in Putnam, Connecticut in 1985 that *Dungeons & Dragons*

allegedly precipitated, the *New York Times* published an article stating the

following:

> "It is another of Satan's ploys to pollute and destroy our children's
> minds," said Kathy Dewey, one of nearly a dozen parents who Tuesday
> night urged the Board to Education to ban the playing of the game
> [*Dungeons & Dragons*] at Putnam High School. ... "You have authorized
> Russian roulette," the Rev. Robert O. Bakke, pastor of the Faith Bible
> Evangelical Free Church, told the board. "Over the months to come there
> will be many thrilling and harmless clicks of the gun as Dungeons and
> Dragons is held to the heads of our young people. But another deadly
> explosion will come." (*New York Times* B1)

Yet, despite the groundlessness of this kind of sensational news coverage, it has a

pervasive effect in our society; schools in Vermont, New York, Virginia,

Colorado, Wisconsin, and California have all banned fantasy games at the

request of frightened parents (Richardson 111).

The Committee for the Advancement of Role-Playing Games (CAR-PGa),

an organization of volunteers that works toward the common good of RPGs and

the people who play them, made a concerted attempt in the 1980s – at the height

of the news coverage of alleged "game-related" tragedies – to identify the factors

that caused the distorted perception that games could be a destructive influence

on some people. After collecting newspaper and magazine clippings from

around the world, articles from peer-reviewed journals, the text of U. S.

Appellate court decisions involving games, and other relevant literature, the

CAR-PGa determined that the RPG Satanism scare was entirely unfounded:

> … in 1990, it had become obvious that [these sources] were not dealing
> with the media taking an isolated phenomenon and distorting it so it
> appeared to be the norm, but rather a mass delusion with no basis in fact
> whatsoever. Absolutely none of the six peer-reviewed studies dealing
> with this topic had found any basis for it; nor did the other four which
> dealt with other aspects of role-playing games. All the appellate court
> decisions in which the issue was raised (generally as a "mitigating
> circumstance" in a crime) have rejected the contention as groundless.
> (Cardwell 84)

In 1993 the CAR-PGa released their study of the Associated Press and United

Press International wire services; it showed that "111 stories had been published

about RPGs. Only three, all from the much smaller UPI, had a majority of pro-

game paragraphs, while 79 were mostly anti-game. The rest were mostly neutral

or considered more than one angle" (Cardwell 85). Apparently the ideal of an

objective news does not apply to the roleplaying hobby, which is instead

exploited as a continually fresh source of sensationalism by some members of the

news media.

In this atmosphere of suspicion and accusation, the RPG industry

struggles to stay afloat in a *niche* market. But the attitude of the conservative

religious establishment and the media does have an impact on the roleplaying

games produced in this cultural environment. In particular, a split between

those tying to avert confrontations and an all-out engagement of the worst of the

claims given here seems to emerge under close examination of the industry's internal dynamics. The content of these game books also seems to reflect the social pressures surrounding the hobby by either actively steering clear of confrontational material or reveling in it.

As an example of the first reaction, take TSR's internal writing guidelines for the *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG. In the same 1984 newspaper article that accused *D&D* of being Satanic, TSR offered its 18-point code of ethics (see Appendix D) as proof of its attempts to avoid any religious controversy in its game. This policy maintained that "The use of religion in TSR products is to assist in clarifying the struggle between good and evil. Actual current religions are not to be depicted, ridiculed or attacked in any way that promotes disrespect" (*St. Paul Pioneer Press* C5). In this way, publishers like TSR attempt to weaken the claims against gaming by presenting their product as non-provocatively as possible.

In contrast, White Wolf has consistently played upon the fears of parents to make their roleplaying game *Vampire: The Masquerade* more attractive to a young audience as an ostensibly "subversive" and "dangerous" form of entertainment. Their most recent publicity stunt was to publish a small promotional pamphlet for their *Demon: The Fallen* RPG in the style of a Jack Chick booklet, and distribute it at the 2002 GenCon convention. Also, for the holiday season of 2002, White Wolf "celebrated" the release of *Demon* by holding what they called "The Devil Made Us Do It Sale" on their web site, placing many

of their books on sale for $6.66 – obviously a reference to "the number of the Beast." On their web site, they claim:

> Demons have been speaking in our ears, controlling the very destiny of White Wolf – and perhaps all of gaming. Their book, Demon: The Fallen™, will soon "grace" retail store shelves throughout the world and they (the demons) demand that we celebrate. Their whispers have grown to shouts as of late and… we just… can't help… ourselves! (White Wolf)

In this way, White Wolf actively aligns their games with Satanism as a marketing ploy, deliberate calling attention to themselves and their products by reappropriating the societal stigma regarding gaming.

A similar split – a division between those attempting to validate gaming's wholesomeness as a hobby and those who revel in its subversive reputation – seems to divide RPG players as well as publishers. Andrew Rilstone, past editor of *Interactive Fantasy*, notes that "some role-players would like their hobby to be regarded as a mainstream form of expression: they feel that attacks on it by the religious establishment tend to marginalize it. It would, of course, be cynical to suggest that there is also a portion of the role-playing industry that wishes to be seen as radical and anti-establishment, and therefore welcomes and even encourages religious condemnation" (Rilstone "Crossing" 77). For example, some gamers use their positions as teachers to introduce roleplaying games to their classes as a learning tool, publishing the results of these experiments in academic journals; others gamers run around college campuses at night playing live-action *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, howling at the moon as the "mundanes" walking by try to avoid them. Despite the difference in coping methods, each is

an effective tactic designed to undermine the stigma placed on the roleplaying hobby by the dominant culture.[xxxiv]

Despite GAMA's efforts to educate parents and games retailers about the benefits of gaming, and disprove any relationship between roleplaying and the suicides of troubled teens, the urban legend persists of the antisocial gamer playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in the steam tunnels underneath his university only to lose his identity in his character, and soon after begin a killing spree or take his own life. Roleplaying's status as an alternative social community leaves it open to deliberate misinterpretations like this, and attempts at reappropriation by the dominant culture. In this cultural environment, gaming is at best judged to be an excessive form of escapism, and at worst as the site of a dangerous subversiveness taking the form of Satanism, increased violence, identity confusion, and self-delusion. While crusading religious groups claim that roleplaying games are "very possessive, addictive and evil … a device of Satan to lure us away from God," fantasy roleplayers, in contrast, define these activities as "inherently social, imaginative, and limited rather than cosmological and self-defining" (Molitor; Richardson 121). This reactionary condemnation by the religious establishment positions roleplaying as a subculture running counter to legitimate, patriarchally validated forms of expression. The impact on the RPG industry by this kind of social environment is twofold. Some publishers avoid controversial content, while others exploit it for their own use as a marketing tactic. A similar dynamic develops among fans, as well, some of whom attempt

to validate roleplaying's legitimacy, while others are drawn to and play up its subversive elements; both reactions attempt to destabilize the stigma held against the hobby, undermining the claims of the dominant culture.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
ACTING THE AUTHOR

My own experience with role playing games began in my freshman year of college, during the 1992/1993 school year at the University of Wisconsin at Platteville. Of course I'd heard of *Dungeons & Dragons*; there was even a Saturday morning cartoon based on it when I was growing up. But I had never known anyone interested in it, and it had always seemed somewhat mysterious and vaguely dangerous. At school, my friend Candy introduced me to a group of guys who got together regularly to play, and when I had gotten to know them fairly well, they invited me to play a game of *Shadowrun* with them. I'd been told that this game was a cyberpunk setting; that it was set in a dark future like the movie *Blade Runner*, but with different "races" like elves or dwarves and the option of using magic, as well as powerful guns and computers, to accomplish our mission. But as the five of us sat around a circular table in one of the study lounges of the dorm, I was extremely unsure about what exactly I was supposed to do.

Mark, who was acting as the game moderator, loaned me some dice from a huge pile he dumped out onto the table, and gave me a spare character he had handy. At the top of this sheet was a brief description of the character – a dwarf "street samurai" – and a bunch of numbers next to the words "Body," "Quickness," "Strength," "Charisma," "Intelligence," "Willpower," "Essence," and "Magic." Mark explained that because I was a street samurai, that meant I

was a fighter, and these attributes reflected that. I had a zero for Magic, but my Body score was high at 8 out of 10, my Quickness was 5, my Strength 7, and I had cyberware that boosted these, though it left my Essence – my soul or humanity – at .1. My mental attributes, however, were lower to balance my physical strengths; my Charisma was 2, my Intelligence 5, and my Willpower 5. "So," he said, "You're basically really ugly, but built like a tank, and you have a big frigging gun." He then showed me how, whenever I wanted to perform an action, like jumping across rooftops from one building to the next, all I had to do was tell him what I wanted to do, then roll a number of six-sided dice equal to the attribute that seemed appropriate. So for this jump, I'd roll 7 dice because that was my Strength. If one or more of the dice rolled higher than the target number he had in mind, which was based on how difficult he thought my action was to accomplish, then I succeeded and he would tell me what happened; one success might mean that I "got an awkward take-off, and came down heavy and off-balance on the other side," while seven successes might have me "leap gracefully into the air and land smoothly dead center on the spot you were aiming for."

I was becoming a bit more comfortable with this, now that I saw that there were actual rules involved, and all I had to do was tell Mark what I wanted my character to do and he'd figure out the rest. So, for the next four hours, I let Mark tell me a story of how our group of mercenary punks was hired to break into a heavily armed corporate headquarters and bring back their secret

prototypes to our employer. I kept thinking that it was kind of like the old children's storytelling game where one person starts a story – saying something like, "Once upon a time there was an old man who lived in a hut and liked to eat corn ..." – only to have the next person abruptly pick up the thread and change the direction the story was going – maybe the old man meets a sentient, man-eating corn plant – and so on down a line of players until the story comes to "The End," which may or may not be even vaguely related to the story seed the first person originally planted. Or maybe it was more like a kind of *Choose Your Own Adventure* book that we all read out loud, making the decisions (and so writing the book) as a group, guided by a concept of winning that meant keeping our characters "alive" long enough to complete our mission, rather than trying to beat the other players.

My experience is similar to what many gamers encounter their first time playing an RPG. Andrew Rilstone defines roleplaying as "a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players, with the intention of producing a narrative. This interaction is such that the fictional character (controlled by the player) has complete or nearly complete freedom of choice within the fictional world (controlled by the referee)" (Rilstone "Role-Playing" 11). The final shape that the roleplaying narrative takes is determined by the players, as moderated by the GM. This, of course, has implications on authorship, in that the reader, in effect, is empowered to do more than just interpret and respond to the work, but actually has a hand in shaping its

narrative.

