



In part one I ended the article by stating the only limitations of role-playing games are those placed upon them by the rules and author's imagination. Some may assume this means the actual text in the game book, after all that is traditionally what we consider to be the product of an author; the printed word. However in a role-playing game the players literally become authors of their own story, a story that is the game. Thus role-playing games are limited only by what the players decide to do, or rather what the players decide by group consensus the game should allow their characters to be able to attempt. In this regard the rules serve as a guideline, a set of laws that help establish parameters of setting and background.

Back to the Future

Just as it is necessary to understand the origins of role-playing games to better grasp how and what the 'Threefold Model' and 'GNS Theory' are it is helpful to project possible trends into the future to see how the genre might evolve. But there is much more to reading the future in the vague mist of role-playing trends than tracking what games have been on the shelf. After all there are popular

trends that players follow, popular trends that Game Masters prefer, and then there are trends in game design. Thus one has to be aware of the types of rules that are being used, not just written and published!

Of course the average gamer will probably say none of this really matters. All they need to know is what their game books tell them, and how they want to use that information. Yet there are myriad styles of rules of play, and some of the games that call themselves RPGs wouldn't have been thought of as such a decade ago.

So, what are they then, really?

When examined something astonishing emerges. Something that the designers of these games may not even be aware of: Namely that some RPGs have not only evolved beyond their war game roots, often consciously redefining themselves, yet their styles of play would not be out of place with the abstract social party games of centuries past. Parlor games!

What's more the are true alchemists of game design, in their search for the ever elusive philosopher's stone, that golden set of rules that will grant their game a degree of immortality, have come up with some real gems. (And not a few stinkers!) Yet it is the process

itself that is important to game designers, that and creating something that they hope is going to be played and enjoyed by others hopefully for years to come.

Alas, many feel that a role-playing game has a limited lifespan. Never mind that games such as chess and checkers have been played for years and years, where modern games are concerned copyrights and claims of intellectual property too often get in the way of making role-playing games more than a niche hobby. Sadly the same can be said of most modern board games as well, thus the armchair game designer may feel that well enough is good enough. But is it really? That depends largely on whether or not one views games as nothing more than passing trends.

From Trends to Theory

All that most theories really are, or at least can be distilled down to in the simplest of terms, are *observations of trends*. For instance you have probably asked yourself what the GNS Theory and Threefold Model of which this article speaks are. More to the point you are probably wondering why anyone should care about such things at all. The answer: Because they are representative of a relatively new phenomenon, a trend if you will, involving gamers wanting to learn more about the how's and why's of the inner workings of role-playing games.

Yet the terminology already grows old and stale. One might as well wonder if a game is a Fantasy Heartbreaker, Scientific Romance, or Halloween Horror! For most what a game is, after all is said and done, is meant to be played. So why not just play the game, right?

Because some are earnestly

interested in discovering why it is that some players do what they do and how, as Game Masters and Game Developers, they can better understand the dynamic of the role-playing interactions amongst players so they can build the better mousetrap, er, game.

And why should understanding how people play their games be important?

Perils of Game Design

Much as game authors would like to think there is a holy grail of role-playing rules that every player will love, the truth is that every individual player has their own taste in game play. What works for one person may seem silly or pedantic to another. Game authors thus have to think carefully about how they construct their systems, for rule mechanics are the engine that runs the game. More than that a game's 'rules of play' provide the basic impetus for how the game functions, helps to define the game setting, and provides the basic laws that make the in-game world what it is. In this regard game rules can be thought of as the physics underpinning the *in-game* reality. The rules let the players know what to expect of the game environment, just as a genre label on the spine of a book informs a reader about the general nature of a novel's potential contents.

However asking: "What physics do I want present in my game?" is but the first step for most game designers. They also have to know, or at least take a guess, about which their target audience is likely to be. This is important for the same reasons that booksellers stack horror novels in one aisle and science

fiction novels in another, all the while making sure that non-fiction is just as plainly labeled. That reason is a matter of taste, more specifically the taste of the consumer, or in this case the gamer.

Established gamers are usually the target audience for role-playing games. Problem is many games are designed that way 'out of the box', which means these games are not likely to appeal to a wider audience. Something to consider.

Audience?

Yes, audience. Think about the last movie you went to. What did you like about it? What didn't you like about it? Would you go see another movie like it again if one were made?

Obviously this isn't a totally fair analogy since most movies have perceptible beginnings, middles, and endings that are revealed to the audience during the movie. For the most part role-playing rules are static texts inked in black and white. Yet most of the more popular role-playing games, I think you'll find, have also been presented in this fashion. Anything else would be counterintuitive and a headache to read.

