



I am going to let everyone in on a secret: this article exists because over the past four or five decades the games we play have evolved. They have taken on greater and greater degrees of complexity. So fast, so diverse, and so varied have the rules of play of our games become that we now need encyclopedia references just to collate and describe the differences to us.

Ah, *Evolved*. A loaded word, yet in role-playing the games we play are the games we create. We shape them, mold them, try to direct the action in them, yet the best ones are those that take on a life of their own. True, the players are directly responsible for the worlds in which they play to a very large extent. But with this increase in the complexity of the rules of play come a certain degree of abstraction, witness the theories discussed within this article on the pages that follow. Theories that ask *Is your game more this, that, or the other thing?* Maybe it's all three, or none at all. One thing is certain our games have developed to the point where they can become enjoyed in actual play or through intellectual discourse of their workings. Some certainly challenge our intellects with innovative dicing conventions, intricate cosmologies, and theories about the nature of reality that would probably pose a challenge to many philosophy majors!

Yet there is one question that too

often goes unasked, yet is all too often heard the older we become. . .

### **To Play or Not to Play?**

For some this is a deeper question than whether or not to set up a chessboard or get out the old monopoly game. There are games we play then there is Game Theory. One is obviously those amusements with which we entertain ourselves; pastimes and hobbies. Such are games. We all know what a game is, how a game is supposed to work, by virtue of having played some manner of game from earliest childhood, especially in kindergarten. Game Theory can seem disingenuous at times because so few of us realize that it exists.

Game Theory is a very real field of study. But what is it?

Look the term up in the average dictionary and, if we are lucky, what might be found is: "Theory of Games". Doesn't say much till cross referenced, where we find Theory of Games given a definition of: "a method of applying mathematical logic to determine which of several available strategies is likely to maximize one's gain or..". Whoa! Let's stop right here a minute.

This sort of thing is very dry reading. Great for Webster's Unabridged, but already it doesn't sound like it has much of anything

to do with the titular concept of which this article is about.

Or does it?

Game Theory is very much the attempt to analyze decision making in conflict situations using statistical analysis, fine the base elements that constitute the social and entertainment aspects of a game. Or more simply put it attempts to measure who is most likely to do what, when, and under what given circumstances. Thus it game theory could be said to have both a sociological and economic aspect. Which makes it a theory about the dynamic interactions of the decision making process as relates to game models.

Often in the online forums one might find the question asked, "Is (insert name of game here) more Gamist, Narrativist, or Simulationist?" (The 'this, that, or the other thing' from above.) Now that question is something that readers may think a degree of oxymoronism has crept into. After all, by definition, a role-playing game is already a gamist simulation expressed in narrative; right?

Not entirely, but only because not every game that has worn the label of RPG is quite the same. True, beneath the hood, in the basic essential of game mechanics and rules of play, all RPGs are mostly identical beasts. But even a cheetah has different DNA from a cougar, and none of us would think that a house cat is a predator, though it is nonetheless a predatory feline than is a lynx.

We know what we think we know and accept the rest on belief, beliefs rooted in what we assume to be true. Alas not all truth is factual. Yet facts can not be proven until they are tested, of course they can not be tested until someone postulates they exist in the first place; that is the conundrum of theorems. They could exist, yet don't exist until someone postulates that they might.

So what good is theory?

## Once More Unto the Breach!

In order to understand the relationship between practical role-playing and the relationship that hypothesis such as the "Threefold Model" or "GNS Theory" have in relation to games, it becomes necessary to understand role-playing games; their origins, the context in which they are played, and the group dynamic involved amongst the players. More than that one has to realize that such theories, as a whole, draw upon a rich and detailed background of extant terminology which is very specific to role-playing games. Terminology which is not always applied in familiar ways and which includes many a neologism. (Fancy word meaning: coined terms.)

But before we delve into those new terms consider what sort of game a RPG is. Thinking about it? Can you nail down any single definition, really?

