

# **Rethinking the Binary**

How Dungeons and Dragons Complicates the Player/Game  
Relationship

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BA - Interactivity and Games, Macquarie University 2016

A thesis presented for the degree of  
Master of Research

Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies  
(MMCCS)

Faculty of Arts  
Macquarie University

18/10/2018

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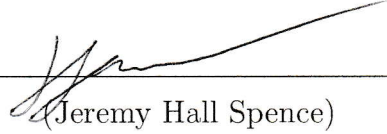
## Summary

This thesis will explore how tabletop role-playing games use a three-part game system in order to construct player experience, and how such a system complicates the traditionally very clear divide between player and game that much of the current game studies' literature suggests. To do so, it will look at how the three main units of the *Dungeons and Dragons* game system: the rules, the dungeon master, and the players, each function independently to shape the game experience, but also how each unit of the system limits the control that the other two units possess over the game. The thesis will primarily be drawing upon literature from the field of game studies, both concerning video games and tabletop role-playing games, but will also employ theorists from broader disciplines. It will utilize the anthropological works of Victor Turner in order to understand tabletop role-playing games as a social ritual, possible worlds theory, as described by Marie-Laurie Ryan, to discuss the multiple fictional worlds that exist simultaneously within games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, and Michel de Certeau's views on power, in order to analyse the power relations between the three units of the game system.

## Statement of Originality

*This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.*

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

  
(Jeremy Hall Spence)

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17/10/2018

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Rowan Tulloch, for his patience, wisdom, and advice. Without him, this thesis could not have been possible, and I thank him for steering me in the right direction, while allowing me enough room to make this thesis my own. I also wish to thank my ever-patient family and my ever-supportive friends, who gave me the drive to see the work through until the end.

Thank you all.

## Introduction

*Dungeons and Dragons* is a game system consisting of three main parts: the rules, the dungeon master, and the players. The rules, as created by the game designers, dictate the way the game is meant to be played, and outline the construction of player characters, the strength of various foes they will encounter, and how the players interact with the game world through the use of dice. The dungeon master is primarily responsible for controlling everything in the world that is not the players, taking on the roles of various characters they might meet, and describing the world around them. They are also usually responsible for the creation of the setting and the story that is played out during the game, however this responsibility can also rest with the game designers, depending on whether the dungeon master is using a premade campaign. Lastly, the players take on the role of the protagonists in the game's story, reacting to the dungeon master's recitations by adopting the personalities of their characters and taking actions on their behalf. Often these actions will lead to alterations in the story that the dungeon master had planned, which forces the dungeon master to adopt the new storyline and adapt their preexisting ideas. As we can see, the game of *Dungeons and Dragons* works in a three-part system, which has become a standard feature of the tabletop role-playing game (hereafter TRPG) medium. Nearly all TRPGs use this system of rules, game master and players, and it is in part due to this system that the medium is able to offer a unique play experience.

Unfortunately, much of the current or past major literature in games studies implies that games are a two-part system, consisting only of the player and the game. Typically, proposed definitions of games or game models assume the relationship between the player and the game as a binary. Jesper Juul's discussion of the classic game model states that a good definition of a game needs to describe the relation between the game and the player of the game, and seeks to establish a definition that can encapsulate the standard model for creating games that "has been constant for several thousand years" (2003, p.30). While Juul's model does also point to broader culture as a third influence on the game model, he primarily examines the relationship between the game and the rest of the world in terms of how the game is separate from ordinary life (p.34), and analyses the system of the players and the game without consideration for other actors within that relationship. As such, in his definition, TRPGs are situated as not entirely games, and are instead classified as borderline cases due to the existence of a dungeon master, who can interfere with the fixed rules that are usually enforced by the game system (2003, p.40). Similarly, discussions of game spaces,

such as game design theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's controversial concept of the magic circle (2003, p.93-99), or Henry Jenkins' "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004), reinforce the idea that there only games, which are traversed, and players, who do the traversing (Jenkins, 2004, pp.121-122; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p.95). Even though Jenkins mentions *Dungeons and Dragons*, he implies that the dungeon master is an extension of the game, and begins the game by designing the game space (p.4), he does not consider that in such a game, the game space is not just the creation of the dungeon master, but is instead a product of the complicated interaction between the rules, the dungeon master, and the players. As a more recent example, debates over Ian Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric have continued this trend, as Bogost posits that game rules can have a significant role in constructing meaning, and Miguel Sicart argues that it is the players who construct the game's meaning, not the rules (Bogost, 2010; Sicart, 2011; Skolnik, 2013). However, both these positions again imply this dichotomy of game and player, the only difference being which one is responsible for the construction of meaning. In all of these discussions and debates, there is rarely a consideration for gaming systems that do not follow a binary system, or what difference such a system might make to the theory being applied.

As such, this thesis will demonstrate how TRPGs complicate the idea of games as binary, and how the change from a two-part to three-part system alters the player experience. Players of TRPGs state that they receive more narrative control and agency over the story when compared to computer role-playing games (hereafter CRPGs), and that TRPGs offer them increased flexibility and choice (Cover, 2010, p.45). This is because TRPGs, through their game system, are able to offer their players real narrative agency, or control of the story, as opposed to psychological agency, or the mere feeling of control. (Cover, 2010, p.47; Hammer, 2007, p.73). In addition, the three-part game system forms the basis for a unique form of social interaction between participants, which TRPG players list as another key feature of the medium (Cover, 2010, p.45).

The research aims of this thesis are twofold: Firstly, to show how the three-part game system typically employed by TRPGs results in a different player experience to video game systems. The effect of the TRPG system on the game experience goes beyond simply splitting the roles traditionally performed by the game into the rule system and the dungeon master. It creates a power dynamic between the three roles, as each has a unique form of control over the game, but also has its control held in check by the other two. Secondly, to clarify why examining games using a binary game model is not always sufficient. A binary game model such as the one proposed by Juul lacks the ability to adequately explain games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, as evidenced

by Juul placing their status as games as borderline because the rules do not constitute a fixed system (2003, p.40). Instead of stating that TRPGs are not games because they do not fit within a definition designed for video games, this thesis aims to show that it is the strict dichotomy of player and game that requires correction.

Given their niche but growing interest, TRPGs have for the most part escaped the notice of academia, and in particular the field of game studies. However, there are a few notable exceptions, such as Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Function of Role-Playing Games* (2010), and Jennifer Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (2010). Bowman's work looks at the many unique benefits that TRPGs offer players. The three main points of this work are that role-playing games form a group's sense of communal cohesiveness through shared storytelling (p.79), sharpen problem-solving and teach new skills (pp.102-103), and offer a space for the enactment of personas (pp.153-154). Bowman explores these points through ethnographic research, interviewing nineteen participants to gain an insight into their experiences with various role-playing games. The participants state frequently how role-playing games have helped them in some manner, either repairing strained relationships (p.61), developing mathematical skills (p.109), or allowing them to express parts of their personality that they would not outside of the game world (p.169), in ways that video games could not. Like Bowman's work, Cover's book is an ethnographic study employing interviews with players of TRPGs, though it seeks to examine the construction of story in TRPGs rather than examining their psychological effects, and does so from a combined a literary and games studies viewpoint. Cover's work encompasses a wide range of topics, from the greater degree of immersion TRPGs provide (p.106), to how players author the events of the game (p.124), to an analysis of the broader social culture of TRPG fans (p.148), and so provides a useful starting point for any inquiry into TRPGs.

The scope of this thesis is focused on a deep look at the *Dungeons and Dragons* game system as representative of TRPG systems as a whole. Though it is only one of many tabletop role-playing games, it is both the first published TRPG and the most popular to date. In addition, as the first published TRPG, it can be seen as the progenitor of the medium, as subsequent TRPGs have all been influenced by *Dungeons and Dragons*' unique rule systems. Therefore, the thesis will use *Dungeons and Dragons* as representative of the most common three part TRPG system, as it is the basis for all other TRPG systems and the game that all other TRPGs exist in context to. There also exist several different editions of *Dungeons and Dragons*, including the unofficial edition, *Pathfinder*. While the rules do differ over these different editions, the general principles of



how the game system functions remain unchanged, and so the thesis will not be focused on any one particular edition of the game. In addition, while much of this thesis is based on player experience, any ethnographic work will be drawn from the studies performed by Cover and Bowman.

The structure of this thesis will mirror the game system being analysed, with the three chapters being divided into examinations of the three parts of the system. The first chapter will explore the function of the rules in *Dungeons and Dragons*, primarily examining how they shape and influence individual play sessions without the automated systems of video games. It will do so by first analysing what other scholars have said about the purpose of rules in regards to shaping player experience, before moving to a discussion of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a form of social ritual. This discussion will employ both anthropological works, largely using Victor Turner's concept of the 'liminoid,' and game studies literature in order to demonstrate what the effects of the game as a social ritual are, and how those effects are generated by the rule system.

The second chapter will discuss the importance of the dungeon master in the role-playing system, examining how they function within the boundaries of the rules, and how much of an effect the existence of such a figure has on player agency. To do so, it will examine the dungeon master by their three main roles: As a creator of the game world, as the reciter of the story, and as the arbitrator of the rules. The discussion will use possible worlds theory to demonstrate how the existence of a dungeon master and the lack of physical game space breaks down the notion of a singular, unified game world, and also discuss power dynamics and relations within the system. It will do so by examining the various functions of the dungeon master and the seemingly unlimited control that they have over the game, but also how their power is limited by multiple checks and balances.

The final chapter will discuss how the role of players in *Dungeons and Dragons* differs from that of players in video games, employing Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics to examine the difference in power dynamics in the two systems. The primary point is that the rule system and the inclusion of the dungeon master change the act of play from purely consumptive to largely productive. Through the active negotiation with the dungeon master and the actions of their in-game avatars, the players wield a considerable amount of power over the events of the narrative, giving them an active role in the authorship of it, rather than just experiencing it. This chapter will be largely dominated by discussions of agency and avatarisation, as well as continuing

the ongoing discussions of social ritual, the impact of liminoid phenomena, and possible worlds theory.