But knowing what is acceptable in a rules presentation is just as important as choosing what style of art to use for illustrations. However knowing who a game's audience is most likely to be really does not help the author design the rules of play. For that they have to rely on their own experience. Just as player's characters will experience a story

with a perceptible beginning, middle, and end, the good role-playing book should present the rules in a straightforward and linear fashion. The problem arises when there is too much to explain in a limited number of pages. The same happens with movies, especially ones that are adapted from novels. There is only so much that can be squeezed onscreen during the average running time of a movie.

Remember the last movie you went to see that was based on your favorite book? Think back to when you first heard about it, how you were filled with a sense of awe and wonder about, and expectation and hope about how the movie would present the story. Alas, once you saw it, it was not quite what you expected. They seldom are. Sure it was better in some ways, in fact parts of it were quite memorable, more so than you would have thought.

Alas remember that scene, you know the one; it was terrible and had nothing to do with the book! Well, technically it did, but they had to scrunch things up and they left out your favorite part. How could they do that to you?

The simple answer is: They didn't.

The longer answer is: Your expectations were built up, but the reality, as is sadly all too often the case, just couldn't fulfill them. Which is just as well because if you're like me you've been wowed on more than one occasion by what filmmakers *have* been able to accomplish with adaptations. But as the old saying goes *you can't please all of the people all of the time...*

And such is the process of game design.

The Role of Game Design

There are so many things that, one assumes, a game designer wants to put into a game but just doesn't have the room to properly include. Or perhaps decides that the pages would be better used with rules for that other all-important thing.

But how to know what is and isn't that all-important element? More to the point, how to balance a game so that the players will feel that the rules cover enough ground so they, begrudgingly, will forgive the game designer for not being able to include one of those other all important things that there weren't enough page for?

What, these questions never crossed your mind? Really, not even once?

Well I am not surprised. Most of us who are players seldom consider just how intense the design process for a game really is. Yet when we buy a computer game isn't it odd that we actually think about the computer programmers, even give them plaudits in reviews, for the systems they design? Systems that often are essentially no different from the guts of a role-playing game, sans the animated graphics and nifty sound effects. But then again role-playing games have those in abundance, just in a different form. It's called imagination and the software we use to produce it is in our brain.

And What about those Theories?

To oversimplify GNS is an incarnation of the "roll vs. role gaming" debate from the beginning of the hobby, yet it is also much more. It is a model of Role-Playing Game Theory, at least as outlined in the essay: "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory"(2)- where the GNS model is essentially summed up as the underlying premise native to basic role-playing methodology that refers specifically to the styles of actual play. A basic premise otherwise known as the "Threefold Model"(3), because that is what the authors who previously wrote on the subject called it. In order to better understand these theories one has to understand the basic model, or rather the styles of play as defined by them. Then we can worry about the whys and what fores. Even ask whether such 'theories' aren't just so much fodder for mental masturbation.

But the theories essentially outline a basic premise that states all RPGs fall within one of the classic milieus of the literary genre. These being easily typified by classic "Genre Labels" such as: Horror, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Romance, and etcetera. But that they display distinctive *styles of play* that shape not only how the game is played but what the players come to expect from their RPG experience. These styles of play are commonly outlined to be:

Gamism (*Gamist*): That style of role-playing which stresses direct competition amongst and between players. Such games center upon a central "Strategy Profile" for game premise, usually defined by games in which goals or predefined victory conditions are part of the rules. In the early days of FRPG games this premise

was archaically referred to as "roll playing" and typified by a style of play stressing the strict adherence to, and use of, strictly established game mechanics over wandering narrative.

Simulationism (*Simulationist*): Where gamism relies upon the "Strategy Profile" to define a game simulationism relies more upon the interplay of "decision makers" in situational conflicts where "determined objectives" in relation to "Genre Labels", these being the categories which games may be sorted by, are the primary stakes. Thus simulationism is that style of game play typified by the assumption of predefined roles for the purposes of in-game exploration of roles which sometimes, though not always directly, fall within the pursuit of set objectives. Thus making this style of play, in part, typical of the sort of role-play that is closest to the methods used in LARP gaming.

Narrativism (*Narrativist/Dramatist*): That style of role-playing in which story telling, or rather the underlying narrative of the game, takes precedence over all other aspects of game play. At its extreme Narrativism relies purely upon the interplay of decision making and chance in the form of choices depending from direct player narrative to provide structure and direction within the role-playing environment. While this method of role-playing has been variously described and defined over the years it must be noted that this method of play holds much in common with early parlor games of the "Murder Mystery" category. Also very close in nature to this style of gaming, though not directly related to it, are the improvisational exercises used by theatre troupes.

That's it?

Yes and no. Those familiar with the terms above will immediately notice that I have melded concepts together. Many will decry this can not be done. Not so!

Why?