As RPG designer Robin Laws suggests, roleplaying can be looked at as a reaction against movements such as the French *auteur* film theory of the 1950s, which put the director at the center of the analysis of cinema (Laws "Hidden Art" 93). Though most RPG sessions don't live up to the same standards as Alfred Hitchcock's suspense, John Ford's westerns, or the films of Howard Hawks, roleplaying is a pop culture formation worthy of serious analysis in that is destabilizes the notion of a cohesive, central creator of a work; the author of a RPG is split into a chain of multiple contributors to the piece, terminating with the performance of the GM and the players themselves.

Roleplaying accomplishes this in part by investing a unique creative power in the players and GM of the game as active readers and interpreters of the text; RPGs are largely defined by readerly determination of the group experience. As R. Rawdon Wilson states, "Games may be invented by one person but played by others; that is, a structure in the mind of one person can be absorbed, digested, and become the temporary structure of another's mind" (Wilson 5). Roleplaying, as a group experience, creates a temporary structure – the perception of a fantasy world – that is distributed among the collective minds of the gaming group. Attempting to take the passive role of viewer of an RPG-in-progress fundamentally does not work, since in the physical act/performance of roleplaying there is no fixed object to observe. Brian Duguid explains, "the role-playing experience or process is simply not observable since it takes place

primarily in the imagination. If you sit and watch a role-playing game session, you can enjoy the interaction between characters and the development of the plot, but no more than that. The actual experience in which you witness the characters as if they are real, in their imaginary environment, only takes place in one's mind" (Duguid 106). Roleplaying consists of image rather than reality, the abstract rather than the concrete. It's a mediated activity, and as such it makes taking a critical approach to roleplaying games somewhat difficult. As Robin Laws notes:

> RPGs are not set up so that other people may watch. Most sessions occur in peoples' living rooms, or at gaming clubs, or in classrooms, far from the analytical eye of the critic. If critics do take the unusual step of arranging to watch a session, they will change its very nature. The participants are likely to either change their session to add some entertainment for the passive viewer, or be cowed by the unaccustomed attention. Criticism of the actual RPG experience is the Schrödinger's Cat of art criticism. Lift the lid to look at the cat, and you may well destroy it. (Laws "Hidden Art" 96)[xxxv]

Gamers exhibit behaviors that can only be appreciated from within the game: they speak a language filled with "hit points," "armor classes," and "skill checks;" they scribble obscure numbers and notes down on sheets of paper; they roll handfuls of oddly shaped dice; and they talk to each other, describing what "they" do in response to the GM's prompts. But the action of the game – the merging of these arcane activities into an experiential narrative world perceived from multiple viewpoints – happens within the GM's and players' minds. When confronting this dynamic, the passive viewer is not merely excluded, but instead is necessarily integrated into the production of the text despite himself, as the

players respond to his presence and shape the game world around his responses to their own performance.

The mediator of this activity is, of course, the game moderator. Running a game session involves the same decisions about plot, characterization, pacing, atmosphere, and imagery that creators of other narrative forms use. The GM interprets published game material and presents his own version of it to his players, adapting that material as needed to fit into his campaign world smoothly. He guides players toward decisions that fit with the overall direction of the adventure he has planned, and acts as the player characters' senses, describing the environment around them as they move though the created world of the game. The GM is also the final arbiter of success and failure, and can manipulate the rules to suit his own purposes.

All of this places the GM in a position of marked authority. As RPG developer Joseph Carriker comments, this power can be seen as dangerous in certain situations:

> I worked as a volunteer at the local federal prison here in Oregon for about a year or so, and got some insight into some of their policies.
>
> One of the Big Issues that the system has with RPGs is that the default assumption is that one person is going to be running the game.
>
> Prisons take very meticulous steps to ensure that there is no prisoner who has any power, of any kind, over another; unfortunately, the nature of the standard RPG has one person holding that kind of power. Yes, its a very limited type of power and seems utterly ridiculous to us, but giving any prisoner any small measure of control over another can have potentially disastrous results. (Carriker)

However, this is an authority that players can easily subvert: players often go

"off-track," deciding to get drunk at a roadside tavern instead of progressing with their mission, for instance; they sometimes "fudge" rolls when the GM isn't looking; they react to the narrative in ways the GM didn't foresee, sometimes doing things like killing an innocuous NPC who was intended to be crucial to the development of the plot; and they "withdraw" from the game when bored with the direction of the narrative or unhappy with the GM's determinations, refusing to participate actively and only rolling dice when necessary. Unruly players have many methods at their disposal to defuse the game moderator's limited authority.

In addition, several roleplaying games have themselves instituted mechanics to give more control to players instead of GMs. For example, Lion Rampant (before later merging with White Wolf) released the roleplaying accessory called Whimsy Cards in the late 1980s. Each player is given a hand of these cards, each of which describes a certain way to manipulate the narrative of an RPG. Players are allowed to use them to introduce NPCs, change the motivations of characters, and find creative ways to help themselves out of sticky situations; Whimsy Cards in this way bolster the players' own claim to authorship in the text. A second innovation on the part of Lion Rampant was the troupe-style play system presented in the RPG *Ars Magica*, which was later bought by Wizards of the Coast, and then Atlas Games. In this game, the players are encouraged to rotate turns acting as GM from session to session, limiting the power any one participant in the game has over the others. In these ways, the

authorial role is distributed among the members of the gaming group, rather than centering in the person of one primary writer.

Plato's "Ring of Gyges" proposition in *Republic* describes a ring of invisibility that allows a person to commit any crime with impunity. The question is, what would you do if you found the ring, and how does this challenge moral systems? In both the case of the wearer of this ring and the roleplayer, "the characters are free moral agents, freed by magic or by judicial powers, allowing them to act and in doing so to define what they consider correct behaviour" (Holsworth 55). The conflict between the initial, unrestrained desires of the player characters and their moral judgment is an aspect of roleplaying that defines it as an ethical forum for the exploration of the nature of human existence, and that inevitably influences the direction the story's narrative takes.

The term "role-play" was coined by J. L. Moreno in the early 1940s – a translation of the German word *rollenspieler* – as part of his system of psychotherapy, which differentiated "role-playing" from "role-creating" in that the former "permits the individual some degree of freedom" (Moreno 438). It has since acquired currency in the fields of sociology, social anthropology, social psychology, psychodrama and simulation games, and, of course, the entertainment field through games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and has been used as an educational exercise, tool of analysis, method of resource management,

psychological therapy, and recreational activity.

The field of psychology has given roleplaying a significant scholarly treatment as it relates to medical therapy, in which professionals use the acting of roles to probe the underlying issues a patient might otherwise cover up. Keith Hurley describes this relationship between psychology and roleplay, saying, "Role-playing or role-taking skill is thought to form an important part of social cognition, communication and interaction. Indeed the basis for many uses of role-playing is that it reflects the underlying empathy, or ability to put oneself in another's shoes. Developmental psychologists [such as P. H. Mussen in *Child Development and Personality*] maintain that the changes evidenced in a child's play and social interactions as they get older is, to some extent, a reflection of their role-taking ability" (Hurley 40).[xxxvii] Hurley goes on to point out that correlations have been found between a person's ability to roleplay and moral behaviors like helping, sharing, and altruism, and also with general intelligence; "Lack of role-taking skills has been found to be typical of juvenile delinquents ... training in these skills can subsequently result in significantly lower levels of delinquency" (Hurley 41).

Indeed, in the field of psychology, methods such as psychodrama, fixed-role therapy, and behavior therapy are based on roleplaying techniques. Psychodrama involves the patient "acting out their concerns and achieving a catharsis, or emotional release, and thereby confronting problems. Through a process of role-reversals and assumption of various personae the client is

encouraged to view their concerns from otherwise unconsidered perspectives,"
explains Keith Hurley (41). In fixed-role therapy the patient is "given a pattern
of behaviour, differing from the patient's normal behaviour, to enact both in the
therapy session and in everyday life. This approach was developed by [G. A.]
Kelly (1955) with the enacted role serving to help protect the patient as they
explore their environment" (Hurley 41). And behavior therapy involves
"substituting effective patterns of social behaviours for ineffective ones and is
used in situations such as assertiveness training. It takes the form of a number of
scenes, each one progressively more difficult, which the subject role-plays, with
the therapist assuming the role of whomever the subject wishes to become
assertive with. It is rather like a role-playing version of systematic
desensitization" (Hurley 42). In all three, roleplaying is used as a theraputic
technique to help the patient achieve a greater self-awareness and understanding
of other people.

Roleplaying's use as a medical therapy underscores the supposition that
during an RPG session a player's character acts as a latent aspect of himself,
played out publicly. As Wilson asserts, "The distinction between an apparent,
but merely surface, identity [the character in a roleplaying game] and an
inapparent, but real, unconscious seeking its own (coded and disguised)
manifestation [the desires of the player] can be reformulated as the active
compulsion, driving up from inaccessible depths, to try on roles, to hide behind
pretense, to define and redefine oneself differently, or to expose more of the

actual human reality than could be captured in any single role" (Wilson 12). The player's unconscious desires are allowed manifest in the role taken in an RPG, as the identity of the character allows the player a disguise behind which to hide. A knowledge of self or identity is in this way formed though the display of the player's inner desires, as is apparent in the difficulties players have distinguishing between player and character, and in the frequent creation of wish-fulfillment-driven characters.

A significant aspect of the multiple author in RPGs occurs within the player himself as he co-authors the storyline of the roleplaying game. Schechner notes that as in a performance, the player/actor is "behaving 'as if I am someone else' or 'as if I am "beside myself"', or 'not myself', as when in a trance. But this 'someone else' may also be 'me in another state of feeling/being', as if there were multiple 'me's in each person" (quoted in Lancaster "Cyber-Performances" 23). This state has been interpreted as identity confusion or self-delusion by opponents of roleplaying games, as was discussed in Chapter Six, and as a function of game play, as when Wilson comments, "Games are, or can be, absorbing; that is, they pull the minds of the players into them and function preemptively and exclusively" (Wilson 5). But this dynamic also foregrounds the importance of identity in RPGs. This is the problem of the "player character." Most roleplaying games in publication feature a special section – generally near the requisite "Roleplaying is Fantasy" disclaimer – that discusses the difference between the "player" and the "character" in the game. *D&D* 3rd

Edition, for example, points out, "The action of a Dungeons & Dragons game takes place in the imaginations of the players. Like actors in a movie, players sometimes speak as if they were their characters or as if their fellow players were their characters. These rules even adopt that casual approach, using 'you' to refer to and mean 'your character.' In reality, however, you are no more your character than you are the king when you play chess" (Monte Cook 6). The *Call of Cthulhu* RPG reduces this sentiment to one sentence, saying, "The game is an evolving interaction between players (in the guise of characters unraveling a mystery) and the keeper, who presents the world in which the mystery occurs" (Petersen 23). The distinction between the two generally becomes moot when participating in a roleplaying game, however; saying that "I" as my character "draw my gun" as part of the roleplaying experience is to engage in the performative rather than merely the descriptive, which is a central goal of the game. As Kurt Lancaster observes, "In a role-playing game performance, players do not just improvisationally describe what their characters will do in a given scene: what they say is the action itself" (Lancaster "Longing" 51). You don't just report an act in a game session, but rather indulge in it, identifying with the character you're playing and with the fantasy world of which he is a part. The common usage of the combined term "player character" in gaming literature merely underscores the melding of the two identities that often happens as part of the normal dynamics of a game session.