The importance of this research is that game studies as a field of inquiry is quite heavily focused on video games, and often neglects to examine other forms or mediums of gaming. While TRPGs have been a niche genre for a long time, they are quickly rising to prominence. The publication of *Dungeons and Dragons*' fifth edition in 2014 brought many new players into the game, and last year Wizards of the Coast, the current owners of *Dungeons and Dragons*, announced that the game had had its biggest sales year since they acquired the rights in 1997 (Weiss, 2018). In addition, the game has begun to re-enter the cultural consciousness through shows like *Stranger Things*, *Community* and *The Big Bang Theory*. In short, TRPGs as a gaming medium can no longer be ignored by the broader game studies community, nor can the game studies community continue assumptions of a simple player/game binary.

# Chapter One

## The Rules

Since the release of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* in 1977, the core rules of each *Dungeons and Dragons* edition have consisted of three main rulebooks: *The Player's Handbook*, which dictates the choices players have in creating their avatars within the game world, the *Monster Manual*, which has the various statistics of various creatures that the players may encounter in their adventures, and the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, which teaches readers how to run a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. While there are always supplemental rulebooks published at later dates, these three core books describe the functioning of the game system, outlining how players and the dungeon master interact, establishing the use of dice in determining success and failure, and generally providing all the information required to play the game. It is these rules that are the focus of this first chapter, and it is the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate how these rules construct a game that cannot be placed within the binary player/game systems too often employed by games studies theorists. More so than that however, it will show how the game system created by these rules impacts the player experience, altering the social hierarchies and sense of identities that the players possess, through a form of complex social ritual. In order to do so, it will draw not only from games studies works, both examining video games and TRPGs, but also on anthropological and sociological texts concerning social status, identity, and fraternity in ritual settings.

To begin, it is important to establish an understanding of the broader literature surrounding rules in game studies. Naturally, discussions of what rules are or the function that rules fulfil have been quite prevalent in the field, due to the effect that the ludology movement had by encouraging the study of games to focus on the mechanical rather than the narratological (Frasca, 1999; Aarseth, 2001; Eskelinen, 2001). As such, there is an overwhelming amount of theory on the topic of rules, and multiple definitions that can be used. In *Rules of Play* (2003), Salen and Zimmerman devote a large portion of their work to defining and discussing what rules are and what they mean to games, concluding that “Rules constitute the inner, formal structure of games” (Salen & Zimmerman, p.125). They also go on to list several defining traits of rules: That rules limit player action, that they are explicit and unambiguous, that they are shared by all players, that they are fixed, that they are binding, and that they are repeating (p.125). However, much like Juul's classic game model, the inclusion of rules being fixed and binding clashes with how rules operate in TRPGs. In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Espen Aarseth discusses how

the mechanics and rules of a cybertext play a defining role in determining its aesthetics (p.22), and more recently, Ian Bogost's work on procedural rhetoric in *Persuasive Games* (2010) describes how the rule structures of a video game shape the arguments that the game can present, or the ideas that it can effectively convey (p.29).

Given the amount of literature there is about rules, the scope of this investigation needs to be narrowed to an examination of what scholars have said about how the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* operate. Instead of asking the broad question of 'what do rules do?', we must instead ask: 'How do the rules in *Dungeons and Dragons* function to construct the game experience?' To answer this, we must turn away from the broader games studies work, and turn instead towards what little scholarship has been published on the topic of TRPGs.

For Sarah Lynne Bowman, rules are important in games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* because they shape the 'rules of reality,' and give substance to otherwise structureless make-believe. In *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010), Bowman looks at the many unique benefits that tabletop role-playing games offer. In a discussion of how role-playing games assist players in developing problem-solving skills that can be used in the real world, Bowman discusses how these sorts of puzzles require a challenge to be overcome, and how the rules in TRPGs provides the mechanisms by which success or failure can be measured (p.105). Perhaps more importantly, Bowman sees the function of the rules as providing an internally consistent guide for how all actions taken by the players within the game function, stating that "The game system establishes the rules of reality within which pretense seems more plausible, adding to the experience of immersion and reducing cognitive dissonance" (p.105). So, for Bowman, the function of the rules system is to provide a framework for the reality that the game takes place in, by outlining the logics that govern the game world. A consistent rule system in turn provides constancy to an otherwise imaginary universe, working as an anchoring point so that players can both understand the game and actively engage with it. The world becomes more real to the players, who in turn become more immersed. But more importantly, these rules of reality that the game designers create dictate the formation of the game experience, because they detail and govern all major actions that can take place in the game world. From swinging a sword to standing in a fire, the game designers' rule system outlines if such an action is allowed, how that action works, and the consequences of that action. On a more fundamental level, the rule system creates the possibility of a game existing at all, by transforming unstructured storytelling into a form of play.

Bowman's ideas on how rules shape game experience are similar to those of a few games studies theorists. In *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), Juul explains that the fictional world helps express the rules to the player, and the rules help the players examine the fictional world of the game (p.163). Juul also emphasises how rules separate the fiction from the rest of the world by carving out a space in which the rules of the game apply (p.164), referencing Salen and Zimmerman's idea of 'the magic circle' (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p.95). Even more similarly to Bowman, in "Doors and Perception" (2007), Aarseth discusses how rules are the transforming force between the fictional and the simulated, and how the simulated is more real than the fictional. He also discusses what distinguishes the virtual from the simulated, using the example of two fictional dragons: Smaug from *The Hobbit*, and a dragon from the video game *Everquest*. His conclusion is that the *Everquest* dragon, which follows a set of programmed directions and reacts to player input, is more real to players, because they have an emotional investment in the success and failure of their characters, and the dragon can be a cause of success or failure. (p.37-39) But, as Bowman also discussed, players are immersed because they know that the game is following a consistent system that adheres to the logics of the game world, and from that system they can then begin to interact with that reality. "Simulations allow us to test their limits, comprehend casualties, establish strategies, and effect changes, in ways clearly denied us by fictions, but quite like in reality" (Aarseth, 2007, p.37). Both Aarseth and Bowman conclude with a similar idea: The rule or game system makes the fictional more 'real', dictating how the game world functions and allowing players to interact with it.

While there is value to these claims, in particular the ideas of consequences adding stakes to the experience, and the ability for rules to add consistency, there are two main problems with these arguments: Firstly, both Bowman and Aarseth discuss 'reality' as an objective concept, as Aarseth discusses how the simulated is more 'real' than the fictional, and Bowman is concerned with how the rules form the basis for a game world that reflects the real world. However, as has been discussed by many scholars, reality is primarily socially constructed, consisting of various institutionalised norms created through joint and shared understandings of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Given this, it is difficult to state that rules are able to make a games more real, as Aarseth claims, and for ideas such as Bowman's, it is more appropriate to state that the rules function to bring the game in-line with predominant cultural ideas, which then in turn gives a feeling of plausibility to the game's setting. By stating their arguments in terms of an objective reality and an in-game reality, scholars such as Aarseth, Bowman, and Juul establish an unhelpful dichotomy between the events of the game and the world

beyond it. This is a problematic stance for game studies in general, as it implies an annexation of game worlds from broader culture, and a stance that has received much due criticism (Consalvo, 2009; Copier, 2007; Zimmerman, 2012). However, this binary view of game reality and ‘real’ reality becomes even more troublesome when applied to TRPGs, which lack the formal game space of a video game. While TRPGs can use game boards and play mats, the majority of the game space is constituted by the players’ imaginations, and therefore there can be no single canon reality. Each of the players will hold their own perspectives on how the game world functions and how the events of the narrative play out, based on a combination of the rules and the cultural ideas they have been exposed to, which help form their conception of what is plausible. Players will then act in the game world according to their individual understandings of that world, which in turn affects the understandings of the world held by the other players. Therefore, it is problematic to view this split between the game world and reality as Bowman and Aarseth do, as the game’s world relies so heavily on the players’ individual conceptions of reality, which, while not unified, are provided some consistency by the rules. This also begins to illustrate why a binary model of player and game is insufficient for examining games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which much of the game exists purely inside the individual players’ minds.

Secondly, this explanation of the rules does not account for all of the rules provided in the *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebooks, as many of the rules and recommendations do not apply to the in-game world, but rather to the out-of-game experience. The problem with the idea that the rules serve only to enhance player immersion in the game is that it comes from a ludological perspective, being focused on how the game experience is built mechanically. While the majority of the content in the *Dungeons and Dragons* rulebooks is of a mechanical nature, such as listing the physical attributes of the various enemies that players can encounter, or how many days a character can go without food, much of the content is also devoted to building the correct social setting and mood while playing the game. For example, the *5th Edition Dungeon Master’s Guide*’s section on table rules has recommendations for rules such as turning off the television while playing, having a clear way to indicate when a player is speaking in character or out of character, or even just deciding before a session who should bring snacks (Wizards RPG Team, 2012, p.235). With the focus on only the mechanical, scholars such as Aarseth and Bowman do not consider that for more social games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, the rules affect more than just how the reality of the game functions, and that in actuality, the game extends beyond the game world. With rules and recommendations for how to organise the social aspects of the game, the designers do not just dictate how the game world functions, they help create a complex social ritual that shapes the

ways that players experience the game. Because of this, it might be more productive to view the rules as instructions or a schema for conducting a complex social ritual.

Ritual is a topic that Bowman does discuss in her work, though she does not explain the function of the rules in the formation of the ritual. Instead, she focuses primarily on the effects of the ritual, which she sees as the temporary reconfiguration of social hierarchies. In chapter two of *The Function of Role-Playing Games*, Bowman discusses general role-playing in communal contexts, but also role-playing games as a form of ritual, and how that ritual functions to supersede normal social hierarchies for the duration of play. “The player is stripped of previous rank in the external world and given equal status to fellow players.” “Individuals are appointed to guide the ritual, a role similar to those enacted by elders in tribal communities.” (2010, p.51) The dungeon master, then, leads this social ritual by guiding the players through the game, and the players must accept the arbitrations and decisions of the dungeon master as final regardless of their respective social status in the outside world.

Bowman goes on to discuss how hierarchies are then reinforced as roles emerge within the party of player characters. As the imaginary game space supersedes the real world, the hierarchy of the avatars becomes more important than the hierarchy of the players in reality. “Players must adhere to the in-character status hierarchies that invariably emerge; even in a group of adventurers of the same age and rank, positions such as Leader, Information Gatherer, “Tank,” and negotiator eventually establish themselves. A fifty-year old man may find himself taking orders IC (in-character) from a girl who, in the “real world,” is only eighteen. He must submit to his role in order to maintain the consistency of the game world” (p.52).