Wouldn't it be erroneous to classify any FRP game as a "single game" since most rulebooks present the opportunity for variegated styles of play? True, the games can be lumped together by group classification, just as monopoly is a game of a type. Yet we can analyze the modes of play which certain games are designed for. This process is perhaps best summed up as follows: "Whenever you play any kind of game, there is a type of role assumption involved."<sup>(4)</sup> This is certainly true of games involving strategy like Chess, Life, Snakes & Ladders, Clue, Ludo, Monopoly, and even Checkers. But this statement becomes profound when applied to any sort of true simulation game, be it a historical war game or fantasy role-playing game.

But aren't all games merely simulations of an abstract environment?

The simple answer is: Yes.

However in the final analysis a game is what the players make of it. This is especially true with role-playing games since they allow the players to create heroes who can develop unique personalities on par with the characters in a novel. Most games allow the player to merely express

themselves in camaraderie with their friends or acquaintances, but role-playing games allow the player to pretend in a world of make believe. An experience that some may say no theory can properly codify so why try, then again from a social and game development context it is worthy of exploration.

### **Where Did it All Begin?**

Games have been with us perhaps since the very beginning of the human race. Our ancestors' etched game boards into rock and wood, molded game pieces from clay and carved them out of bone, even used the bones of sheep, called astragals, as the first form of dice. Dicing originated with lot casting, thus it is to the astronomer-priests of ages past, and later the diviners and fortune tellers who kept much of that ancient lore alive, if in adapted form, that modern gaming owes a great debt. For without those first methods of randomly determining outcomes gaming, as we know it today could not exist.

Yet it is to the Greeks and Romans of classical times that the real credit must go for the familiar shapes of game implements in the Western world today; board games especially. True, board games of a type have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs, yet the flat table top board game and dice as we know them today had their direct antecedents in the European cultures of antiquity as passed down by word of mouth through the Dark and Middle Ages, revived during the Renaissance, and rediscovered by archaeologists in recent decades. Games with names like Senat and Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum, the precursors of Backgammon; Tablut and Draughts, more commonly known as Checkers; Ludo and Chauper, otherwise known as Pachisi; and even Chess. All games with hundreds of years of history behind them.

Indeed games like Chess, which is credited as a direct descendant of the oriental games of Shaturanga, Xiang Qi

(Chinese Chess), and Shogi have been around for quite a long time. Just as Tarot cards have been around for quite a long time, though no one any longer remembers the original game for which they were created, much less plays it.

For board games there exists a long and rich tapestry of history to examine. However, for the historian of modern role-playing games, the tale really only begins in 1915 with H.G. Wells and the publication of a rather unassuming book titled "Little Wars". A book that would become known for containing the first set of amateur war gaming rules. Rules intended for use by anyone who owned those once popular lead army men of yesteryear, now long surpassed by the ever present green army men found in most stores toy aisles.

Rules for lead army men?

Yes, rules for lead army men. That Mr. Wells found it necessary to provide a codified set of rules for resolution of conflicts which arose in games played with toy army men is proof that, from the very beginning, a debate has waged amongst game aficionados about resolving basic game issues. Chief amongst these is determining victory conditions, defining styles and methodologies of play, and making these "rules of play" available in a set format. We take it for granted that our games come with rules, but it was not always so. In centuries past board games were purchased and the rules of play literally passed on by example, meaning through first hand experience.

Of course it is unlikely that Mr. Wells, or the war gamers that followed, realized that they were ushering in the modern role-playing era. Yet once such parameters were put into black and white, printed for all and sundry to use, it was only a matter of time before game players began to wonder why it should be that units, as a whole, were always destroyed. After all in real life warfare much could hinge upon sorties made by the individual; be they a soldier, spy, scout, or saboteur. Thus rules for running individual units were created.

You may be asking yourself what this has to do with role-playing. The answer is *quite a lot*. Once individuals were created they ceased to be units. Thus players began to associate with individual pieces, naming them, giving them traits, qualities that eventually developed into personalities.