The process of developing an RPG character is an intensive, lengthy

process. As James Wallis observes, "In-depth characterization cannot be created, it must develop and evolve during play in a process which sometimes takes years, as the player explores and develops the limits of the character's personality, and creates a library of experiences and references which define their past and present – character development is an existential process" (Wallis "Through" 86). The development of a character may be experiential, yet upon first creating a character, this experience is lacking. For this reason, a new RPG character is often more like his player than different, as the player "fills in the blanks" with his own experience; the character can't leave behind his player's background, knowledge, and skills, though the two might be completely different individuals as far as the game's narrative is concerned. The designer of the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game recognizes this situation and includes a warning to GMs and players: "A player has a duty to roleplay an investigator within the limits of the investigator's personality and abilities. That is the point of roleplaying. Try to know as little or as much as the investigator would in life" (Petersen 23). As James Wallis also describes it, "The player is inside the character's head – but since the character's personality is defined in sketchy terms, the character often becomes the player or a facet of the player's personality, projected onto the archetype, and with the abilities and attitudes of the role" (Wallis "Through" 85).

Though there are instances of "self-play," in which players are told by the GM to translate themselves into stats, creating characters who "are" the players

as part of the conceit of the game scenario,[xxxviii] for the most part players take on a

role less obviously self-reflexive. The designer of *Call of Cthulhu* suggests, rather

pointedly, that "It is often more fun to create investigators entirely different from

the real-life player: a tough private eye, perhaps, or a rude taxi driver, or a

tuxedo-clad millionaire dilettante" (Petersen 23). In playing a character who is

very different from the player, however, more is sometimes betrayed about the

player's unconscious desires than would be by reproducing himself accurately in

fictional form. Nathan Gribble, a teacher who uses fantasy roleplaying as a

classroom teaching tool at Sands School in Devon reports:

> Children are happy to play characters who have the same good points that
> they do, but shy away from creating ones who share their bad points, or
> with compensatory good ones. A child who thinks they are tough might
> create a tough player character, but they would be equally happy to create
> a weak one. A child who feels weak and vulnerable, on the other hand,
> will certainly not choose a weak character, and would be fairly unlikely to
> choose a tough one since that would also draw attention to their
> vulnerability. When children start to come to terms with their own
> failings, it is sometimes reflected in their choice of player character.
> (Gribble 103 – 104)

In this way, a player's perception of self is reflected in his character. As Wilson

observes, "Behind every godgame, there lies a situation that recalls, with full

power to evoke the appropriate feelings, the common human intuition of being

made a victim, a scapegoat, or a sacrifice and of being made puny or deluded by

someone superior" (Wilson 142). In roleplaying this situation, however, the

players are also often given the means to reverse this power relationship; first by

being able to subvert the GM's control of the narrative, as discussed previously,

and second by taking on the roles of mighty warriors, arcane magic-users, or

even superheroes, and in this way playing out their own fantasies of power within the game world.[xxxix] James Wallis notes that "playing a character with superior abilities to one's own is one of the escapist aspects that draws players to role-playing games" (Wallis "Realism" 81). In the world of the roleplaying game, players are able to reverse the hierarchy of power into which they were born, asserting their own power over the culture that has manipulated them their whole lives. As Catherine Martin explains:

> The youth of Generation X were exposed to crass consumerism in the marketing of expensive action figures; preestablished hierarchies; machine culture; and an emphasis on masculine characteristics, aggression, the importance of power and wealth, and human powerlessness. The boys were not merely passive recipients of these messages, however, but learned to manipulate and reject them. ... As adolescents, they reacquired some of their power and creativity as human beings through their role games, played among themselves with rules manipulated by them and a Dungeonmaster chosen by them. (Catherine Martin 118)

In this way, roleplaying allows the players to escape a sometimes harsh reality into a dreamworld in which they can re-assert their personal power and individual sense of worth. As Wilson asserts, make-believe such as that promoted by RPGs "does not merely improve on nature, detailing its potential idealities ... but actually replaces it, in an act of psychological displacement, with a better and more acceptable world" (Wilson 10 – 11).

"Our relationship with the world which we entered so unwillingly seems to be endurable only with intermission," says Freud in regard to the purpose of dreams (Freud *General Introduction* 92). This could as easily apply to the "escapism" the roleplaying games, however. In a Freudian sense, the created

realm of the RPG might be considered parallel to that of the dream fantasy. For example, Freud refers to dreams in the context of being a "region" of exploration, in the way that the game world allows players and GMs the perception of space; indeed, Freud states that "the essential feature in the dream-work is the transformation of thoughts into hallucinatory experience," much as the RPG facilitates a group narrative experience based on individual imagining (Freud *General Introduction* 224). Freud's concept of the dream also presents dreams as being "a life bearing certain resemblances to our waking life and, at the same time, differing from it widely" (Freud *General Introduction* 92); similarly, though a wide variety of settings are possible in RPGs, ranging from uncanny to fantastical to mundane game worlds, in each instance they follow certain laws of physics (instituted in the form of game mechanics), they present interpersonal relationships between the characters, and the rules of cause and effect are firmly in place. Roleplaying worlds make sense because of their resemblance to the real world. Yet the RPG scenario also places the players in positions of power that may differ drastically from the reality of their everyday lives. Freud also posits the idea that dreams are produced as a response to a disturbing stimulation of the body during sleep. As an example, he cites a colleague who claimed that "Wilst dreaming, he was made to smell some eau de Cologne, whereon he dreampt he was in Cairo, in the shop of Johann Maria Farina, and this was followed by some crazy adventures" (Freud *General Introduction* 96). Similarly, RPG players take the kernel of the adventure provided by the game moderator

and transform it into their own narrative. This transformation of the original "stimulation" by the players for their own narrative use often culminates in a story line very different from the one begun by the game moderator, just as the dream often has no resemblance to the physical occurrence that may have prompted it.

Aligning the roleplaying experience with Freud's understanding of dreams, then, suggests that the underlying goal of the roleplaying game should also be parallel to that of dreams. And, indeed, both instances are cases of wish-fulfillment. However, the gaming storyline perhaps more closely mimics day-dreams in this, which Freud states "are scenes and events which gratify either the egoistic cravings of ambition or thirst for power, or the erotic desire of the subject" (Freud *General Introduction* 103). Day-dreams, especially, are subject to the manipulation of the dreamer: "They form the raw material of poetic production; for the writer by transforming, disguising, or curtailing them creates out of his day-dreams the situations which he embodies in his stories, novels, and dramas. The hero of a day-dream is, however, always the subject himself, either directly imagined in the part or transparently identified with someone else" (Freud *General Introduction* 103). Indeed, as previously noted, players many times create characters almost indistinguishable from themselves, but for the thin shell of a different name and appearance, yet who are able to attempt daring deeds and access phenomenal physical and magical abilities not possible in real life, in this way assuaging the thirst for power that Freud says is a primary

motivation for day-dreams.

As a process of wish-fulfillment, roleplaying games also actively identity the taboos and desires working within the subculture that engages in it. RPGs not only justify acting these taboos out, but actually sanction this behavior by positioning the players as inherently "good" in the cosmology of the setting. The most basic formulation of this is in *Dungeons & Dragons*, where fans of the fantasy genre take up characters with nine rather simplistic alignments: Lawful Good, Neutral Good, Chaotic Good, Lawful Neutral, "True" Neutral, Chaotic Neutral, Lawful Evil, Neutral Evil, and Chaotic Evil. Because a character is normally designated by the game as Good – PCs actually take this as a formal game statistic – actions that would be abhorrent in everyday life are easily rationalized; PCs regularly seek out otherwise harmless creatures in their underground homes and slay them for their treasure,[xl] for example, then justify murder and theft by saying, "Well, it was an Evil creature!"[xli] *Dungeons & Dragons* formalized this construction of good vs. evil in TSR's own *Code of Ethics*, which stated that "Evil shall *never* be portrayed in an attractive light and shall be used only as a foe to illustrate a moral issue. All product shall focus on the struggle of 'good vs. injustice and evil,' casting the protagonist as an 'agent of right'" (Appendix D). In another example, the game *Vampire: The Masquerade* takes the Goth subculture of the 1980s and 1990s and adds enough of the supernatural to justify murder and mayhem, as well. Goths become vampires who struggle between the conflicting desires of the remnants of their humanity

and the impulses of their bestial selves. To live, they must take the lives of others. The rush of feeding on blood is also identified with that of sex or drug use. Even in H. P. Lovecraft's work and the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG based on it, killing masses of Mythos worshipers in the swamps of New Orleans is justified because they are the miscegenate offspring of humans and unnameable creatures. In each of these games and many others, by playing out cultural taboos players are imbued with a sense of power and control over their lives that they may feel is lacking in reality.

From a psychological perspective, then, roleplaying games navigate the terrain between the dominant culture's conflicted suspicion and fear, and the RPG culture's own subversive resistance to disempowerment. They are sites of conflict taking the form of complex structures of fantasy, which are easily appropriated and reinscripted by the players, and which at their core address the Freudian concepts of dreams and wish-fulfillment. In roleplaying games, players find a dreamworld of their own creating that affirms their sense of self-worth and power.

But power isn't the only motivator behind day-dreams, or roleplaying games for that matter. As noted before, the gratification of erotic desire is as strong a drive in day-dreams as the thirst for power (Freud *General Introduction* 103). Roleplaying also provides an outlet for the erotic desires of the players though the gender inequality that many RPG settings and gaming groups

indulge in, and the elements of scopophilia present in roleplaying's performative nature.

The participants in the roleplaying community are largely white, well-educated, middle-class males in their late teens to late twenties, though the roleplaying hobby welcomes into its ranks many who would not fit this description. This makes roleplayers problematic to dominant culture because, as Henry Jenkins points out, "fans cannot as a group be dismissed as intellectually inferior; they often are highly educated, articulate people who come from the middle classes, people who 'should know better'" (Jenkins 18). In reaction to this unresolveable circumstance, fan cultures (Jenkins uses "Trekkies" as his example) are instead interpreted by dominant culture as being brainless consumers, cultivators of worthless knowledge, who place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material. They are seen as social misfits, emotionally and intellectually immature, unable to separate fantasy from reality, and are feminized or desexualized as a result (Jenkins 10).