The problem with this argument is that the reconfiguration of social hierarchies is not as absolute as Bowman seems to state, but also that Bowman does not explore the effects of the ritual beyond this point. While there is certainly an altering of social hierarchies in the duration of play, the statement that players must adhere to their in-character statuses or must submit to their roles to maintain the consistency of the game world is far too definite, and implies that all the social relations between the players outside of the game world cease to exist for the duration of play. This again indicates a binary view between the in-game and out-of-game worlds, implying that the players can only inhabit one or the other, but as Jennifer Grouling Cover states, “TRPGs involve continual frame shifting between different possible and actual worlds” (2010, p.92). Through the duration of play, players inhabit multiple worlds, as discussions move from in-character to out-

of-character, or can exist in a halfway point, such as a player describing what they want their character to do. Because of this, the in-game and out-of-game social hierarchies that Bowman separates are in fact both in effect throughout play, and while they can remain separate, most often the pre-existing social hierarchies the players possess will affect and inform the relations between the in-game characters. In addition, this change in social hierarchies is not the only effect of the ritual. Bowman does not list any others, but the main attraction to TRPGs for players, based on an online survey conducted by Cover, seems to be that it provides flexibility, with users stating that the unlimited choices and complete freedom in creating your own character were what made TRPGs important (Cover, 2010, p.45).

Therefore, it may be more productive to say that the reconfiguration of social hierarchies is a by-product of the main effect of the ritual, which is to provide a space within which players can choose a life and social status other than their own, and experience it without repercussion. The experience that the game as a ritual creates is about more than social hierarchies among players, as the game itself is about more than that. The adoption and enactment of personas by the players can lead to a change temporary in-game change in social status, but perhaps the overlooked effect of the ritual is simply the way that it enables this exploration of alternate personalities. Bowman's work heavily discusses the topic of TRPGs as a way to safely explore character personas, even offering a taxonomy of other selves that are expressed through play (2010, pp.170-176), and yet she excludes this point from her discussion of TRPGs as a form of ritual. Instead of the reconfiguration of social hierarchies, perhaps the main effect that TRPGs have as a form of social ritual is the creation of a safe play space separate from the actual world, in which players can create, dictate, and experience an alternate life for themselves. This, in turn, is how the rules function within the game system to shape the game experience.

In order to unpack this argument, it is prudent to discuss the anthropological and sociological works of Victor Turner as they relate to ritual. For the purposes of this discussion, Turner's most relevant ideas are those of the 'liminoid' and 'communitas,' but in order to understand these, it is important to first establish an understanding of the 'liminal.' In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1991), first published in 1969, Turner details his study of ritual practices among the Ndembu people of Zambia, outlining the role of symbolism in the observed rituals, but also the impact that rituals have on social structure. In order to do so, he utilises the idea of the liminal, adopted from Arnold Van Gennep's work in *The Rites of Passage* (1960) first published in 1909. Van Gennep had argued that all rites of passage in a society are divided into



three phases: the separation phase, where the supplicant undergoes symbolic behaviour to separate them from their previous societal standing, such as the cutting of hair; the transition or liminal phase; in which they have left one social status but not yet joined another, existing as external to social hierarchy; and the reaggregation phase, where the ritual ends and the supplicant re-joins society with their new status (Van Gennep, 1960). Turner adopted and popularised these ideas, which were not widely acknowledged at the time of publication, through use in his work, but in particular the concept of the liminal. For Turner, the liminal entities, those who were undergoing the liminal period of the rite, were most interesting in their relation to each other. “It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition, to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. However, among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.” (1991, p.95). This egalitarian comradeship was labelled by Turner as *communitas*.

*Communitas* was the largest expansion of Van Gennep’s ideas by Turner in *The Ritual Process*, as he argued that during the transition part of a ritual, when the participants were in the liminal state and removed of their binding social status, there arises a general social bond that ties them together as a community of equals. Turner defines *communitas* as: “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated”...“communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.” (p.96), and this concept is largely where Bowman draws her discussion of TRPGs as a social ritual from. The *communitas* that Turner describes is very similar to the experience of players in a *Dungeons and Dragons* game, as much, though not all, of the social status that usually binds the players is stripped away, leaving them as stateless equals or comrades in their own unique group, and being led by a figure of authority, the dungeon master, who controls the ritual proceedings. However, there are some elements of Turner’s theory of the liminal and the *communitas* that undercut this comparison. Firstly, what Turner is discussing in this case is still the sort of religious ritual or rite as described by Van Gennep: a rite of passage, taken only once, in which a supplicant moves from one status to another, and includes the separation and reaggregation phases. *Dungeons and Dragons* naturally lacks these key features, as it is played repeatedly, and marks no change in status upon the completion of the ritual. Furthermore, it lacks any religious or societal significance, being a form of entertainment undertaken by choice rather than by doctrine, and perhaps most importantly, the purpose of a liminal experience in ritual is that so the supplicant can experience a low point before being lifted to a higher status. As Turner states: “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.” (p.97). In games

such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, players most typically emulate heroes, with their characters being stronger, wiser, smarter or more charismatic than they themselves are, in a form of power fantasy. The high is experienced during the ritual, rather than afterwards.

However, this problem is clarified with the introduction of the liminoid, another expansion of Van Gennep's ideas by Turner in a later work. Turner saw the liminoid as a type of experience that had all the features of a liminal experience, but was completely optional and undertaken for the purposes of enjoyment (Turner, 1974, pp.64-65). This idea is outlined in Turner's article "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual" (1974), where he examines the idea of liminality again in relation to the modern day, and finds that there are many activities that evoke a liminal experience while not adhering to Van Gennep's definition. Because of this, he labels these instead as being 'liminoid', and lists five main differences between the two: Liminal phenomena tend to be prevalent in early agrarian societies, while liminoid phenomena seem to arise after industrialisation; liminal phenomena tend to be collective, while liminoid phenomena can be collective, but often are characteristically individual products with mass effects; liminal phenomena are integrated into the social process; whereas liminoid phenomena are developed apart from the major social, political and economic processes of the society; liminal phenomena have common intellectual meanings or interpretations for the group practising them, while liminoid phenomena tend to be idiosyncratic or quirky, and compete with each other for the attention of consumers; and finally, liminal phenomena ultimately work to support the structure of society, while liminoid phenomena can be subversive, critical, or simply unconcerned with broader society (Turner, 1974, pp.85-86). These five differences mark *Dungeons and Dragons* as a form of liminoid phenomena rather than liminal, but in addition to this, when discussing annual rituals such as harvest festivals, Turner offers that not all rites reduce the participants to a low before returning them to a high, and in particular liminoid phenomena can do the opposite, and "elevate those of low status transiently before returning them to their permanent humbleness." (p.57). The liminoid experience, then, is best described as a feeling of statelessness or of altered status for a temporary period of time, evoked for enjoyment through an optional, voluntary activity.

While Bowman references Turner in her discussion of the game as a form of ritual, she only employs the concept of the liminal, and does not reference Turner's work on the liminoid at all. However, the liminoid has been employed in the context of games studies by a few authors. Sun-Ha Hong examines the way liminoid games are able to evoke a 'real enough' attitude from their players, where players know that the events are not real, but act as though they are, through

consistent, rules-bounded spaces (2015, p.50), Talmadge Wright, Eric Boria and Paul Breidenbach see *Counter-Strike* as creating a liminoid state which reshapes everyday life through play, allowing for a rise in behaviours that would not be tolerated in real life (2002), and Eric Kristiansen employs the liminoid in defence of the magic circle, seeing it as a form of liminoid space where players are removed from the public and enter an intermediate state, separate from the normal social system (2015, p.168). All of these studies examine how the liminoid is responsible for a change in player behaviour, due to a feeling of statelessness among participants, and while none of them examine the liminoid in relation to Turner's *communitas*, the effects that they describe: the feeling of 'real enough', the rise of behaviours outside of the norm, and the separation from the normal social system (though not to the extent that Kristiansen suggests), can be found within a normal play session of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

From the examination of Turner's work, and the similar effects that the liminoid has in some video games, it is clear that the rules of *Dungeons of Dragons* function to create, intentionally or not, a form of social ritual that evokes a liminoid experience for the participants, allowing them to experience statelessness, or an altered status, for a controlled, limited time. It also creates among them the feeling of *communitas*, or equal status, by ensuring that the players' characters function in a mechanically uniform manner, or play by the same rules. While the ritual does reorganise social hierarchies, as Bowman states, this is a side effect of the feeling of *communitas* created by the liminoid experience. The real effect of the ritual, and by extension the real effect that the rules have on the game experience, is to form a safe, temporary space wherein the players can undergo a liminoid experience, allowing them to cast off their real-life statuses and adopt the high statuses of their in-game avatars. Similarly to how Turner describes rites such as harvest festivals, the players are allowed to temporarily experience a status higher than their own (or perhaps lower, depending on the nature of the character they are playing), before being returned to the safe normalcy of their everyday life.

Therefore, in creating the rules of the game, the designers of *Dungeons and Dragons* shape the player experience by establishing the nature and boundaries of the liminoid experience. In order to allow the players to experience the high status of being a fantasy hero, it requires a consistent, fantasy setting for them to be immersed in. This is the purpose of the rules of reality that Bowman, and to a lesser degree Aarseth, discuss. The mechanical rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* makes the high status that the players experience feel more legitimate, as they are demonstrably achieving or failing to achieve their goals in much the same manner that Bowman and Aarseth state, but the

rules also create the basis for a logical game-world that the players can imagine and enact their temporary selves within. As such, Bowman's rules of reality, which dictate how the world functions mechanically, assist players to establish in their minds a consistent, logical game world, in which threats feel more menacing and achievements feel more legitimate. This, coupled with the rules and recommendations on establishing a social setting and mood appropriate for playing, creates a play experience designed to maximise player immersion, so that they can better cast-off their out of game statuses and experience the in-game alternate statuses of their characters. While their actual world statuses cannot be fully discarded, as Bowman suggests, the game system nonetheless creates a feeling of *communitas* among the players, granting them comradeship and egalitarian fraternity that does not erase their previous social ties, but alters their perception of them for a short period of time. Thus, the rules establish a form of social ritual that enables players to experience a life and social status other than their own, in a safe, communal setting. However, what does this mean for the control that the game designers, as part of the three-part game system, have over the players and the dungeon master?