Beginning to see anything familiar?

If you've ever played a RPG that is precisely what happens when most players create their character. Odd, isn't it, for role-playing games aren't said to have been created until the mid nineteen seventies! Yet there the basic elements of one is.

Never mind that many old parlor and dinner games could be said to share basic elements of the role-playing experience, or that theatrical troupes have been taking on roles far longer than the RPG is said to have existed. For, amazing as it may sound, role-playing games are not the evolutionary culmination of any singular extent form of game; at least not by conscious design. Yet role-playing games contain elements from a myriad number of game forms. The use of characters, specifically the taking on of character roles, has existed in parlor games and murder mystery games since well before the first role-playing game was printed. Yet none of these precursors are truly a role-playing game anymore than Chess would be classified as a historical war game, despite the fact few would argue that Chess is the direct precursor of the modern historical war game. Yet, for the average role-playing game enthusiast, the story of role-playing doesn't really begin until roughly 1974 and the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

### ***Why worry about Details?***

This question is one of perspective and definition. Some definitions can be easy and straightforward, witness the following: "In a fantasy game, each player assumes the persona of a particular character, be it witch, warlock, mighty warrior or pious priest..."(1) This from 'Fantasy Wargamming', an early book upon the

subject of role-playing. Or the explanations can be vague and ambiguous non-starters like: 'The very nature of RPGs makes them almost impossible to codify in any exacting terms.'(5)

Oddly enough that last quote comes from the opening paragraphs of a chapter attempting to provide an explanation of how a RPG is played. When read in comparison to the previous example one might assume this if from some older tome, yet it is not. The book was published circa 1999 while the previous one circa 1982. But is the ability to define what a role-playing game is really so impenetrable that some feel it necessary to make statements like, "Getting involved in gaming can sometimes feel like trying to join a secret society."(5); or is it merely that the hobby, read the role-playing game itself, has evolved to the point that it now encompass not a single type of game but rather games of a type. Thus leaving hobbyists racing to catch up with the realization.

Certainly that was the case when *Fantasy Wargamming* was published. The facts loudly declare themselves in the terminology employed. It is, yet isn't, role-playing jargon. But this is only because the book was written during the developmental infancy of the role-playing game. Yet it is the peculiar jargon that readily identifies a game. Poker has it's full houses, but use the word 'houses' in reference to Monopoly and the meaning shifts dramatically.

Which leads us to that ever elusive and problematic question of. . .

### ***What is a Role-Playing Game?***

The role-playing game (RPG for short), when using traditional board and card games as a measure, is a non-standard game form in which many traditional game elements; such as the use of dice, a grid map to designate the field of play, miniatures to represent the characters; may be used. Every role-playing game is subtly different, yet retains certain basic elements in

common that sets it apart from other game genres. For instance the "character" is the primary element of the role-playing game, it is also what sets RPGs apart from traditional games such as chess or baccarat. The stress of most role-playing games is usually placed upon the role of hero or heroine, known as the character persona, thus making the primary goal not so much one of a conditional "win, lose, or draw" situation that terminates the game but rather the attempt to create a novel experience through interaction within a dynamic backdrop known as the "game world" or "campaign", an experience that is essentially a spontaneous narrative in which the player's characters are meant to take an active part. Also unique to RPGs is the requirement of a rules arbiter, known as the Game Master or Referee, whose role is not merely to adjudicate rules disputes but to actually mediate and guide play much as a director would a movie or theatrical production.

In short game play was, and remains, strictly defined by the sorts of character that you are playing. Or rather the archetypal "persona" which you are going to be slipping into during the game. The actual style of play wasn't so important in those early days as was the rules of play, however this has since changed somewhat. Of course the biggest problem in the early days of FRP games was in getting gamers to understand the difference between "player knowledge" and "character knowledge", thus the IC (In Character) and OOC (Out of Character) short hand often seen in discussions of game play, which is perhaps how the larger debate of "gaming styles" truly began. Gaming styles which postulated there was a difference between character knowledge and player character knowledge, or more simply what sort of knowledge a player's character would have access to.