The dominant culture's attempts to feminize and desexualize the RPG fan culture can be seen in the yearly media coverage of Milwaukee's GenCon,[xlii] the United States' largest roleplaying convention. Full-page color spreads of convention-goers dressed in medieval armor or as Klingons regularly decorate the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's* City pages. Other photos show awkward, aging boys with *Dungeons & Dragons* t-shirts stretched taut across their bellies, holding up their prized lead fantasy miniatures for the camera. And very rarely is a

woman to be seen, unless garbed in a chainmail bikini. This is especially telling when considered alongside Jenkins' assertion that "the comic fan and the psychotic fan are usually portrayed as masculine, although frequently as de-gendered, asexual, or impotent, [while] the eroticized fan is almost always female. ... The female spectator herself becomes an erotic spectacle for mundane male spectators while her abandonment of any distance from the image becomes an invitation for the viewer's own erotic fantasies" (Jenkins 15). Accordingly, despite the exceeding low percentage of women actually involved in this formation, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* invariably includes at least one token scantily clad female in their coverage of the GenCon convention.

Female roleplayers, as a percentage of the total gamer population, are significantly underrepresented. In 1994, the ratio of male to female gamers in the United States was at 5:1 (Cardwell 86). In 1999, John Nephew, president of the RPG publishing company Atlas Games, also estimated that "the RPG community is perhaps 85% or 90% male, based on what I've seen at game conventions and whatnot" (John Nephew). Research done by Wizards of the Coast in 2000 also suggests that 19 percent of monthly players of tabletop RPGs are women, and they spend less on the hobby, as a group, then males (Wizards *Adventure Game*). This imbalance is odd in that the dynamics behind roleplaying games would seem at first glance to appeal to women players, in particular. C. Gilligan states that "female identity revolves around interconnectedness and relationship" while male identity hinges on "separation and independence;" Gilligan also

suggests that girls seek co-operative play while boys prefer competition (Gilligan 23). As discussed previously, roleplaying games are touted by their designers as cooperative games rather than competitive ones, stressing collaboration between players as members of a group rather than winning. However, several studies describe how "Boys' games tend to involve threats or challenges, often in the context of some violent or fantastic one-against-many situation" (summarized in Oliver 64). This is where RPGs lose much of their appeal to a female audience. Though not competing among themselves, the players of an roleplaying game are inevitably the "winners" as they hack through monstrous foes in their quest for gold and glory. RPGs come from a combat-oriented, competitive background, having sprung from miniatures wargaming as discussed in Chapter Five. The irony of this situation is that an entire category of games that touts itself as distinctive in its roleplaying elements is many times reduced to little more than a vehicle for simulated combat in the form of dungeon crawls – falling back into "roll-play" instead of "role-play" – and in so doing prompts women to avoid roleplaying games entirely.

Another turn-off for women gamers are the male-oriented settings that many RPGs adopt. Jenkins suggests that fans "construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media," making them true "textual poachers" in the De Certeauian sense (Jenkins 23). This is more than apparent in the intertextuality that runs rampant in the construction of

game settings. Game moderators and RPG designers many times borrow wholesale from the literary fictions published by well-known writers, research the period or place their adventure is imagined as taking place in to ground their own creations in relation to historical or scientific sources, or draw on the tried-and-true tropes of the fantasy or science fiction genres. This intertextuality often becomes a justification for assumptions regarding gender in roleplaying games, however.

Consider the game world of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, for example. H. P. Lovecraft is known for letting men dominate his stories, with only minor, problematic female appearances. These intrusions are of note in this discussion for their similarity to the disempowerment and positioning as "other" that women often experience in roleplaying. For instance, in "The Thing on the Doorstep" Asenath Waite is possessed by her sorcerous father Ephraim, who has displaced her mind with his own. She is, literally, a man wearing only a mask of the female. And Asenath must also be considered as non-human; extrapolating from the implications in "The Shadow over Innsmouth," she is the product of miscegenation between a human and an aquatic creature, and she has the "Innsmouth look" that confirms her unnatural heritage. Also, when Asenath's husband Edward Derby says that Ephraim (as Asenath) is now attempting to take over his own mind, he comments that she "wanted to be a man – to be fully human – that was why she got hold of him." Here, women are seen as monstrous, as weak-minded and less than human, and as a distortion of the male

that seeks to consume the male. Asenath is, in fact, a monstrous female who has trapped her mate and will eventually devour him. In Lovecraft's work, women often obscure the truth, impede the hero, and are positioned as possessions of the primary male as wife, landlady, mother, etc. – bear in mind that Lovecraft's women are usually relegated to minor appearances such as the landlady Mrs. Herrero in "Cool Air," Captain Johansen's widow in "The Call of Cthulhu," and Wilbur Whateley's "mother" Lavinia in "The Dunwich Horror." Women in Lovecraft's stories also represent fecundity, as is shown by the cosmic force Yog-Sothoth who sires a pair of twins by Lavinia Whately, but insists on characterizing itself as the female principle. Lovecraft uses women like Lavinia Whately and Asenath Waite as vessels to propagate the unnatural; a woman's sexuality is irrevocably tied to her reproductive capability, which is cast as horrific. Along with Lovecraft's "cosmic-mindedness" and focus on weird horror, these are also some of the elements that inevitably make their way into roleplaying game based on these works.

However, the designers of the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG refuse to overlook the more obvious, cultural forms of "racialism" and misogyny in Lovecraft's work – in particular, the bigotry that was a social norm in the different time periods in which the game is set:

> Historical settings are as real as possible. The world and the United States were very different in the 1890s and 1920s from now, and behaviors most find repugnant today then were ordinary and acceptable. Racism, xenophobia, religious bias, and sexual discrimination as we now perceive them were then normal parts of life, and often loudly espoused. Local, state, and federal laws systematically supported segregation and

> discrimination of every sort, and social forces of great power underwrote that legislation. Scenario authors can choose to ignore social history as not germane, or decide to incorporate specific elements into their plots. Both sorts of approaches have been published. To preclude information about earlier eras (or about this one) dishonors the memory of those who prized freedom, fairness, and opportunity, perhaps long before we were born. (Petersen 24)

But this awareness merely highlights the existence of those games that use historical basis as a justification for sex discrimination and other prejudices. Take the game *Pendragon* (Chaosium, 1990) as an instance of an RPG firmly based in a gender-biased historical setting. This game assumes that most player characters will be males, since the game revolves around knights in a medieval world. Andrew Rilstone asserts that "there is little point in censuring the game for this. If you are going to go off to war, or on the quest for the Holy Grail, you are likely to leave the women-folk at home" (Rilstone "Editorial" 1.3 6). As Rilstone explains:

> Many role-playing games are set in archaic cultures in which politically incorrect values are the norm: not only the romanticized Middle Ages, but also Victorian England or the 1930s. In such societies, the roles of women and men were more sharply differentiated than they are today. Could it be that, for male gamers, this is part of the appeal? Perhaps it appeals to the same ethos as the Wild Man culture: that some men – particularly, perhaps, rather studious, unathletic "nerds" – yearn for a world of heterosexual male friendships; of hunting honour and warfare. (Rilstone "Editorial" 1.3 5)

From this perspective, including the historical facts of sexual inequality and other discriminatory practices as part of the game setting allows male players to escape into game world that validates their own sense of worth by making their characters physically and socially superior to those around them, whether they

happen to be monsters or women. The constructed pseudo-histories of many roleplaying games represent a purposeful blurring of reality and fiction to create this kind of game environment. Roleplaying games that incorporate historical information usually don't include footnotes to indicate historical sources, for example, so the reader has no way of finding out which references are only products of the writers' imaginations. This mixing of historical reality and fiction allows the players free reign in constructing their own male-dominated fantasies.

Rilstone goes on to say that in historically based games like this, it's possible to bend the norms and introduce female knights or Valkyrie-like warrior women, but doing this makes the massive assumption that "the way to admit female characters into an RPG is to come up with a reason why they should be joining in the murdering and pillaging with the blokes. We admit women into our games, but them have to be macho women, preferably with guns" (Rilstone "Editorial" 1.3 6).[xliii] Indeed, the issue of gender is dealt with directly in only a few RPGs, often by making female fighter characters into rare but accepted oddities: *Rune* (Atlas Games, 2001) allows for the occasional Viking warrior woman, and *Pendragon* admits the existence of exceptional characters like Joan of Arc, for example. Andrew Rilstone acknowledges that the alternative – a game based on "women's pursuits" – provokes the immediate judgment that the game would be boring, but replies, "would role-playing games really become less interesting if their focus was broadened; away from combat and power, and into

the issues of real human relationships, in which, throughout history, both men and women have been involved?" (Rilstone "Editorial" 1.3 6).[xliv] Unfortunately, the RPG industry has not embraced this idea wholeheartedly.

A similar dynamic – that of casting female characters in typically male roles like the aforementioned warrior woman rather than providing story structures that break women characters out of the confines imposed by the male fantasy – occurs as a product of the influence of fantasy tropes in RPGs. A minimal female interest in fantasy literature – the source of many of the world settings in the RPG hobby – is attributed to the fact that women find no one with whom to identify. According to author Ursula K. LeGuin, the hero-tale common to fantasy is concerned with "the establishment or validation of manhood. It has been the story of a quest, or a conquest, or a test, or a contest. It has involved conflict and sacrifice" (quoted in Oliver 62). Few of these stories feature any women, even fewer have a female protagonist, and the women who do appear are likely to be "men in women's clothing," in that they're driven by what can seen as male egos, motivations, and impulses. These women wear armor and wield swords – they're given qualities inappropriate to their gender instead of focusing on a more realistic portrayal of women. As one of educator Anna Altmann's students commented, the tokenism of women warriors is "just another case of welding brass tits on the armour" (quoted in Oliver 60). Instead of emphasizing the inner strength of women as opposed to the physical strength of men, for instance, women in fantasy – and in many roleplaying games – are

typically seen "in relation to heroes: as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim or

rescuable maiden," as accessories rather than protagonists, asserts LeGuin

(quoted in Oliver 61). In fantasy, as in RPGs, the hero's relation to women is

"limited to the artificial code of chivalry, which involves the adoration of a

woman-shaped object," she further maintains (quoted in Oliver 65). By drawing

on fantasy tropes, a historical basis, and the work of biased writers like H. P.

Lovecraft, roleplaying games in this way disempower women either by

masculinizing them, or by positioning them in the roles of devalued and

extraneous NPCs. In both cases, womanly heroism is not allowed.

Many women, myself included, become alienated by most RPGs' focus on

combat and conquest, and their seemingly blatant misogyny in many instances.

Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition co-designer Jonathan Tweet recounts one of his

experiences with women in gaming:

> Melissa wanted to be a princess, a beautiful princess. We, an all-guy
> group, were playing a fantasy/science fiction/post-holocaust game.
> Melissa was joining us for the first time. She was – can you guess? – the
> girlfriend of one of the players. We were mutated, magic-wielding, ass-
> kicking mercenaries in a ruined world. And Melissa wanted to be a
> beautiful princess.
>
> Insert awkward pause here.
>
> This home-brew game, you see, had statistics for strength, hit points,
> damage bonuses, and magical power. But looks? Status? The referee
> hadn't bothered to include rules for those. It would have been unfair for
> Melissa to play a beautiful princess because her character would have
> advantages (good looks and status) that she hadn't got by rolling dice. In
> an effort to make her happy, we suggested she play a sorceress, about the
> closest thing to a princess that fitted the rules.
>
> She played, she left, she never returned. (Tweet "*Everway*" 86)

Consider, too, my own introduction to M. A. R. Barker's world of Tékumel through a monthly gaming group I've been a part of since late 2001. Because I knew the RPG was associated with the *Empire of the Petal Throne* series of novels, I read Barker's *Man of Gold* before our first session to prepare myself. I was immediately struck by the blatant misogyny shown in the construction of this fictional world: the hero leapt from one sexual encounter to another throughout the narrative, literal sexual slavery was rampant, both of the primary female characters were stigmatized by their society for aspects of their physicality (one had the blue eyes that marked her as a "witch," and the other – when her presence became inconvenient to the plot – was poisoned with an addictive drug that made her a cataleptic), the only way women could have the status of men was to declare themselves "aridani" (a class of women who take on the role of men), and when the hero couldn't decide between his two lovers in the end, he promptly married both in an offhand remark by Barker. To my discomfort, all of these attitudes and social norms were also reflected in the RPG. On the cover of the *Tsolyáni Language Part II* sourcebook, for example, is a cartoon that depicts two men having problems with the intricate language Barker devised for his world. Some confusion comes up between the words for "shlen beast" – a fantasy beast of burden – and "slave woman." The interaction in the comic implies that there may not be a real difference between the two. And then there are the anecdotes of how women gamers' characters have been "raped" by male PCs during game sessions. As Lee Gold asserts, this kind of alienating tactic is

"often used as a way of discouraging girls from joining an all-male player group" (Gold 104). Unfortunately, situations like these are far too easy for unsuspecting women gamers to stumble headlong into. Is it any wonder that some of them might try gaming once, then never come back?

In another example of this attitude in the roleplaying industry, take the publications of some RPG publishers and designers as cases in point. For example, the book *Fey Magic: Dreaming the Reverie* in Mongoose Publishing's *Encyclopaedia Divine* series was released in 2002. Browsing my local game store I came upon this sourcebook on faerie creatures for the d20 System. I was taken aback by the artwork at first glance – not at its quality, but at the sheer number of fully naked women depicted: of the 26 illustrations of women, including the cover, only 4 showed them fully clothed; in contrast, 13 depicted women with only a carefully placed bit of foliage or gauze, and 9 were completely bare and generally full-frontal. That's almost one third of the illustrations that showed fully nude women, and a total of about 85 percent that were at least partially exposed. Fantasy roleplaying has a tradition of depicting scantily clad female bodies, but this ratio seems a bit excessive. The same company released the *Slayer's Guide to Female Gamers*. Before its publication, representatives of the company posting in professional online forums claimed they couldn't understand why some people had already reacted negatively to the title without even having read the book. Several industry leaders promptly leapt to their defense, again seeming not to comprehend the emotional impact of a gamebook

whose title implies that women roleplayers should be murdered. And as another example, consider my own experience in coordinating and editing the *Penumbra Fantasy Bestiary* for Atlas Games (2003). This was project for which we put out an open call for manuscripts by freelancers, and I was immediately struck by the sheer number of submissions that unselfconsciously proposed monstrous female creatures who delighted in kidnapping human males and forcing them to mate; at first I just felt a bit embarrassed for the writers and asked for revisions, but then started rejecting them outright when the initial trend became a genuine, overwhelming pattern, even among established, professional freelancers. The tradition of epic heroism and the *bildungsroman*, which is filled with monstrous man-eating women, is apparently alive and well in the roleplaying industry.

The disparity in the gender ratio between men and women in the RPG hobby is in this way largely fueled by the thinly disguised gender inequality present in many roleplaying games. When looking at the role of women in RPGs, we must consider the influence of the media that eroticizes female gamers, the games' narrative focus on combat and violence, an intertextual drawing upon popular fiction, history, and the tropes of the fantasy genre that disallow women an active role except in the guise of a man or an NPC, and the attempts of publishers and designers to appeal to male sensibilities. The game worlds of many roleplaying games are constructed based on male fantasy, which promotes gender inequality and results in a disproportionately low number of female participants in the hobby.

The elements of scopophilia present in roleplaying as a performative activity based on erotic desire may influence the narratives of RPGs even more so than the games' questionable portrayals of women do, however. In analyzing dreams, Freud locates the mind as "the stage whereon the drama of the dream ... is played out" (Freud *General Introduction* 94). Dreams, then, "are a performance and an utterance on the part of the dreamer," Freud asserts (*General Introduction* 105). By approaching roleplaying by way of Laura Mulvey's application of psychoanalysis to the cinema, so, too, can roleplaying be interpreted as a performance that offers insight into desires of the players. Mark Frein observes that "We can point to a book lying on a table and say, 'That's a role-playing game,' but we would not say that role-playing is actually happening. Because of this, role-playing seems to be a close cousin of drama. A role-playing game, like a play, needs to be embodied and occurring through time" (Frein 74 – 75). Live action roleplaying, in particular, highlights the performative qualities of roleplaying.

Live action roleplaying (LRP or LARP) emerged in 1982 with the publication of *Treasure Trap*, a *Dungeons & Dragons*-like game that took the mechanics of table-top RPGs and made them "live." As Jay Gooby, events organizer for the international live roleplaying society The Adventurers' Guild, explains, "Instead of rolling a die to see whether you succeeded or failed in a particular action (e.g. fighting with someone, casting a magic spell, running,

leaping or hiding), with live role-play these dice rolls became real actions"

(Gooby 16). In a LARP, roleplaying is enacted in an outwardly performative

manner:

> Sword fighting, running, leaping and hiding actually took place. Spells were "cast" by quoting a line followed by the effect of the spell: "By the power of the fire elements – Fireblast!" Those having the spell cast at them reacted appropriately, role-playing its effect upon them. Physical combat occurred by way of "safe" weapons. These were swords, axes, maces, etc. all constructed from high-density foam glued over a rigid central core and covered with appropriately coloured tape.
>
> … Certain conventions were also introduced to simulate the impossible: a hand in the air signified invisibility, a call of "Time-freeze" indicated that the players in a game should shut their eyes and halt in their current positions – time effectively was held – until "Time-in" was called, thus permitting instantaneous actions such as teleports or transformations to occur. (Gooby 16 – 17)

Like standard pen-and-paper roleplaying games, LARPs can be linear, event-

based adventures or character-dependent, interactive scenarios. The step from

pen-and-paper RPGs to live action roleplaying, however, brings roleplaying even

closer to modes of performance such as the theatrical improvisation of the

commedia dell'arte of the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. Both are totally

improvised, and created by the players on the spot. There are no scripts, though

there are stock characters and situations that appear in different combinations.

"But although the characters [in *commedia dell'arte*] were old favourites and

audiences wanted to see them again and again," Michael Cule asserts in

"Improvisation in the Theatre," "there was a tendency for them to become more

and more individualized and distinguished from one another. Actors would

take a stock character and give them more and more of a personality, making a

name for themselves in the process" (Cule 37). Similarly, RPG characters are

many times stock figures with no home, family, friends, or real personality of

their own. James Wallis states that "characters created within the confines of a

game's rules can survive being two-dimensional, or even one-dimensional,

because they will function as a template, a blank sheet for the player to project a

personality onto" (Wallis "Realism" 72).

On the stage of the roleplaying game, however, the performance many

times becomes problematic in relation to gender. In particular, a certain anxiety

often makes itself apparent when a player of one sex roleplays a character of the

opposite gender. In one of my own first experiences with gaming, a male gamer

created and played a female character. "Her" name was Ballistic, and she was

described as a black Aeon Flux shaved bald and loaded down with armor and

weaponry. She was a cold-blooded killer, and had a completely unfeeling

personality. Ballistic is also typical of one common method of cross-gender

roleplaying: that of the frigid, withdrawn, masculinized female character. That

"tank" of a dwarf I was given by my game moderator, Mark, for my first

roleplaying attempt is another instance of this kind of female combat machine.[xlv]

Another notable female character often created by male players is the vamp.

When these "mysterious and sultry" sex-driven women appear in roleplaying

sessions, they lose no time in attempting to seduce every male in sight, PC and

NPC alike.

One way of approaching problematic occurrence of males playing

stereotyped female characters, either as overly sexualized vixens or as masculinized, frigid combat machines, and of females playing sometimes equally problematic male characters, for that matter, is from the perspective of Laura Mulvey's theory of spectatorship. In this performative space where the audience has the freedom to become actor – where players act the parts of their individual characters while viewing the actions of others – the oversexed female persona taken on by the male player seems to fall into the category of an extended scopophilia that has been given the opportunity to manifest itself in the narrative, influencing the plot rather than being restrained by the inherent distance between actor and audience present in cinema. Scopophilia is summarized by Mulvey as "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" and thus taking "pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation" (Mulvey 424 – 425). In the case of the cinema, "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly," leading to the manipulation of the female character into a figure of pure sexual desire (Mulvey 425). In the RPG, this styling of the female figure around male fantasy is literally enacted upon the male player's female character, resulting in a hypersexual seductress equivalent to the cinematic *femme fatale.* And pushing the analogy a bit further, just as the appearance of the woman in cinema "works against the development of a story-line," halting the action in favor of extended erotic displays such as dance numbers, so too does the presence of this vamp character often lead the roleplaying group into

tangential situations such as bar scenes where the female character is inevitably propositioned by any and all male characters in attendance, generally halting the forward movement of the plot in the process.

As a result of situating himself in the subject/object position by playing a female character, the male gamer finds himself with two options from which to choose his roleplaying strategy, just as the male cinematic character is limited to two reactions to the woman as icon. These are voyeurism: "preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma … counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object"; or fetishistic scopophilia: "substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (Mulvey 427). The male gamer playing a vamp generally chooses the second option, resulting in character sketches that resemble dark versions of a Barbie doll in sprayed-on Spandex, with a (non)personality to match. In this way, the male-generated female character "bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish" (Mulvey 430).

The flip side of this coin, then, is the masculinized female character played by a male gamer; what I have described as the "Ballistic" character. This seems to represent an acting out of narcissistic scopophilia in an identification with the character, with a dash of wish-fulfillment thrown in for taste. The male gamer is able to picture his character as a militaristic mercenary in this guise, but must strip her of femininity and personality to accomplish this. Again, he is limited to

voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia in his approach to synthesizing these reactions, but this time he chooses voyeurism; he is able to demystify the female character by acting her as an exaggerated male, which thus devalues the feminine as necessarily "weak" by privileging the amplified masculine traits of the character.