## Chapter Two

### The Dungeon Master

In *Dungeons and Dragons*, the role of the dungeon master is perhaps the most complicated, being a three-part system in itself. In a video game, the player's actions are monitored and reacted to automatically by the game system itself. However, due to the physical nature of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the rules cannot be enforced by an automated system. Instead what the game has is a dungeon master, a single player who creates the story, the characters, and the world of the game, who recites the story to the other players and alters it based on their input, and who arbitrates what actions are permissible and settles any rule decisions. While the game designers dictate how the game system functions, the dungeon master is necessary for the game to function at all, and because of this, they potentially have the most control over the resulting player experience. Therefore, in order to understand the role that the dungeon master plays in the overall game experience, this chapter will examine how the dungeon master exerts that control over the system through their three main functions: creation, recitation and arbitration, and what limitations they face by having to act within the game designers' rules in order to maintain a consistent liminoid experience.

#### Creation

The role of creation for the dungeon master encompasses the work they do before the game begins, and in this role they are most similar to a traditional author. Creation refers to the function that the dungeon master fulfils when they create the intended storyline for the game, use the rulebooks to plan the enemies that the player's characters may encounter, design the non-player characters that the players are likely to interact with, and many other small decisions that all make up the initial crafting of the intended game experience. Although there can arguably be just as much creativity involved on behalf of the dungeon master during the playing of the game, as they must often improvise new directions for the story based on the actions of the players, those acts of creation exist in relation to this original creation, and as such it can be seen as the original script that the dungeon master has for the story. Therefore, in regards to this act of initial creation, the dungeon master can be seen as similar to a novelist or scriptwriter: An author in their own right (Cover, 2010, pp.127-129; Hammer, 2007, p.70).

However, the dungeon master is unlike a traditional author in the amount that they are limited by the medium in which they work. While a novelist or scriptwriter is by no means limitless in terms of what they write, being bound by conventions, norms, taste, or simply the constraints of the written word, the limitation of the dungeon master goes beyond that, as they are writing inside an already authored space. Their creation exists inside the *Dungeons and Dragons* system, a system of rules, lore, and thematic elements created by the designers of the game. While this system offers dungeon masters many possibilities in how they wish to shape their creation, it also functions to limit the power that the dungeon masters have in that creation, in order to maintain a logically consistent game world. The dungeon master's creation must be one that can function alongside the rule system and, more importantly, within the boundaries of the intended liminoid experience. As discussed in the first chapter, *Dungeons and Dragons* as a form of liminoid phenomena allows players to experience the feeling of a higher status, but in order to do so, it relies on the rules of reality to give the game stakes or consequences, which legitimise the feeling of achievement that the players have when things go right, and also help to present a logically consistent world to the players, allowing them to more easily immerse themselves (Bowman, 2010, p.105). However, if a dungeon master oversteps their bounds by establishing game elements incongruent with the rest of the setting, then the fiction becomes harder to rationalise and the players lose their immersion, weakening the illusion of altered status granted by the game. If the dungeon master chooses to play *Dungeons and Dragons*, and then wishes to tell a science fiction story, then the consistency of the game experience will likely be threatened, as the dungeon master would have to reconcile the science fiction setting with the game's mechanics. The problem is that the logics inherent in the game system favour a fantasy setting, with mechanical systems such as combat being designed to facilitate the mostly melee fights typical of the genre, or fantasy elements such as the use of magic being assumed as normal. In addition, smaller details outlined in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, such as the time that travelling takes, the cost of goods, and the size and nature of cities are all intended to create a consistent fantasy world, making them jarring when transferred to another setting. Because of this, the dungeon master, while having the final say over all rule decisions and creating and controlling the game's story, is in fact limited by the boundaries of the fantasy setting that the rules favour, and the experience those rules are designed to create. So, while in theory the dungeon master could create any sort of setting that they wished, in practice the medium itself confines their creation to a fantasy setting, taking power away from the dungeon master in order to better facilitate the player experience.

Another factor separating the dungeon master from a traditional author is that what the dungeon master creates at this point is not a completed text. Jennifer Grouling Cover takes the stance that the ‘text’ of the game is the discourse produced by the gaming group during play (p.91), as until the events of the narrative occur in the game, they are subject to change. Because of this, we have to ask what it is that the dungeon master is actually creating at this point. Their creation is both not a wholly new game world, as much of it is informed by the rules of the game in order to comply with the intended liminoid experience, and it is also not a completed text. So what is it that the dungeon master creates, and what is the role of their creation?

In order to answer this, it is best to first elaborate on a useful classification system for quantifying fictional worlds: Possible world theory. Much like social constructivism, possible worlds theory (hereafter PWT) is based on the foundation that reality is not a single entity, but a plurality of different worlds. Unlike social constructivism however, PWT claims a single central world as ‘actual’, and all other worlds are possible worlds that sit in opposition to the actual world (Kripke, 1963; Ryan, 2012), though in line with the tenants of social constructivism, the nature of the actual world varies from person to person, the term merely meaning “the world in which I am located” (Ryan, 1992, p.529). While originally the concept of possible worlds was used as a solution to problems of formal semantics regarding the conditions of truth for counterfactual or hypothetical statements, it was adapted in the mid-70s by literary theorists in order to discuss the nature of fictional worlds (Ryan, 2012). Of particular use is Marie-Laurie Ryan’s typology of fictional worlds from *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991), which serves to break down the many possible ‘realities’ of a narrative into useable theoretical pieces. Ryan not only distinguishes the actual world (AW) from the textual actual world (TAW), or the world presented by the text, but also separates out the narratorial actual world (NAW), as the world as presented by the narrator, the textual reference world (TRW) as the world the text claims is factual, and the alternative possible worlds (APW), which are the fictional worlds that become accepted as true when the reader shifts to them (Ryan, 1991, p.vii). For a game such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, this is a much more nuanced method of viewing the game worlds and the game world logics established by the rules. Every player will have their own APW, because, as was discussed in chapter one, they all hold slightly differing interpretations of the TAW being presented based on their constructed realities, but in turn, those APWs combine through play to form the TAW.

Returning to the discussion of creation however, we can see that, unlike the works produced by traditional forms of authorship, we cannot attribute this initial act of creation and worldbuilding as

a completed TAW, as the events of the game world only become part of the text when played. The TAW is the world as presented by the text, but the work that the dungeon master produces does not meet this criterion. As Cover discusses, also employing Ryan's work, the notes summarizing their creation that a dungeon master brings with them to a gaming session do not represent the TAW, as players may ask questions or pursue lines of inquiry during play that the dungeon master did not foresee or plan for. Therefore, there is no actual textual representation of these parts of the world until they are articulated during the gaming session (2010, p.91). Until the game is played and the text is actually produced, the creation that the dungeon master authors is only an APW, one that serves as a starting point for the formation of the TAW during play, but is subject to change by the players during that formation.

Despite these points, the dungeon master can derive great control over the game experience from their role in this initial creation, as they while they do not create the TAW, they most heavily influence the direction of the TRW. In her discussion, Cover collapses the distinction between the TRW and the TAW, her view being that while in a traditional text the two would be quite different, with the TAW being constituted of the events as the author presents them, and the TRW being the broader world that those events take place in, in a TRPG they are functionally identical, as both the broader world and the events of the story only enter the text through play, and until that point are subject to change by the players (p.91). However, this simplification of the two when discussing TRPGs is a little overzealous. While it is true that both are only created through play, the majority of the TRW is shaped by the dungeon master before play begins. The invention of elements such as landmasses, cities, cultural customs, monarchs, important groups, and the history of the game world is mostly complete before a play session, and while some of this can change during the course of play, meaning that it is still not canonically part of the text until it has been played out, the majority of this content will remain unchanged simply because it is not within the player characters' power to change it. So while the TRW becomes part of the text in the same manner as the TAW, they differ in the amount of power that the dungeon master and the players have over their formation. The distribution of power over the events of the TAW is much more evenly balanced between the two, but players have little to no power over the creation of the TRW.

In actuality, while the TAW is formed primarily from the interaction between the dungeon master and the players, the dungeon master shares more of the TRW's formation with the game designers, as they draw upon rule elements to create the TRW, working with the designer's systems to focus and clarify the setting. In so doing, it allows the dungeon master to impart some power



over determining what breaks the liminoid experience. As discussed, a creation that is inconsistent or clashes with the norms of the setting established by the game can draw players out of the fiction, ruining the feeling of new status granted by liminoid phenomena. But by being able to control elements of the TRW within the designer's framework, they can establish some of the boundaries of what constitutes 'consistency' within the setting. As has been well discussed in video game studies, the space presented in a game assists in constructing the players' understanding of the setting, and the inherent nature of the game world (Jenkins, 2004; Nitsche, 2008, p.3). So, through designing their setting, the dungeon master exerts control over the player's understanding of what's possible. For instance, while they must remain within the boundaries of fantasy, a dungeon master could give their setting the theme of ancient Rome, or of gothic horror, while remaining within the purview of the rules. These settings would impart different allowances and restrictions for the players without being incongruent with the overall fantasy theme, but thereby altering the nature of the game's ritual and the resulting player experience. In this manner, creating the framework for a TRW that is consistent with the rules can help to define the scope and narrow the focus of the broad setting established by the designers, allowing the dungeon master to create a more immersive game world, which in turn strengthens the feeling among the players that their altered status is legitimate. By creating a consistent TRW that functions inside the rules, the dungeon master bolsters the strength of liminoid experience, and clarifies its boundaries.

In addition, while the dungeon master's choice during the process of creation is limited by the rules to an extent, their role as a creator allows them to shape the intended player experience through the world they choose to build. The events of the story will take place within this world, with the players and the dungeon master shaping much of the narrative, but the broader game world, which shapes and effects what the players' characters can do, is a product of the dungeon master's creation. This is important, because games construct a player's understanding of them, teaching them the norms, affordances and expectations that eventually constitute the player's subjectivity, and which in turn influences how the player acts (Tulloch, 2010, p.36). By having control over the TRW, the dungeon master has some power over this construction of players' understanding of the setting, and thus some indirect influence over the actions of the players. Those actions in turn then shape the norms the setting; informing, reinforcing or challenging the dungeon master's TRW, and creating a cycle of influence between player and dungeon master. Therefore, the role of the dungeon master as a creator provides them with control over the game experience through their shaping of the game world, which in turn allows them to influence the scope of the liminoid experience and the expectations of the players. Thus, while they are bound within the rule system

for fear of ruining the game experience, they can also manipulate the setting and ritual boundaries themselves through the formation of the TRW.