Where theories are concerned they are mutable, which means they are subject to change, reinterpretation, and outright redefinition by others. To argue the point would be to fall into the mire of fallacious construal of the concepts being something other than what they are, namely theories. If a concept is deemed to be immutable then it is no longer a theory, even if it cannot be proven. And we all know about things that cannot be proved which are nevertheless believed, such is the crux of the debate between Creationism and Evolution. Some could call this debate a fallacious argument between two opposing philosophical schools, schools that have forgotten that their philosophy is but a theory. Of course I'd never suggest such a thing, but it is a good example.

The thing to remember is that theories are not practical. Rather they are general propositions, outlines of ideas, and expressions of probability of design as related to estimated explanations of the working of a thing, substance, and action, or what have you. Theories are seeking of understanding through development of theories and hypothesis. This is the very process of scientific debate, it is the selective adaptation of traits and ideas to fit a paradigm, or rather the attempt to develop a paradigm based upon perceived traits and ideas that have been adapted from observational fact. (i.e.: Trends.) Yet approach with caution for theory is not a substitute for the actual phenomenon. Thus, in the end, what we have to ask ourselves is whether such distinctions as outlined

above are applicable.

Are they? If so, how? Can such theories apply to any single game? Can the answer ever be as simple or easy as *yes* or *no*?

What is the point?

Consider the following quote: "To define alchemy without being irreverent or pompous is well nigh impossible."(6) Yet how can one approach a subject for the first time without reading someone else's definition of what that subject is supposedly about? One can't for that is precisely what everyone that has ever played a game has done, relied upon someone else's explanation for how things should be done to play those games. Whether we play games like pin the tail on donkey, football, lawn darts, or tic-tac-toe we learn them based upon the definitions of others. These are definitions that shape how we play the game. Something that H. G. Wells understood when he set himself the task of writing those rules for lead army men, rules that were written not because he was pompous and arrogant, but because he recognized the need for a set of rules of play. He *observed* the need.

And what was that observation?

Probably that, without set rules of play, little boys spend more time arguing about who shot what than actually playing.

Role-Playing as Allegory

The games we played in our youth are going to be very different from the games that the youths yet to be born are likely to play, then again they are likely to be very similar. After all Fantasy Wargamming was once a term synonymous and interchangeable with

Role-Playing. But that was long ago. Life is change. The world in which we live today is not the world into which we were born, and yet it is. Language is dynamic, it shifts, meanings subtly blur, and as night falls we all too often wander aimlessly in the enshrouding dark searching for the light of revelation. Of course what we discover at the end of that long winding dark may surprise us, especially when we turn around and realize just how far the journey has taken us. But then that's life isn't it?

Ah, allegory and simile, it is what most approaching role-playing for the first time will be exposed to, with very good reason. Role-playing games are alchemy of ideas and gaming forms, and the Game Masters' explorers setting out upon an eternal quest for the elixir of entertainment. Theorists are ghost hunters out to capture elusive quicksilver phantoms, hold them up to the light, see what mysteries they might reveal.

And the future?

The rest of us are just along for the ride. So we might as well enjoy the scenery, roll up a few characters, and maybe rescue a dragon or two from evil princesses. Because the future of role-playing games will likely show us that all our projections based on current trends barely scratches the surface of what is out there, waiting for us.

#

The articles *The Alchemy of Role-Playing* and *The Alchemy of Role-Playing 2* are Copyright © 2002, 2003 by C. Demetrius Morgan

FOOTNOTES

1. From the introduction to "Fantasy Wargaming", page ix.
2. The original article may be found @ http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/gns/gns_introduction.html.
3. Related articles can also be found @ <http://www.darkshire.org/~jhkim/rpg/styles/index.html> and @ <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~tarim/rpg/rpgpage.htm>.
4. pg 20, "The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer' s Bible".
5. Pg 25, "The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer' s Bible".
6. Pg. 9, "Alchemy: An Illustrated A to Z"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Alchemy: An Illustrated A to Z"; Diana Fernando, 1998; ISBN 0-7137-2668-7
- "The Encyclopedia of Games"; ed. Brian Burns, Barnes & Noble, 1998; ISBN 0-7607-1025-2
- "The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer' s Bible"; Sean Patrick Fannon, Game Codex, 1997. ISBN 0-9674429-0-7
- "Fantasy Wargaming"; ed. Bruce Galloway, Stein and Day, 1982. ISBN 0-8128-2862-3
- "Hoyle's Games"; Lawrence H. Dawson, Wordsworth, 1994; ISBN 1-85326-316-8
- "The Illustrated History of Divination"; Stephen Karcher, Barnes & Noble, 1997; ISBN 0-7607-0528-3
- "The World Atlas of Divination"; ed. John Matthews, Tiger, 1998; ISBN 1-84056-049-5