Although my perception of the dynamic at work in the case of the woman player acting in the guise of a male character is necessarily biased, it seems to me that female gamers roleplay male characters in a much more matter-of-fact, realistic way than their male counterparts play female characters. Sandy Antunes cites Emma Kolstad, a woman roleplayer on the Strange Aeons online discussion list, as suggesting that "since western society has conditioned us to find women's bodies attractive (hence their use in advertising) but does not glorify men's bodies in the same manner, men experience more of a thrill or mystique when they play women than women do when they play men" (Antunes 63 – 64); this erotic thrill is a possible motivator for the extremism of the cross-gender character choices of male players, which female players don't often seem to reciprocate. In my observations of female-played male characters, however, women are much more likely to err on the side of creating male characters who exude an excessive (transgressive) sexuality, much as the male player does in his *femme fatale* female character, rather than playing up the character's physical power. However, Mulvey asserts that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his

exhibitionist like" (Mulvey 426). In roleplaying, this reluctance takes the form of a semantic slippage demonstrating the anxiety a transgressive woman provokes in the dominant culture, most often represented in the patriarchal figure of the GM. Gamers usually perceive the characters of other players as looking similar to their players, and so characters often treat other characters as the players themselves would treat each other. When one of the players is a woman playing a male character, or a man playing a female character, pronouns become confused and conceptual difficulties inevitably arise. For example, in the several times that I've played male characters, I've needed to call constant attention to the fact that I am a *male* as far as pronouns go in reference to my character, otherwise risking the (usually male) game moderator describing obviously conflicted events such as, "Jean Claude walks out the door of the pub. She's leading the tavern wench by the hand and giving you guys her 'don't bother me for a few hours' look." Problematic instances such as this show the subversiveness available to enterprising gamers in regard to acted gender constructions.

While Mulvey admits that manifestions of visual pleasure are not "intrinsic to film," she also claims that "it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction" (Mulvey 430). I would disagree with this, giving the RPG as an example of an unprecedented instance in which these contradictions are emphasized by the flexibility of the boundaries between subject and object positions – those of audience and character. Marie-Laure Ryan

also notes that "the central idea of Interactive Drama is to abolish the difference between author, spectator, actor, and character;" and Brenda Laurel adds, "The users of such a system are like audience members who can march up onto the stage and become various characters, altering the action by what they say and do in their roles" (Ryan 678; quoted in Ryan 678). This is the dynamic of the RPG, as well, and as such allows roleplaying the advantage of subtly working against the traditional split between spectacle and narrative.

Roleplaying is a self-reflective endeavor, and as such RPG narratives present a complex structure of fantasy; characters are more than just their players' senses and limbs, they are their representatives in the game world, and representations of their players' inner selves. Players inevitably begin roleplaying by creating characters who emphasize some aspect of their own personality or physicality into heroic proportions in an overt display of wish-fulfillment; this melding of player and character identities allows the player's perception of self to be reflected in his character, and provides the player with a means to gratify erotic desire and the thirst for power, just as do dreams in a Freudian framework. The game worlds of many roleplaying games are constructed based on male power fantasies to take advantage of this phenomenon, providing, for example, moral judgments of good and evil that never overlap, as PCs are defined as inherently good, and confrontations that involve firepower, destruction, and super-human abilities so as to emphasize

and reinforce stereotypes of masculine power and yet still empower male players. The origin of game worlds in male erotic fantasy promotes gender inequality and results in a disproportionately low number of female gamers in the hobby, but also positions roleplaying as a locus for issues of performance and spectatorship, and ambiguity in relation to gender construction.

By appealing to the players' fantasies so overtly, roleplaying games invest a unique creative power in the audience as active readers and interpreters of the text; the authorial role is distributed among the members of the gaming group, rather than centering in the person of a primary, seminal writer. In this way, RPGs modify the author to encompass an empowered, interactive storytelling among a group of participants.

CONCLUSION:
A GAME OF AUTHORIAL POWER,
REVISITED

Donald Burleson identifies H. P. Lovecraft's overarching theme as dealing

with "the nature of self-knowledge, the effects of learning one's own nature and

one's place in the scheme of things ... the soul-shattering consequences of self-

knowledge" (Burleson 135). It's somewhat ironic, then, that the transformation

of Lovecraft's stories of weird horror into a roleplaying game emphasizes issues

of identity and self-knowledge even further, in ways the Lovecraft may never

have imagined – in ways that destabilize and deprivilege his own position as

author.

As this study has shown, a knowledge of self and identity is intrinsic to

the wish-fulfillment of character creation. For example, players "become" their

characters as extensions of themselves; a player creates a character who signifies

himself on a psychological level, as well as functioning as his physical

representation in the game world. As Wilson notes, "characters are latent

aspects of the author's self now being played out indirectly but publicly ...

characters are unfilled roles waiting on the reader's exploratory playfulness"

(Wilson 12). Taking on the role of his character then allows the player to

participate in creating a dreamworld that assuages his fantasies: the thirst for

power is addressed by stereotypically masculine super-human characters, while

the modes of scopophilia that are a fundamental part of roleplaying provide an

outlet for erotic desires in the guise of female characters who are either masculinized combat machines or overly sexualized vixens. Players negotiate questions of performance, spectatorship, and gender construction in ways that dissolve borders between spectator and actor, author and character, and work against the traditional split between spectacle and narrative. In this way, roleplaying is a self-reflective creative endeavor; players craft a complex narrative structure of male fantasy by exercising the authorial power roleplaying invests in them. The game itself provides rules that cede control over the story to the players, and a setting in which the shared fantasy takes place. As *Dungeons & Dragons* co-creator Dave Arneson explains, "The richness is not in just rolling dice, the richness is in the characters and becoming part of this fantasy world" (rpgrealms.com).

The created worlds of roleplaying games are in this way mental landscapes formed of human creativity. But the same can be said for the fictional worlds of literature. Wilson notes, "The differences between games and texts seem both massive and unmistakable. Yet once either games or texts are engaged, in play or in reading, they create separate domains of experience that have distinct worldlike properties: their own space and time, their specific actions, even their distinctive emotions" (Wilson 244). Furthermore, roleplaying displays elements found in the godgame – a type of literary labyrinth – wherein the reader is "invited onward unwittingly (or to be compelled) into a series of alternatives, into the necessity of having to decide between exclusive disjunctions

when the rules or choice have been hidden, or made unknowable" (Wilson 163). Wilson asserts that the godgame, and consequently the roleplaying game, "poses the puzzles and paradoxes about the nature of reality and about the status of the text itself that preoccupy postmodern writers" (Wilson 142). This identification of roleplaying as a kind of godgame, and the RPG world as a fictional world, facilitate the blurring of boundaries between game and literature, allowing RPGs to be approached as a distinctly postmodern literary form. Wilson admits that "literary texts are, and are not, like games. Games, though they manifest unmistakable textual features (a kind of primitive textuality), are not literary texts. Yet they often seem to be precisely that" (Wilson 240). Roleplaying games are in this way play that can also be understood as literature – they necessarily bridge the gap between the two categories, as a true literary game.

From a psychological perspective, roleplaying games are also a site of social conflict; they are a crossroads between the dominant culture's suspicion and fear, and the fan culture's resistance to disempowerment. In *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Allen Fine gives four justifications often cited by gamers for their hobby: "the educational components of gaming; gaming as an escape from social pressure; games as aids in increasing one's sense of personal control or efficacy; and games as aids in dealing with people" (Fine *Shared Fantasy* 53). Furthermore, supporters of roleplaying games say that RPGs promote the "psychological development of individuals and the development and strengthening of social bonds" (Catherine Martin 116). Despite the benefits touted by the RPG industry

and the hobby's participants, however, roleplaying's status as a marginalized pursuit is exacerbated by attacks by the conservative religious establishment. Though these claims seem unfounded, parents can still be "frightened by the potential for increased violence, identity confusion, and self-delusion among their children," contributing to roleplaying's reputation as a dangerously subversive act (Catherine Martin 117). The RPG hobby is affected in two ways by this hostile cultural environment. Some publishers avoid contentious content, while others exploit it as a marketing tool, just as some fans attempt to prove roleplaying's legitimacy, while others are drawn to its dangerous reputation. Both reactions attempt to destabilize the stigma held against the hobby, the first by weakening claims against gaming by presenting RPG products as non-provocatively as possible, and the second by reappropriating the societal stigma. In this way, roleplaying is positioned counter to the dominant cultural ideology.

Furthermore, the RPG fan community exhibits a resistance to dominant culture in its ability to step across the boundaries between producer and consumer, spectator and participant, reader and writer. Gamers take an aggressive authorial role in their hobby through a network of distribution and communication facilitated by the internet, expanding the contact that venues such as the opinion columns of the early twentieth century pulp magazines previously provided between literary professionals and their fan followings. This facilitates an unusual amount of spectator influence on the writing of the RPG genre, first in the form of designers who reinterpret literature into

roleplaying games, lending their own creative inspiration just as Lovecraft's

Circle used elements of his work in their own stories, then in online

communication between fans and with RPG designers, editors, and publishers

on message boards or directly through email, by GMs through both their

interpretation of published adventures and by designing adventures of their

own, and lastly by the players' own actions in the game session. Fan-produced

print media and conventions also work to make fan input a crucial influence on

the roleplaying industry, allowing fans to produce and actively seek out

unprecedented opportunities to influence the commercial cultural production

targeted at them, and in so doing dispute the privileged authorship of

roleplaying games.

Though roleplaying games are often based on the work of a seminal

writer, such as H. P. Lovecraft, and draw siginificantly from that writer's setting,

themes, characters, and atmosphere, the flexible boundaries of RPGs shift the

position of the author into a border-blurring multiplicity that is directly

postmodern. The evolution of author from distinct to aggregate has

encompassed not only fiction writers and the original creators of the RPG genre,

but also subsequent designers who borrow material from each other, the editors

and publishers of these games, the hobby's fan community, GMs and players

who reinterpret texts for their own purposes, and the social environment in

which they are created. In this way it becomes apparent that the roleplaying

experience is inherently the result of multiple subjectivities, breaking the illusion

of a purely objective meaning.

ENDNOTES

i   Throughout this study, male pronouns are used to refer to RPG players, GMs, and designers. As Chapter Seven explains, the vast majority of "gamers," as they call themselves – and consequently professional members of the roleplaying games industry – are male. As a result, gender becomes a determining factor in the narratives that issue from this formation, and for that reason I consciously chose to use the male pronoun.

ii   Of special note as a partial exception to this rule is *In Palamedes' Shadow* by R. Rawdon Wilson; this is a comprehensive treatment of games from the perspective of cultural criticism, and discusses the sub-genre of RPGs at several points. But it falls into the common practice of treating roleplaying as a brief mention in the larger category of game theory, rather than conducting a close examination of roleplaying on its own terms or interrogating one specific example of an RPG. This is the fault that I hope to correct here by looking at authorship in relation to roleplaying games, in particular, rather than just the broader category of games of which the hobby is a part.