## Recitation

The second function of the dungeon master is the recitation of their creation to the players, though ‘recitation’ is not quite an accurate description, implying a more one-sided process than a game of *Dungeons and Dragons* is. During a session of the game, the dungeon master verbally presents the imaginary scenarios, settings and characters they have created to the players, allowing them to interact with the TRW that the dungeon master has created, and navigate the story.

In many ways, the recitation of the story by the dungeon master is similar to storytelling in the oral tradition, where the performer is both a maker and a reciter (Bennett, 2005, p.33). As already discussed, the dungeon master creates or is the ‘maker’ of the story and the game world, and those elements that they create are then verbally conveyed to an audience. Additionally, Bennett states that the singer “Both repeats the song, and invents it as he sings” (p.33). This again can be applied to the dungeon master, who repeats the story that they have created to the players, but at the same time must reinvent it as they recite it. As the dungeon master conveys the story, the players will be taking actions in response to it, which the dungeon master must then account for and include in the narrative. In many parts of their recitation, the dungeon master will simply leave the story up to the players, presenting them with a situation and asking them: “What will you do?” Through the act of recitation to the players, and reacting to the players’ responses, the actual story of the game is created, most times differing significantly from the events of the story that the dungeon master had originally planned.

As a result of the interaction between the player’s suggestions and the dungeon master’s creation, it is during recitation that the TAW is formed. As previously discussed, the TAW of the game is only shaped through play, when the discourse created between the players and the dungeon master alters the dungeon master’s initial creation, which, until that point, had only been an APW (albeit one with a much more likely chance of becoming the TAW). However, as the characters of the players are part of the TAW, this discourse that shapes the TAW also shapes the players’ avatars, which in turn shape the TAW. Sometimes the effect the dungeon master has on the characters is

simple, such as causing them damage or even death, but often it can be more subtle, involving the growth or change of a character's personality as they traverse the narrative. That character will then behave differently throughout the ongoing game, taking actions that shape the game based on this personality shift. Through the dungeon master's recitation, and the actions the players take in response, these two loci of power clash, resulting in the players' characters shaping the dungeon master's story, the dungeon master's story transforming the players' characters in a reciprocating loop.

In order to explain the significance of this in comparison to video games, we should examine Espen Aarseth's *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (2001). In *Cybertexts*, Aarseth outlines the features of what he defines as 'ergodic' literature. In comparison to traditional literature, ergodic literature is defined by the 'nontrivial' effort required to traverse the text (p.1). Most commonly Aarseth uses ergodic literature to refer to video games, but the concept applies to most forms of interactive media, from choose-your-own-adventure novels to *Dungeons and Dragons*. The point most relevant to this thesis however, is Aarseth's establishment of the idea of the 'negotiation plane.' For Aarseth, narrative discourse usually is broken down into two planes of discourse, the event plane, where the narration of events takes place, and the what Aarseth calls the progression plane, which is the unfolding of events as they are received by an implied reader (p.125). In traditional literature, these two planes work in conjunction, as the reader's progression follows the narrated events. However, in ergodic texts, the two planes are divorced from each other, as the reader must work "actively and nontrivially" to make sense of the events (p.125). Importantly, Aarseth also discusses a third plane that games provide, the negotiation plane, which stands between the progression plane and the event plane. Using the example of a text adventure, Aarseth discusses how players in games must negotiate with an intermediary in order to progress (p.125). In the text adventure, the negotiation is between the player and the 'voice' of the game, which the players must interact with using text commands, finding the right commands to be able to progress through the game's plot.

However, the role of the dungeon master complicates this relationship of negotiation between player and game, by providing an entity that can understand context and actively respond to the input of the player. Aarseth points out in his example of the adventure game that in order to achieve the unfolding of events that they desire, the player must find the correct commands that the game's voice responds to. Anything else would be rejected by the game system, as it lacks the capacity for deeper understanding (pp.125-126). While video game systems have obviously

progressed quite far since adventure games the broader point still applies, which is that negotiating with an automated game system will always place the duty of negotiation on the player. A coded system only recognises the commands that it has been programmed to recognise, and cannot infer the player's will from controller inputs. Therefore, it is always the player that must negotiate with the machine, not the machine with the player. However, in *Dungeons and Dragons*, the negotiation plane is substituted with the dungeon master, who has a greater capacity for understanding and responding to the will of the players. Instead of the players negotiating and the machine responding, the players and the dungeon master actively negotiate with each other.

The effect of this alteration to Aarseth's traditional player/game negotiation system is that the input of the players that has not been planned out in advance can be responded to. In regards to narrative events, most video games have their TAW already created from when the player begins the game, or perhaps offer a few set choices that the player may use to make changes to it. In *Dungeons and Dragons* however, as has been discussed, the text only becomes set through the act of play, when the dungeon master's APW is shaped through interaction with the players. As a three-part system of rules, dungeon master and player, instead of a two-part system of player and game, players are granted the advantages of having both a set system of consistent rules and a flexible method of negotiation with the events of the game world. This grants TRPG players much more power over the events of the narrative than video game players, allowing them to take an active role in the formation of the TAW. In turn, the game's text, or the discourse produced through play, then becomes a work of co-authorship between the three parts of the system. The difference between video games and TRPGs that this creates is highlighted by Aarseth when he states: "The tensions at work in a cybertext are" ... "a struggle not merely for interpretative insight, but also for narrative control: "I want this text to tell *my* story, the story that *could not be* without me." In some cases this is literally true. In other cases, perhaps most, the sense of individual outcome is illusory" (Aarseth, 2001, p.4, emphasis theirs). The ability to negotiate actively with the dungeon master through their recitation, rather than passively with the game's coded systems, creates a play experience where the sense of individual outcome is not illusory, and where the players assist in telling a story that could not exist without them.

## Arbitration

Lastly, we have the function of arbitration, through which the dungeon master has both the most and the least control. As mentioned, without an automated system to enforce the rule system the designers have created, that power, and that responsibility, is instead delegated to the dungeon master. While it behoves the players to know the rules and follow them, in cases of rule questions, confusion, or contradictions, it comes down to the dungeon master to decide how the rules should be interpreted. In addition, it was previously mentioned in the recitation section that the players take actions in response to the dungeon master's story, but never described the way in which they take those actions. When a player proposes an idea, such as "I want to sneak past the dragon" or "I want to climb the tower", it is then up to the dungeon master to decide what the player must do in order for their character to succeed. Most commonly this will be rolling a die and seeing if the character is skilled and lucky enough to successfully perform the proposed action, but for simple tasks, often the dungeon master will allow the character to perform them without any action on the part of the player. However, in either case, after the player proposes an action, it is the dungeon master that dictates if and how that action can be resolved. Additionally, the dungeon master has the authority to outright deny impossible or overly complicated suggestions from the players, imposing a limit on the power the players have to control the game world. What can and cannot be done, and what does and does not adhere to the rules, is at the discretion of the dungeon master.

To complicate this control, however, is the fact that the dungeon master is limited by the need to arbitrate in a manner consistent with the existing rules. As discussed in chapter one, part of the important work performed by the rule system of *Dungeons and Dragons* is the establishing of Bowman's rules of reality, the rule framework that ensures that the logics of the game world are consistent, that makes the challenges the players experience feel legitimate, and which brings the image of the game world that the players hold in their imaginations closer in line with each other. Therefore, when the dungeon master makes decisions which change or overwrite the existing rules of the game, they must always be made in the context of the broader rule framework in order to maintain that consistency. Much in the same way that dungeon masters are limited in their role of creation by the boundaries of the liminoid experience, as imposed by the game designers through the rules, they are also limited in their capacity of arbitrators. Because of this, the power that the dungeon master has over the rules is both limitless and very limited, leading to great tension

between the desire to create new rules to match unexpected situations, and the need to remain within the designers' rule framework.

The dungeon master does still have immense control over the rule system however, and so we must reconcile the positions that the dungeon master has both complete power over the rules, and that the rules have complete power over them. In order to do so, it may be best to view the power that they have neither as complete subjugation nor complete control, but rather as a form of 'poaching'. This is an idea expressed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practise of Everyday Life* (1988), which primarily concerns the ways in which mass culture is altered by consumers, and converted to serve the individual. The chapter on 'reading as poaching' is no different, arguing for reading to be seen more as an active process than a passive one. De Certeau takes issue with the implicit image of the public presented by the media, which he sees as being one in which the public mindlessly feast on media content, being moulded, guided and handled by content producers (p.165-166). This is an idea that De Certeau finds unacceptable, and so he instead argues that to consider reading as a passive acceptance of the ideas of others is incorrect (1988, p.169).

In doing so, he expresses a similar position to that outlined by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" (2000), and also by Michel Foucault in his 1969 work "What is an Author" (1980), which can be seen as a response to Barthes. All three texts are focused on challenging previously held ideas of the author's power and the author's place in society, and mark a shift away from traditional conceptions of authorship. However for this discussion, Foucault is not as important as Barthes and de Certeau, as while Foucault primarily concerns himself with the nature of the author, this discussion is focused on the power of the reader. For Barthes, to give a text an author was to impose a limit on the text, forcing the reader to accept a single canon interpretation, and preventing them from interpreting it for themselves (p.128). Barthes sees a text as a "tissue of citations", consisting of various wedded and contested styles of writing, and so an author's work contains multiple layers of meaning, which can only be understood from one perspective: that of the reader (p.129). Because of this, for Barthes, the intent of the author should therefore be secondary to the interpretation of the reader. However, where Barthes and de Certeau differ is that de Certeau acknowledges that the meaning constructed by the reader is still predicated upon the words being read, and so while the reader is not subjugated to the writer's will, neither is the writer's will or intent completely supplanted by the reader's interpretation. Instead, the writer constructs a fixed place in which their views are expressed, and the reader moves across this place, taking what they find valuable from the writer and combining that with their own views

(p.174). In so doing, the reader's place is both inside and outside the writer's place, being subject to the written work, but not subjected by it. Instead, "readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it for themselves" (p.174).