Once the distinction was made between character knowledge and player character knowledge the doors were opened to debate about how the game should be played. A question, where a game is concerned, that

the average player would probably say really had no right or wrong. Most would probably say: *Method of play?* You just do! After all don't the rules themselves tell you all you need to know?

A game is a game true enough but what is called soccer in America is football in Europe. Over time the terminology used by those debating the perceived differences has changed. Once the distinction was summed up as the difference between "roll" and "role" gaming, yet few would think to use those terms today. Of course as the role-playing hobby evolves so, too, will the terminology used to describe it. Something to consider when thinking about the games we know and love.

### **The More Things Change . . .**

Early FRP games existed in a simpler time. A time before minimalist rules and storyteller systems. A time before CCGs. A time before debates about whether diceless or generic rules systems were better than systems that used one sort of dicing convention, or type of die, over another. A time before which sort of rules system might be better used for a specific genre or milieu was even a design consideration! There were dice, random rolls, and charts. That was what most gamers expected of their games. Thus those early FRP games could all too simplistically make the distinction one of whether or not a Game Master or gaming group stressed table top "roll play" over dramatic "role playing". After all the early RPGs were still considered little more than extensions of the Fantasy Wargaming hobby.

How times have changed since the early days of FRP gaming! Not because role-playing is not a clear cut gaming form, but because it provides such a dynamic background of possible modes of play. Thus it is possible for every gaming group to eventually develop their own unique *styles* of play. Styles of play that are all equally valid, styles of play that confuse and

confound many novice gamers. Even so what feels right is usually based upon the rules of play, as the players understand them, and how they want to use them, right?

### Stratagems and Theorems

Styles of play, rules of play, methods of play, theories of play... When taken at a glance it appears overly complex, until you realize that what is really being discussed are different facets of the same gem. And the gem being examined in this instance are role-playing games as a whole, not just a specific game like Dungeons & Dragons, GURPS, or Traveler.

Strategy and theory are all about approach. And how a role-playing game is played depends in large part on what sort of environment the game is set in. Setting, it's something to think about. For just as we have our favorite genre of novels so, too, are we likely to have a favorite time of RPG. Alas too few of us think about what we read, much less the games we play. Even these words can be interpreted differently since all of us are individuals, which means none of us are likely to see things in the same light. No, really, I've got a 60 Watt bulb above my head right now as I type these words!

Yet in the room you are sitting in it may be full daylight shining in through your window by which you are reading this words. To say nothing of where you might be when you read, the mood you are in, or whether you happen to like an author's writing style. Differences and shades of similarity, that is life, it is what we have to deal with everyday.

So, too, does that describe the basic differences and similarities in most of the role-playing games you are likely to find. Some use Template systems while others rely on Classes, yet both are attempting to achieve the same basic goal: create a game that fits a theme. That *theme* being directly linked to a specific genre and style of play. For instance most fantasy games rely on a

class system, which is logical when one considers that most fantasy games are really set in pseudo-medieval worlds with cultures governed by rigid hierarchical structures. By the same token that means that the class system may not be suited for a western or modern espionage game. In fact a class system is probably the last thing you'd want to see in a non-fantasy role-playing game. Unless of course the game world had a rigid feudalistic society in which the type of characters allowable depended upon social standing or birth rank.

That's the beauty of the role-playing game. Just when you think you can rigidly apply a set of parameters to define them you discover they are much more than they first appeared to be. The game worlds presented by game authors can be as rich and vibrant as those presented in any novel, often presenting a depth that many novels cannot achieve. Which means the only limitations of the typical role-playing game are those placed upon them by the rules and the author's imagination.

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The footnotes to this article are contained in the associated article, *The Alchemy of Role-Playing 2*, which expands upon much of what has been discussed here.

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