     Similarly, since fan culture and online community has also been dealt with to some depth in works like Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers,* much of this dissertation focuses on the narrower topic of the fan's integral part in the production and authoring of roleplaying games, specifically.

iii   I've played RPGs since my freshman year in college and am currently a member of two long-running gaming groups, I've attended GenCon – the premiere gaming convention in the United States – every year since 1993, and since 2000 I've worked as a professional line editor for the game publishing company Atlas Games, which my husband John Nephew founded in 1990. I've become acquainted with the people most influential to the roleplaying industry, including the publishers and designers of games like *Dungeons & Dragons, Vampire: The Masquerade,* and *Call of Cthulhu,* as well as the developers of several fan magazines and web sites. These contacts have facilitated my effort to infuse this dissertation with an insider perspective – a personal insight into this subculture – which might otherwise be difficult for an academic study to accomplish.

iv   The distinction between the terminology referring to a player and that referencing his imaginary character is something that most roleplaying games take very seriously in a cultural environment that many times stigmatizes this hobby as a dangerous escapist fantasy. For example, besides the standard notice on the credits page of the *Dungeons & Dragons* core rulebook stating that "This product is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual people, organizations,

places, or events is purely coincidental," the publisher also takes an extra precaution fairly common to the roleplaying games industry. In the introduction of the book, a notice is prominently displayed asserting that "THIS GAME IS FANTASY. The action of a *Dungeons & Dragons* game takes place in the imaginations of the players. Like actors in a movie, players sometimes speak as if they were their character or as if their fellow players were their characters. These rules even adopt that casual approach, using 'you' to refer to and mean 'your character.' In reality, however, you are no more your character than you are the king when you play chess ... Likewise, the world implied by these rules is an imaginary one" (Monte Cook 6).

That roleplaying game publishers feel obligated to point out such an obvious fact so explicitly, when other professionals in the fantasy and science fiction publishing industry don't feel the need to add cautionary notices to novels, for example, is significant in that it highlights a continuing misapprehension on the part of the general public toward roleplaying games. For years, roleplaying games have been subject to an unfounded demonization by the media and by extremist conservative elements of society. When the publishers of *Vampire: The Masquerade* begin their introduction by saying "Vampire is a game of make-believe, of pretend, of storytelling" (Rein•Hagen, 21), this foregrounds a history of intentional misrepresentation of the roleplaying hobby. The problem of the "player character" is discussed further in Chapter Seven, and the impact of societal vilification on the hobby is covered at the end of Chapter Four and in Chapter Six.

v   Unlike the standard six-sided dice that are included in many family board games, these specialty dice have anywhere from four to twenty or more sides; this lets game designers allow for different probabilities for success on any given roll just by specifying the use of a different type of die.

vi   For simplicity's sake, this study presents a generalized procedure for determining successes in roleplaying games, but each game system uses a different mechanic for this.

To determine the success of his character's action in *Dungeons & Dragons*, the player rolls a twenty-sided die and adds a skill value based on his character's relevant ability score in that area, trying to get a result higher than the number the DM sets as the difficulty. The average result of a twenty-sided die is 10.5, so the difficulty of an easy action is usually 10 or less, since the probability that a player will roll at least a 10 is slightly better (55 percent).

The *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game uses "percentile dice," which means the player rolls two ten-sided dice at the same time; one die is designated the tens place, while the other is designated the ones place. In this system players try to roll lower than their characters' percentage score in the relevant skill,

which is again based on an ability (called a "characteristic" in this game). The average result for a percentile roll is 50.5, so players who design characters with skills that are over 50 have an advantage.

In *Vampire: The Masquerade*, the player uses multiple ten-sided dice to determine success; he rolls a number of dice equal to his character's score in the relevant skill (confusingly called an "ability" in this game) plus his value in the ability that skill is based on (called an "attribute"). A ten-sided die has an average result of 5.5, so the standard difficulty for an action in *Vampire* is 6; the player counts how many dice turned up with a result higher than 6 and the more successes he gets the better his character performs the action.

Finally, *Shadowrun* works similarly to *Vampire*, but uses multiple six-sided dice; average result of a six-sided die is 3.5, so a player rolls a number of dice equal to his character's score in a skill based on a relevant ability (called an "attribute" in this game), and the dice that come up with results higher than a standard difficulty of 4 are successes. The more successes a player gets, the better his character performs the action.

These rolls are further complicated in some games by things like modifiers that change the difficulties based on environmental factors in the game world (like poor visibility or being incapacitated in some way), open-ended rolls that let a player get enormously impressive successes by re-rolling a die and adding it onto his previous result if he rolls the maximum possible on the first try, and botches or critical successes that happen when a player rolls the worst or best possible result on a die. All of this means that that characters regularly fail miserably (and many times dangerously) or succeed superhumanly.

vii   See Chapter Seven for a discussion of the implications surrounding super-powered player characters.

viii   For a discussion on how transgressions of societal taboos such as this work as a part of the wish-fulfillment inherent in roleplaying games, see Chapter Seven.

ix   Though it could be argued that Lovecraft's intentional archaism of style, sentence structure, syntax, and word-choice, which often included deliberate "Britishisms" – and which are reproduced in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG – is indeed a manipulation of language similar to that of these authors.

x   Perhaps this merging of convention and rule – of flexible and inflexible assumptions – is part of what provokes such anxiety in regard to roleplaying games in the general populace. The instability or mutability of these games is seen as silly escapism to some, but is interpreted as dangerous by others; see Chapter Six.

xi   The concept of intertextuality first formulated by Julia Kristeva "postulates a discursive space between literary texts in which multiple texts coexist, collusively inscribing congruent and overlapping paths of signification" (Wilson 21).

xii   In fact, one danger that many long-lived roleplaying settings encounter is that, with their extensive development through the release of supplements, the RPG as text becomes more closed, defining every element of the world rather than demarcating open spaces for individual creativity to develop. The marketing tactic of releasing a new edition of a RPG is one solution to this problem, as it opens the game to new players, stimulates new interest in the game, and thus propagates the game through increased participation.

xiii   Indeed, this fascination with collecting on the part of the RPG industry birthed a card game entirely based on collecting – *Magic: the Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1994). In *Magic*, players buy cards packaged in cellophane booster packs like those of collectable sports cards. Also like sports cards, *Magic* cards are printed so that some cards are more rare than others. Players can then customize their decks, but of course those who have more rare cards are likely to have a stronger deck, so players are encouraged to collect as many as possible. This seminal game blossomed into a new genre of "collectable/customizable card games" (CCGs) or "trading card games" (TCGs); the next incarnation of the CCG to succeed in the mass market was the English translation of the *Pokemón* card game (Wizards of the Coast, 1999), whose catch phrase is "Gotta Catch 'em All!" *Pokemón* and *Magic* are both published by Wizards of the Coast – the same company that now owns *Dungeons & Dragons*.

xiv   Wilson also makes the connection that a collection represents the wider one of language: "Language collects, as postmodern writers persistently observe, and … it does so arbitrarily: discourse is a verbal collection, a lexical museum, much as a collection is an ocular discourse." (Wilson 120 – 121)

xv   It's also interesting to note that there are instances in which authors have drawn on roleplaying games for the inspiration for their fiction. For example, Raymond E. Feist's GM used the Tékumel world of the *Empire of the Petal Throne* RPG as a source for their gaming group's adventures. Later, these gaming sessions would make up the background of Feist's *Riftwar Saga* novels. In another turnabout, Feist's fictional world of Midkemia was actually published as an RPG world sourcebook, as well (Vesanto).

xvi   Some dispute Gernsback's claim to the facilitative connotations tied to the

title of "Father of Modern SF." Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss, for example, asserts that "it is easy to argue that Hugo Gernsback was one of the worst disasters ever to hit the science fiction field. ... Gernsback himself was utterly without any literary understanding" (Aldiss 209).

xvii   Note that in comments like these Lovecraft struggles against allowing his readers the role of co-authors, though they still direct his creative choices through the person of Lovecraft's editor.

xviii   Just as the pulp science fiction magazines of the early twentieth century provided a safe haven for development of the genre, and yet also ran the risk of ghettoizing the very literature it promoted, so too do RPGs sometimes relish their reputation as an individualistic, intellectual, and subversive hobby, while affiliation with the hobby simultaneously stigmatizes the work produced by its authors, pushing them further and further from the true "literature" its writers might otherwise have produced for the mainstream market.

xix   Lester Del Rey argues against this view, making the distinction that a ghetto is "a place to which people or things are restricted, either by law or economics. But science fiction was in no sense restricted. It appeared in mainstream books and general magazines" (Del Rey 88).

xx   In his letters, Lovecraft asserted that "Only the human scenes and character must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism*, (*not* catch-penny *romanticism*) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown – the shadow-haunted *Outside* – we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold" (Lovecraft *Selected II* 150, original emphasis). How ironic that Campbell himself "made his [invaders] completely alien in form, but highly sympathetic to the reader – and he gave them a psychology which was neither human nor that of evil monsters," yet he could not appreciate Lovecraft's own efforts to separate the psyches of human and alien characters (Del Rey 84).

xxi   The fictional *Necronomicon* allows Lovecraft a "back door ... to realms of wonder and myth" when materialistic science would not allow a more direct approach, according to Fritz Leiber; "It permitted him to maintain in his stories at least occasional sections of the poetic, resonant, and colourful prose which he loved, but which hardly suited his later, scientifically realistic prose. It provided him with a cloud of sinister atmosphere which would otherwise have had to be built afresh with each story. It pictured vividly his Copernican conception of the vastness, strangeness, and infinite eerie possibilities of the new universe of science. And finally, it was the key to a more frightening, yet more fascinating

'real' world than the blind and purposeless cosmos in which he had to live his life" (Leiber 61).

xxii   In fact, to deal with this problem, an entire supplement of non-Mythos *Call of Cthulhu* RPG adventures, titled *Blood Brothers 2*, was published by Chaosium, Inc. in 1990.

xxiii   Although mentioned in Lovecraft's early stories, Hastur is actually the creation of Ambrose Bierce; this fictional creature is "a great being supposedly trapped beneath the Lake of Hali near the city Carcosa on a planet circling the star Aldebaran" (Petersen 105).
         "Yog-Sothoth Cycle of Myth" is another term used by some of those who dispute August Derleth's "Cthulhu Mythos" appellation. Yog-Sothoth is either second-in-command or co-ruler of the universe with Azathoth, and is somehow locked outside of the mundane universe yet able to travel through both time and space (Petersen 96).

xxiv   This idea of developing a large network of consumers is similar to the theory of "network externality" that has been so influential in the development of open gaming. See Chapter Five for more on this concept.

xxv   Another of Derleth's flawed beliefs was that Lovecraft's beings represented elementals. By forcing Cthulhu into the role of a water elemental, and situating other beings of the Cthulhu Mythos as earth elementals, then creating his own air and fire elementals in subsequent stories of his design, "Derleth began to systematize and explain all that Lovecraft had wisely left misty and evocative" (Price 254).

xxvi   The quotation given here is thought to be the original upon which August Derleth based his own version/paraphrasing/hoax: "All my stories, unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live on outside ever ready to take possession of this earth again" (Quoted in Mosig 109). When confronted by R. L. Tierney, Derleth became angry and refused to produce the Lovecraft letter that he said contained this paragraph. After Derleth's death in 1971, L. Sprague de Camp and others examining Lovecraft's unpublished letters arrived at the conclusion that this paragraph did not exist in any of Lovecraft's letters to Derleth.

xxvii   The assumption by gamers that MUDs should contain the same elements of fantasy found in RPGs is one that has been interrogated by several scholars.