Therefore, a more productive way to view the dungeon master is as a poacher of the rules; not being fully in control of them, but having complete freedom to take what they please from within them. When arbitrating, the dungeon master is not a passive reader, who can simply ignore the game designer's will in the manner that Barthes suggests. Rather, they poach what they require from the game designers in order to facilitate a positive game experience, and in so doing, derive power over them. Because of this, dungeon masters are neither wholly in control of the rules, as they must negotiate the 'fields' that the game designers have laid out for them, but neither are they fully subjugated by the game designers' will, able to take and alter elements of the rules in order to make the game more enjoyable for themselves and their players. This could almost be considered an analog form of video game 'counterplay', as superficially it resembles the definition that Tom Apperly and Michael Deiter present, being a "reconfiguration of gaming within already existing, localized, enacted practices of unruly innovation in digital game play" (2010). However, while this definition outlines counterplay as 'unruly', and de Certeau frames poaching as almost an act of rebellion, or a subversion of the power of others, in *Dungeons and Dragons* this theft of power is actively encouraged by the designers: "The D&D rules cannot possibly account for the variety of campaigns and play styles of every group. If you disagree with how the rules handle something, changing them is within your rights." (Wizards RPG Team, 2008, p.189).

The impact of this intentional placement of the dungeon master as a poacher is that they exist in a position between the players and the rules, arbitrating the relationship between the two. If the rules are insufficient to encompass a player's actions, or they serve to limit a player's agency in an unsatisfactory manner, then the dungeon master may choose to override the rules in their favour. Likewise, if the players attempt to act in a manner incongruent with what is possible within the rules of reality, then the dungeon master is able to deny their actions and work to maintain the consistency of the game world, stopping that player's suggestion from becoming part of the TAW. In this manner, the dungeon master's limitation is passed down to the players, who must negotiate with them to impact the TAW, and so if the dungeon master is limited in his rulings by the need to uphold the game world's consistency, and the consistency of the liminoid experience, then the players are as well. The addition of the dungeon master as a poacher of the rules makes them

almost a hybrid of player and game, being an active participant who must play by the rules of the game system, but also a moderating, limiting force who upholds the intended game experience through the enforcement of the rules.

This position, and the manner in which it functions, is not unique to their role as arbitrator, only most prominent there. Both through creation and recitation, the dungeon master's role is one of tension, pulled between their duty to the rules and their duty to the players. So, while it seems that the dungeon master should have the most amount of control over the game experience, in actuality their power can be subject to a number of different checks and balances. Every act of creation that the dungeon master takes has to fit within the game designers' previously established rule system, meaning that when they attempt to make something original, it will always bear some element of the designers' intent. And when communicating the story to the players, the direct interaction between the two sets of authors can cause the dungeon master's planned story to be altered radically. The most control they have is in the act of arbitration, where they can exert control over both the game designers' rules and the players' actions, but even then the actions they take are taken in relation to the overall rule system, necessitating them to work within the parameters outlined by the game designers. However, despite these limitations, the dungeon master is possibly the most crucial element separating games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* from video games, and they have a vast amount of influence over the facilitation of a positive player experience. Most key to the difference in the resulting game experience is that the addition of a third party between player and game, one that can be actively negotiated with, changes the very role that the players have in the game system, allowing them to enact meaningful change to the events of the TAW. But coupled with the dungeon master's roles in the arbitration and interpretation of the game designers' rules, and the creation of the TRW which is both limited by, and defines the limits of the liminoid, they have a tremendous amount of influence over the game system as a whole, and show how this addition of a third unit to the usually binary game system can cause a significant change to the system's power distribution, and narrative control of the game's players.



## Chapter Three

### The Players

For the purposes of this thesis, players are perhaps the most important area of study, as the difference in player experience is part of what this thesis aims to establish. Although the dungeon master could be considered a player of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the players referred to in this chapter are the participants in the game whose roles most closely resemble those of video game players. They are the consumers of the gaming experience, those who are having the story presented to them so that they may navigate through it. However, given the different mediums, the *Dungeons and Dragons* players' role in the game experience differs from the video game players', and a large part of the reason that tabletop role-playing games have flourished even with the existence of video games may be because of how differently the role of the player functions between the two mediums.

Firstly, we should examine what the players actually do in a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. For the majority of a play session, the players will be interacting solely with the dungeon master, as the dungeon master lays out the events of the story, and the players either state what they wish to have their characters to do, or talk 'in-character', improvising conversations either with other player characters or with the dungeon master's characters. If the dungeon master decides that the actions that the player wants their character to perform have a possibility of failure, these two units then interact with the rules as a dungeon master selects a suitable skill that the player must succeed at, and the player rolls the die to determine if they succeed. Thus the majority of the story is formed from the interaction of these two units. As the players make choices and take actions to navigate the dungeon master's presented scenarios, the text emerges.

Therefore, this final chapter will examine the control that the players have over the narrative, and highlight the curious ways in which power is distributed throughout the whole *Dungeons and Dragons* system. To do so, this discussion will draw upon literature from the previous two chapters, particularly discussions of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a social ritual, the limitations that are enforced by the maintenance of the liminoid experience, and possible worlds theory.

In order to discuss the difference in power and control over the narrative, we can employ another of de Certeau's ideas, that of 'strategies and tactics.' Much like the idea of reading as poaching, de Certeau again seeks to discuss the idea of the ordinary person not merely as a passive entity, but

as active participant functioning within the boundaries established by those with power. To this end, he posits two modes of action, one available to those with power and one to those without. Strategies are the activities of those with power, and consist of managing relations with those exterior to themselves from within a delineated space (1988, p.36). De Certeau notes that the establishment of place that strategies require has three import effects. Firstly, it is a triumph of place over time, as by delineating this space, those who control it may use it as a safe haven to plan from and capitalise on previously gained advantages, which affords them the security to deal with any variable circumstances that arise. Secondly, it is a mastery of place through sight, as they may observe and measure those outside of their space, in order to plan and predict what actions should be taken. Lastly, the use of strategies enables the production of a specific type of knowledge, which is able to transform the ‘uncertainties of history’ into readable, analysable spaces, and is sustained and determined by the power to provide a place of their own (p.36). In contrast to strategies, those without power employ tactics, which are smaller, calculated actions shaped by their lack of delineated space (p.37). Tactics are performed in the space imposed on them by the other, much like the poaching that readers perform, and lack the mastery over time that strategies offer. Instead, tactics operate by taking advantage of opportunities when they present themselves, poaching from the proprietary powers and never being able to keep what their user takes (p.37). As de Certeau sums it up: “Strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power” (p.38-39, emphasis theirs). While these are terms adopted from military usage, de Certeau applies these ideas to various everyday situations, most famously to the notion of walking in the city, where the space has been arranged by those with power, such as city planners and cartographers, but is utilised by the ordinary folk, who employ shortcuts or other unseen spaces to get around. In doing so, they repurpose those spaces established by strategies, stealing for themselves small advantages through the use of tactics.

Applying this concept to video games, we can see that this power distribution is typically quite simple. The game world is established by the game designers, who create the landscape that the players must then navigate in the same manner that city planners create a landscape that walkers must navigate. Typically the space that the player navigates is the space of the other, and it is using the resources of the other that the player gains temporary power over that space.

However, looking at *Dungeons and Dragons* as a game system, it is harder to establish who employs strategies and who employs tactics. As was shown in the first two chapters, the way that power and control are distributed throughout the system complicates the typical two-part system, and so both the game designers and the dungeon master employ a form of strategies; designers through their construction of the all-binding social ritual that the dungeon master and players must function within, and dungeon masters with the power of creation, which allows them to most heavily influence the textual reference world that the players are bound within. In addition, dungeon masters can be seen as employing both strategies and tactics through their role as an arbitrator of the rules, as they are expected to poach from the designers in a tactical manner, but use that poached power to construct a consistent landscape of rules in which the players must operate.

So, the players control the events of the TAW by responding to situations presented by the dungeon master. However, it is important to note that players must primarily exert this control through the actions of their characters. Turning back to Cover, she uses Goffman's framing analysis to separate a tabletop role-playing game session into three frames: the social frame, in which planning and non-game related talk take place, the game frame, where players suggest actions and roll dice for them, and the narrative frame, involving in-character talk by the players and narration of the actions taking place, either by the dungeon master or the player taking the action (Cover, 2010, p.94). However, it is only in the narrative frame where the actual construction of the TAW takes place (p.101). While players can propose actions in the game frame that they wish their characters to take, they only take place when they have been approved by the dungeon master. Only when the action is approved does the character take that action, and the suggestion moves from the game frame to the narrative frame, either by the dungeon master or the player narrating the outcome. As such, the only way for players to access the narrative frame, and thereby affect the TAW, is through the actions of their characters.

However, here we encounter the first limitation to their narrative control, as while it is technically possible for a character to say or do whatever their player likes, giving them limitless agency, in actuality the player is limited by a social expectation that their speech and actions should align with the personality and abilities of the character that they have created. Should the player attempt to access the narrative frame with actions that are either out of character, impossible for that character, rely on knowledge that that character does not possess (i.e. metagaming), or could impede the enjoyment of the other players, their actions will either be second-guessed by the DM,

or simply not allowed. By taking actions inconsistent with their character, the player threatens the sanctity of the ritual that the game has created by in turn making the game world inconsistent. The purpose of the liminoid experience is to allow the players to adopt a new status for themselves, and when undertaken as a group, it forms a sense of *communitas*. However, if a player disregards their adopted status, it draws attention to the fictitious nature of the new statuses that the players have, and collapses the illusion. Therefore, to avoid breaching the boundaries of the ritual, there is an expectation that the players will remain in character, or be gently reminded by the dungeon master that their actions are incongruent with their identity. In this manner, the narrative agency that a player has available to them is tied directly to the type of character they create for themselves, as they are expected to remain in-character to the best of their ability. Therefore any character that they create will impose limitations on how they can affect the events of the game, and the resulting possible game experience.

In addition, the players are also limited by the boundaries of the setting, as determined by the dungeon master. As mentioned in the discussion of the dungeon master, the act of creation gives them control over the TRW, the world which the text claims as factual (Ryan, 1991, p.vii). It is the setting of the game that the events take place in, and also helps define the boundaries beyond which the liminoid experience begins to break down as inconsistencies enter the game. The players are expected to obey the logics of the setting as established by the dungeon master, in the same manner that they would obey the rules of the game. However, the players can repurpose the facts of the setting to their own advantage. For example, a dungeon master might make the decision as to whether their setting includes early firearms or not. The players are expected to perform their characters in accordance with this fact of the game world, but if firearms are available, then the players can then use them to their advantage. However, this limitation is not as absolute as the limitation of character consistency, as while the dungeon master has the most control over the TRW, as discussed, the TRW still does not become part of the text until played out, and can be subject to change later. Therefore, while the players are confined in their actions by the setting, they can also alter the setting through suggestions to the dungeon master, asking to have their character's backstory incorporated into the game world, or even just through table talk and joking.

Even so, in both cases, the players must function within landscapes formed by others, and so during play the players employ tactics, and the dungeon master and the designers, through the application of the rules, employ strategies. The setting of the game, certainly, can be a place that is primarily the dungeon master's own, as they dictate the majority of the TRW, in which the

events of the TAW, including the players' actions, take place. With control of that setting, they can manage interactions with the players, limiting what they can and cannot do by influencing what would break the constancy of the setting or threaten the illusion of high status created by the liminoid experience. This means that the players must navigate the setting that they are placed in, negotiating within a creation co-authored by the dungeon master and the rules, and being expected to act appropriately within that arena. And while the social expectation thrust upon the players is not necessarily a 'place' in the traditional sense, it is nonetheless a boundary that the players have imposed upon them, and in turn, must observe.

However, as so much of what a player can do is limited by what their character can do, it is also important to examine the method by which players create their characters. The players' characters inside the game are a form of avatar, which Larissa Hjorth defines in *Games and Gaming* as being "personal representations used by individuals in digital environments" (p.71). While games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* are traditionally not digital, Hjorth's writing primarily concerns avatars in video games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy*. Avatars in the two mediums do function differently, but the fundamental ideas are the same. The avatar is the method that the player uses to present themselves, or parts of themselves, in the fictional context, and occupies "a satellite space in between the player's sense of self and the community it inhabits" (p.84). In this manner, it is seen as an extension of the player's 'offline' identity, the presence of which increases a player's sense of immersion by informing their method of gameplay and their interaction with other players (p.73).

In regards to how avatar identity is constructed in games such as *World of Warcraft* compared to games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, there are some differences. Primarily, an avatar in a game such as *World of Warcraft* is able to represent itself through its appearance, granting other players a rudimentary understanding of the identity being portrayed. Because of this, much of a player's identity is bound up in their appearance, and how they choose to present themselves becomes an integral factor in how their personality is conveyed (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Li, Liao, & Khoo, 2013). In contrast, most characters in *Dungeons and Dragons* will have no accurate visual reference for their appearance, lending a greater importance to role-playing to portray their identity. Secondly, outside of specialised *World of Warcraft* servers or games such as *Second Life*, there is far less of an expectation to roleplay a consistent character, or even role-play at all, in video games, given the generally lower amount of narrative agency video games offer compared to TRPGs.

However, in general, video game avatars and player characters in *Dungeons and Dragons* are similar, and Bowman raises a few of the same points in *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* (2010), particularly in regards to the expression of identity. Bowman offers a typology of nine different type of *Dungeons and Dragons* character personas, and discusses how all of them represent or exist in context to the player's identity (p.163-176). She also notes that "the playful enactment and negotiation of identity is a primary attribute of role-playing games" (p.154).

Therefore, in the *Dungeons and Dragons*' character creation process, the avatar being created expresses a fragment of the player's personality, but that fragment will be shaped by the character creation process itself. The character partially consists of the player's own identity, usually expressed through an original concept the player might have going into the creation. But the player must negotiate that concept or piece of their identity with the rules of the game in order to create a playable character. As stated previously, the player primarily gains narrative agency through their character, and their character's actions are limited by their abilities and personality, which are decided in the character creation process. In the character creation process, the player assigns their character a race, a class, and spends points to determine their characters strengths and weaknesses. However, the players must make their characters using the choices provided to them in the rulebooks, as discussed in chapter one, in order to ensure that the player does not breach the boundaries of the liminoid experience that the rules established. The rules also serve to keep all of the characters that the players make mechanically balanced, so that the characters are of approximately equal skill and strength. In doing so, they ensure that the sense of *communitas*, the feeling of equality between all participants in the ritual, is maintained. However, because of these mechanical limitations, the resulting character will not always resemble the original concept or idea that the player held in their mind. However, their personality does become more apparent as it is set in stone through the creation process, defining their place and skills in the game world. "The character sheet gives the player an initial sense of the strengths and weaknesses of their persona, and sometimes establishes idiosyncrasies that work to enhance role-playing and deepen interaction" (Bowman, 2010, p.159). Every decision in the character creation process will define what the character can and cannot do mechanically. Both the talents and shortcomings of a character will shape the character's personality, and how they can interact with the narrative frame.

Outside of the limitations imposed by the protection of the liminoid and *communitas* experiences, this is not particularly different from the creation and application of avatars in computer role-playing games. Naturally, avatar creation in video games is quite broad and varied, from some

games where players simply choose their avatar's appearance to others where they may choose the avatar's skills and personality. However, for computer role-playing games that are heavily influenced by tabletop role-playing games, or can even trace their lineage back to them such as *Dragon Age* or *Fallout*, often character creation follows these same TRPG principles. The skills that a player chooses for their character at the beginning of the game shape the actions that they can take later on, and so no matter the player's intent when playing the game, certain actions, and in some instances certain narrative paths, will not be accessible due to the skill set, background, or personality of their character. In a similar manner to characters created in a TRPG system, what the players can or cannot have their character do mechanically is influenced heavily by the process of character creation. Both the video game player and the *Dungeons and Dragons* player have their avatars shaped by the rules, forcing them to act within a framework dictated by the designers.

In fact, in terms of power dynamics so far, it seems that TRPG players are just as subjugated by the strategies of game designers as video game players, the only difference being that in games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, the role of the designer is split between the dungeon master and the designers of the rules. As stated previously, the power distribution, and the application of strategies and tactics to video games is quite simple, with the game itself being a landscape created by the designer that the players must move through. However, if we simply substitute the role of the designers with the dungeon master and the rules, are TRPGs that different? The dungeon master and the rules of the game create and define the nature of the setting, with the rules establishing the basis of the liminoid experience, and the dungeon master designing the TRW to tailor that experience. Players must then experience that world and traverse it in a manner that resembles de Certeau's tactics, being confined by the setting and using what they can within that landscape to temporarily seize small amounts of power for themselves. So are TRPG players and video game players all that different when it comes to power relations?

On the surface, the roles of players in both mediums do seem quite similar. As the players of both video games and TRPGs are the 'readers' of ergodic literature, they therefore share many key traits inherent to consumers of this type of medium. Both strive for a sense of narrative control, but both are limited by the systems in which they are functioning. It is easy to see how the players are kept in check by the system, having landscapes of rules and active arbitration by the dungeon master holding them back, ensuring that they do not breach the borders of the liminoid experience and collapse the ritual. The designers and the dungeon master are able to enact strategies to prevent this, influencing the actions of the players, but what influence do the players have over the

other parts of the system? As previously mentioned, players of both mediums interviewed stated that TRPGs offered more flexibility and freedom (Cover, 2010, p.45), and Cover marks the key difference between what the two mediums offer players as the difference between interactivity and agency, stating that “For players to truly have agency, they must shape the system themselves” (p.46 - 47).

As agency is so pivotal to this discussion of control over the system, it is useful to examine two different theorists’ discussions of agency, one concerning video games, the other concerning TRPGs. First is Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (2017), first published in 1997. Though Murray works in the broader field of digital media, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* is referenced heavily throughout video game studies for its discussion of agency, and is therefore a useful lens into how video game theorists view the concept. Murray’s work is an examination of the affordances that computing technologies offers to storytelling, and an analysis of how interactive mediums can transform narratives. However, in her fifth chapter, she examines the topic of agency, defining it as “The satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (p.159). For Murray, agency does not typically accompany narratives, and it is only in the digital format that participants can dynamically alter a narrative in progress, as they have control over the system that the narrative takes place within. Comparing agency to dancing, she states that when using a computer, we can be both the dancer, who follows the steps being called out to them, and the caller of the dance (p.161). Murray is also quick to draw a distinction between agency and interactivity, seeing the term interactivity as too vague and broad. For Murray, activity alone cannot constitute agency, as the activity allowed by a game can in some instances be so small or limited as to be meaningless. In such cases, the players’ actions “have an effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players’ intentions” (p.161). One form of agency in digital media that Murray discusses extensively is spatial navigation, or the ability of the player to simply move through virtual landscapes. The ability to move through a virtual space is pleasurable because there is a sense of significant action associated with it, especially in games where the story is often tied to the navigation of space (p.165). As such, the video game player’s mastery of the narrative comes from a mastery of space, though Murray does lament that this form of agency moves the player towards a single solution or ending, limiting their options. Curiously, although Murray does not discuss tabletop role-playing games, she does mention live-action role-playing, or LARPing, which she says offers players a larger amount of freedom in improvising stories, and many ways of accomplishing their goals, due to the game master overseeing the activity of the players (p.186).



Second is Jessica Hammer's discussion of agency in "Agency and Authority in Role-Playing 'Texts'" (2007) in which she analyses agency and authorship both in computer role-playing games and tabletop role-playing games. For Hammer, agency describes the capabilities a player has when taking actions within a game space, and authority is the ability to judge and enforce the outcomes of those actions (p.72). The interaction between the two is complicated, as Hammer states that "It is easy to see both within a mutually reinforcing context. However, agency and authority are neither identical to one another, nor are they directly opposed. One can have agency without authority, which might be the ability to try many things but without any means to impose one's own will if resisted. One can also have authority without agency, lacking the ability to initiate, but able to decide the results of others' actions" (p.72). In terms of role-playing games, Hammer sees role-playing games as needing to address questions of agency differently than traditional texts. Traditional texts are "fixed in form but fluid in interpretation" (p.73), whereas role-playing texts are created and negotiated through the act of play, as Cover also discussed, allowing all participants to affect the way that the story progresses. Hammer also breaks agency in role-playing games down into three forms, which are defined by their limitations: Character agency, which is limited by what the player's character can do, in a similar manner to what has already been discussed, participant agency, which is limited by the player's ability to participate in the story, such as a strong, fighting-oriented character not being able to participate because the story is about societal politics, and framework agency, which is limited by what is possible within the framework of rules that surround the game (pp.74-77).