For instance, Marie-Laure Ryan asserts that, "to take full advantage of the transformational power of the [online] medium, Interactive Drama should open its world to supernatural creatures, animated objects, magical metamorphosis, movements defying gravity, and postmodern/Escherian transgressions of ontological boundaries" (Ryan 690). Marcos Novak echoes this when he muses that "the ancient dream of magic that finally nears awakening into some kind of reality" is a dynamic of the MOO (Novak 228).

xxviii The relationship between gender and roleplaying games is discussed at greater length in Chapter Seven.

xxix   The short-lived journal *Interactive Fantasy*, which saw four issues published by Hogshead Publishing from 1994 to 1995, was major step toward legitimizing RPGs as a significant literary and cultural phenomenon within the roleplaying community itself, as it drew on noted industry luminaries to present a serious, semi-academic treatment of roleplaying games.

xxx   "Product Identity" is defined by the Open Game License as "product and product line names, logos and identifying marks including trade dress; artifacts; creatures characters; stories, storylines, plots, thematic elements, dialogue, incidents, language, artwork, symbols, designs, depictions, likenesses, formats, poses, concepts, themes and graphic, photographic and other visual or audio representations; names and descriptions of characters, spells, enchantments, personalities, teams, personas, likenesses and special abilities; places, locations, environments, creatures, equipment, magical or supernatural abilities or effects, logos, symbols, or graphic designs; and any other trademark or registered trademark clearly identified as Product identity by the owner of the Product Identity, and which specifically excludes the Open Game Content" (see Appendix B).

xxxi   Preview copies of *Three Days to Kill* were actually sold at The Source Comics & Games in St. Paul, Minnesota the day before the *Player's Handbook* went on sale at GenCon, however.

xxxii   Another link between game and literature reveals itself in roleplaying games when approached as a learning tool. Play can be looked at as the human instinct for self-preservation played out ritualistically, as learning tool; "Games constitute blocks of conceptual space within which skills, and hence mastery, are exercised and tested" (Wilson 6). Wilson also speculates that literary conventions are learned through experience and practice (Wilson 85).

xxxiii One story I've heard tells how some Canadian gamers were questioned by

the authorities after being overheard talking about their characters' criminal plans. Although I haven't been able to verify this as anything more than an urban legend, it at least points out an awareness on the part of the gaming community of the discomfort their hobby causes the dominant culture.

xxxiv In a third typical reaction to attacks from the dominant culture, some gamers marginalize subcultures within the RPG hobby fanbase to divert the censure aimed at themselves; wargamers, goths, comics collectors, furries, animae and manga fans, live-action roleplayers, computer gamers, and collectable card game players are all often the unfortunate targets of this tactic. Even *D&D* players have felt the derision of gamers who disdain d20 System games. Again, this can be looked upon as a method used to destabilize the stigma against gamers, as it asserts that the more-deviant subculture is more deserving of revulsion than is the "mainstream" roleplaying hobby.

And still a fourth observable reaction is that of total avoidance, in which roleplaying is entered into as a form of escapism. As Brian Duguid observes, "'Role-playing' and 'escapism' are terms that sit happily together and it's undeniably true that escapism is inevitably politically reactionary; it shows that rather than deal with the problems of the real world, which involves work and struggle, we would prefer to visualize a preferable alternative. In its favor, the visualization of alternatives and the creation of dreams could of course be considered fundamental to progressive political endeavour" (Duguid 107 – 108). In this way, gamers subvert the dominant culture by entering a created world where their own views and concerns are primary (see Chapter Seven for further discussion of this topic).

xxxv This is similar to the dynamic critics have noticed in online roleplaying games. Kurt Lancaster notes that "An observer watching a virtual-reality user from outside the performance frame can see them expressing physical behaviours that can only be understood from within it. The user is physically in two worlds at the same time" (Lancaster "Cyber-Performances" 29).

xxxvii The acquisition of role-taking skill has been divided into the following five stages by R. L. Selman in "Social Cognitive Understanding":

> Stage 0: The egocentric viewpoint (0 – 5 years), during which children can't imagine others taking different perspectives on social situations.

> Stage 1: Social information role taking (5 – 8 years), when the child is not aware that others might perceive a situation differently from the child's outlook.

Stage 2: Self-reflection (8 – 10 years), during which a child understands that people are aware of the thoughts and feelings of others, and that of the child himself. This mutual awareness affects each person's perspective.

Stage 3: Mutual role-taking (10 – 12 years), allows a child to put himself in another's situation, and understands that others can do the same.

Stage 4: Social and conventional role-taking (12 – 15 years), at which point the child understands that there are viewpoints shared by social groups that facilitate communication within the group.

xxxviii A few games, like the translation of the French RPG *TRAUMA* (Darcsyde Productions, 1992), use this as their primary conceit, however. In this game, the players are expected to play themselves as characters, facing terrible modern-day situations like hijackings, drug wars, conspiracies, etc.

xxxix Exceptions to the tendency for roleplaying games to cast players in the roles of superhuman characters do occur in the RPG hobby. Take, for instance, the game *Ars Magica* by Atlas Games. In this historically based game of medieval fantasy, players can choose to roleplay the powerful magi who control forces of magic present in the year 1220, but just as often they take on the roles of the mundane companions who use their skills to aid those magi, or the servant "grogs" who care for the others in the covenant. Similarly, in the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG the players become mundane scholars, detectives, and policemen uncovering the schemes of all-powerful alien entities. Note, though, that in both of these cases the "normal Joe" characters become empowered by aiding or confounding extraordinary beings ... their identity is still defined by their relationships with the superhuman entities and world-shattering events typical of a fantasy realm.

xl The outcome of each battle in an RPG is predetermined for the most part – the player characters almost always win in encounters with foes, and in those cases where they don't, the GM has probably made victory impossible as part of a plot device. Again, this only works to empower the player characters. Because players often play a thinly veiled version of themselves, severe or permanent harm to their characters is hard to deal with, and so generally avoided by GMs or purposefully used to narrative effect. As Phil Masters asserts, "To the extent that players genuinely identify with their characters – a situation which many games declare to be their highest aim – any serious and prolonged threat to a character's life and well-being should be frightening" (Masters 69).

xli   I've been in at least one game where this assumption has been turned around by the GM, however. Our party encountered a group of Evil lizard-like kobolds squatting in a mine, and after eradicating them had to deal with the lone kobold orphan child crying that her family was dead. This completely derailed the adventure – which had been a typical dungeon crawl scenario until this point – and threw the entire party into a moral dilemma. By confounding "readerly" expectations in this way, the GM exposed and interrogated the subsumed taboos and desires inherent in the game.

xlii   The summer of 2002 was the last year GenCon was held in Milwaukee. Starting in 2003 it relocates to Indianapolis, as it outgrew Milwaukee's convention facilities and hotel space.

xliii   *Macho Women With Guns* is actually the name of a real roleplaying game designed by Greg Porter, and first published in 1988 by Blacksburg Tactical Research Center. A fan site for the game explains, "Macho Women with Guns is the game of a world twisted beyond the bounds of chauvinism and reason. Where no one is immune to lethal doses of satire, and nothing is too sacred to be dragged through the mud. Where we are hopefully so biased and contradictory and blatantly offensive that no one in their right minds would think to take us seriously" (Arnholm). In this way, the roleplaying game is translated into a satire that interrogates the assumptions about gender that appear in many RPGs.

xliv   As an instance of an alternate framework for RPGs, Anna Altmann proposes the "green-world" figure found in domestic realist fiction, describing this as "five phases of the quest for rebirth: splitting off from family, husbands, lovers; the green-world guide or token; the green-world lover; confrontation with parental figures; and the plunge into the unconscious" (quoted in Oliver 62). Martin Oliver explains that the green-world figure "is something or someone outside of established society, who is a guide to but not the goal of the quest. The most significant change, though, is that the move is not from poverty to power but security to self-discovery. This need not, unlike in the hero-tale, be externalized" (Oliver 62). Development of character motivations and internality is thus emphasized in the green-world alternative, allowing characters to break away from *cliché* archetypes and rigid character classes, instead embracing an emphasis on professional or social skills.

xlv   This character immediately underwent some radical life changes, incidentally; he became a she with the stroke of a pencil, and gained quite a few points in Charisma, along with a more in-depth personal history and some social skills.

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Reference: Pat or Larry Brady, Publishers/Owners, (608) 233-7001

Cottonwood Hill Publishing Company – Benton, WI   Summer 1996
Position: Freelance Writer; wrote annotations for the *Best Books for Young*
        Adult Readers reference book.
Verification: Stephen Calvert, Publisher/Owner, (608) 759-3031

PUBLICATIONS
Several entries in *Country Matters,* Guardians of Order, 2003
"Fuzzwippit" from *The Penumbra Fantasy Bestiary,* Atlas Games, 2003
"A Test of Viking Virtue" from *Games Unplugged* #16 – 17 and *Enter the Viking,*
        Atlas Games, 2002
"Goblin Goodies Galore" from *Game Trade Magazine* #17 and *Enter the Viking,*
        Atlas Games, 2002
"Yesterday's News" from *At Your Service,* Atlas Games, 2001
"All That Glitters … " from *En Route,* Atlas Games, 2001
"Davlika" from *Touched by the Gods,* Atlas Games, 2001. Translation in Spanish.
The Tide of Years, Atlas Games, 2001. Translations in German and Spanish.

HONORS AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES
2003 workshop panelist at the GenCon game convention, Indianapolis
2001 panelist at the Game Manufacturer's Association Trade Show, Las Vegas
Attended 1999 MMLA conference, Minneapolis
Reader for Spring 1999 Cream City Review, UW-Milwaukee
Attended 1999 UW-Milwaukee 20th Century Studies conference
1998 Nelson Writing Contest judge/award presenter, West Virginia University
Presented academic paper at 1998 WVU Graduate Colloquium: "From Class to
        Consciousness: HG Wells' *The Time Machine* as Model of the Mind"
1997 – 1998 Stephen F. Crocker Scholarship, West Virginia University
Attended 1997 WVU Literature & Film Conference
Active in WVU English Graduate Organization
Phi Kappa Phi honorary lifetime member
University Honors Program participant, UW-Platteville
First place in the 1994 UW-Platteville English Department Short Story Contest
UW Foundation Scholarship, UW-Platteville
1992 National Merit Semi-finalist

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Major Professor   Date