Hammer's work, being focused on role-playing, is much more relevant to this thesis than Murray's, but what is most interesting between the two theorists is their different views on authorship within an interactive environment. For Murray, who writes primarily from a digital media studies background, and more heavily references video games, interactors are not authors. While there are video game theorists who argue that a player is a form of author (Cassidy, 2011; Mateas & Stern, 2005), Murray states that "there is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself." (2017, p.187). While interactors can create aspects of digital stories, they only act within the possibilities that have been established by the originating author, who sets into stone everything they can do through writing and programming. The procedural authorship allowed by electronic media involves writing the rules for the participant's interaction with the system, and dictating what will happen in response to the participant's actions (p.187). Therefore, while the player could be the author of a particular performance within the system, that must be distinguished from the originating author of the system,

making the performance agency, not authorship. (pp.187-188). However, Hammer, writing from a role-playing games perspective, sees things differently. Although she acknowledges the designer of the system as the primary author, in a similar manner to Murray, she still sees the participants as authors in their own right, with dungeon masters being ‘secondary authors’ and players being ‘tertiary authors’, as they assist in the creation of the story through the act of play, and give life to the story (2007, pp.71-72).

This distinction between how agency and authorship are viewed in relation to video games, and how they are viewed from the perspective of role-playing games, speaks to the distinction between how the players function within the two mediums, and to the differences in player experience. Therefore, with this understanding of agency and authorship as a basis, we can return to the ideas of how players interact with the TAW through the narrative frame, as well as the role that their avatars play, in order to show how TRPG players have more agency than their video game counterparts, and how this leads to differences in the two systems’ power structures.

Firstly, although players are limited in their access to the narrative frame, when they do gain access they can author the narrative in ways that video game players cannot. As both Cover and Hammer discuss, the text of a *Dungeons and Dragons* session is only created when the game is played, and it is a combination of the dungeon master’s recitation and the player’s in-character actions that create the canon events of the narrative (Hammer, 2007, p.71; Cover, 2010, p.91). This grants them a far greater amount of agency, bordering on actual authorship, over the events of the story, as they are including elements outside of the possibilities established by the primary and secondary authors. In comparison, as Murray suggests, video game players cannot achieve this same level of agency, as the game system that they are confined by has already been authored, and all of the possible actions, objects and potential outcomes within that system are fixed (Murray, 2017, p.187). A video game is an already completed text, whereas a story told in a TRPG system is only completed when played. This variance in the player’s actual control over story events is due to the addition of the dungeon master, as discussed in chapter two, because players are now negotiating with a system that can react actively to their input. This element of active negotiation is the key difference between the player experience in video games and in TRPGs, as with the addition of an active participant to negotiate with, the players are transformed from active agents to co-authors.

Secondly, as discussed, the limitations that the players do have enforced on their characters serve to keep them consistent within the boundaries of the liminoid experience, and fairly balanced in terms of character ability in order to maintain the feeling of *communitas*. However, once the players are in-character, they have the power to shape the setting through the actions of their avatar, and re-define the borders of the liminoid experience. If a player's character simply has a gun in a setting without firearms, then that is an inconsistent element that will affect the immersion into the ritual experience. However, if that character slowly through the course of play becomes the first person in that world to invent a gun, then that becomes part of the TRW that the game takes place in, and from then on is consistent with the setting. The player's avatar is initially limited by the rules, but this should not be viewed as a limitation to their agency. Instead, these limitations grant the player's character a place within the world as stands at the beginning of the game, ensuring that they are consistent with the starting conditions of the setting, but once the character has entered the setting, and so long as they can remain in-character, the player's avatar becomes a tool through which they can affect change in the world. They are shaped by their experiences within the game's ritual, but also shape the acceptable boundaries of the ritual itself. Thus, the player's avatar, while constructed within the game designer's system, becomes a place from which they can strike out at the world, creating their own path through the narrative without threatening the consistency that protects the liminoid experience.

The result of this system is not only a game experience that allows for greater narrative control, but also a gradual increase in player agency as the game progresses. As stated above, Hammer lists three types of agency: Character, participant, and framework, which are defined by their limitations. However, the longer a character exists within the game world, the more each type of agency increases. Character agency is a limitation to the player's actions due to their character's mechanical abilities or personality (Hammer, 2007, pp.74-75), but as a character levels up and progresses through the story, their abilities develop, changing or becoming stronger, and allowing them to perform in ways previously denied to them. In a similar manner, their personality can change over the course of the story, and in response, the dungeon master will no longer prohibit or question actions that fit their new personality. Participant agency applies to situations where a player simply cannot participate in the story (pp.75-76), but the longer a character remains a part of the game world, the more connections they have to that setting, allowing them to participate in unexpected ways. A player who is unable to deal with a certain challenge on their own may call in a favour that an NPC from a past session owed them, or simply use their accumulated resources to help overcome it. Finally, framework agency, which is limited by the rules, is increased in the

manner discussed above. The player shapes the world as they progress through it, changing what is possible within the setting, and in so doing expanding the limitations of what would disrupt the liminoid experience. And as the boundaries of the liminoid are expanded, the rules that reinforce those boundaries will be altered or removed, granting the players more agency within the rule framework.

Turning back to the discussion of de Certeau, this means that while the player is subject to functioning within the landscapes constructed by others, as they create their character within the game designer's parameters, the players are not employing tactics. As mentioned, one of the key features of tactics is that unlike strategies, which can be used to stockpile 'resources', tactics do not keep anything for themselves. "It takes advantage of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it can stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep." (de Certeau, 1988, p.37). However, in the case of their avatar, while the player does have to operate in a 'place' imposed on them by another, they keep the power they take from the rules and use it to construct a character for themselves, which becomes their locus of power. From this locus, the player's character can affect the dungeon master's story and the boundaries of the liminoid experience in a manner atypical of tactics. For the player, character creation is not a process of tactics, but one of poaching, taking what serves them best from the fields of rules, and using it to construct a place of power for themselves.

Because of this, while they are created within the parameters of the rules, the resulting character employs both strategies and tactics. And while the designers of the rule system can be seen as employing strategies, in the same manner as video game designers, they actively encourage the subversion of their power. Likewise, the dungeon master can also be seen as an employer of strategies, having a constructed story and world for the players to navigate. But importantly, so too have the players. The game system provides a player with enough flexibility to choose the starting limitations for their character, in order to exist in a manner consistent with the rest of the game world, and in doing so, they "distinguish (their) "own" place,"... "the place of (their) own power and will, from an "environment." (de Certeau, 1988, p.36) Their 'place' is their character, formed from a hybrid of their identity and the game's rules, and from their place they have power over the story, exerting their will to alter the events of the TAW, and slowly gaining more power as their character becomes a fixture of the game's setting. While the player characters exist inside the landscape constructed by the dungeon master, the player's ability to actively negotiate with them, as well as seize narrative control and take the story in unexpected directions shows that they exist

outside the dungeon master's control. Through their characters, players are able to exert their will over the story, the world, and even the experience constructed by the game system, in a manner that video game players cannot.

In conclusion, the power dynamic between the players, the dungeon master, and the rules of *Dungeons and Dragons* differ from that of a traditional video game, as players of TRPGs are offered a level of narrative control that video game players are not. The addition of the dungeon master to the system allows both for active negotiation of the game in progress, allowing for spontaneous creation of narrative elements not present in the dungeon master's plans, but also for the creation of the TAW and TRW during play, rather than having these established beforehand through the writing and programming of game designers.

The agency that players have is not without limitations however, as it must be exerted through the actions of their avatar, which can be denied by the dungeon master, typically because they are out-of-character. In so doing, the dungeon master attempts to protect the fragile consistency of the game's setting, which in turn supports the continued existence of the liminoid experience, through which players experience temporarily changed social statuses. Without the consistency of the setting, however, the illusion of status would fall apart, as the players would feel as if their actions were meaningless. Therefore, both the dungeon master and the rule system attempts to enforce consistency on the players, and in order to do so, must employ strategies to keep the players limited. For the dungeon master, this is through the arbitration of player actions, but the rule system keeps the players consistent through the character creation process, which limits the form of the player's avatar in the game world, and dictates how they can function.

This also grants the players a place of power that they control within the game world, as once the character creation process has ensured that the character is appropriate for the setting, and the dungeon master keeps a watchful eye over the characters for any out-of-character behaviour, the players are free to shape the game world as they see fit, slowly redefining the parameters of what breaks the liminoid experience. Unlike video game players, the players in games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* are not subjected to participating in the game through the use of tactics, but are active users of strategies, becoming co-authors of the story, and amassing ever greater amounts of agency and freedom within the system as the game progresses.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to show how the three-part game system that *Dungeons and Dragons* has made standard among TRPGs challenges the traditionally binary divide between player and game that is often implied throughout game studies, and demonstrate that such system shapes the resulting player experience into one that differs significantly from that typically found in video games, offering far more player agency, as well as a unique form of social interaction. From the main body of this work, we can make some deductions in regards to these research aims. Firstly, the three-part game system typical of TRPGs allows for the difference in player experience due to a number of small factors, but most key is the installation of the dungeon master as an active negotiator. It is this factor that transforms the role of the player from mostly consumptive to largely productive, as they are no longer limited to working within the scripted parameters of the code. With the introduction of the dungeon master, the players are able to have their actions be recognised and acknowledged, and their unique contributions become part of the ongoing text. In addition, the liminoid experience made possible by the rule system allows a player to experience a feeling of statelessness or altered status usually found in religious rituals and coming of age ceremonies, as well as a feeling of unity and fraternity with the other members of the player group, with whom they are sharing the experience. Secondly, we can see from the complex interlocking mechanisms of the TRPG system that such a system could not be encapsulated within a binary. Examining games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* using the dichotomy of player and game is simply insufficient, as the dungeon master is just as much of a player within the game designer's rules as the players are, but also take over much of the responsibility that is traditionally assigned to game designers. In addition, with players having their own locus of power from which they can exert control over the dungeon master, granting them some authority over the text being produced, they take on some of the responsibilities of a game designer as well.

To examine the chapters and what they demonstrate more closely, the first chapter of this thesis showed how the rules function to create a complex social ritual, which allows the players of the game to experience the feeling of altered status, as well as a feeling of equality amongst the members of the gaming group. These feelings, described by Turner as the liminoid and *communitas*, are created by the designers' rule system, which allows the dungeon master to conduct the game in a logically consistent game world, increasing player immersion and providing them with a meaningful challenge to be overcome. However, amongst TRPG theorists, there is not much recognition of the

importance of the rules as separate to the dungeon master, nor a usage of the liminoid, which seems crucial to explaining much of the unique game experience TRPGs offer. Going forward, the currently limited field of TRPG studies needs to recognise the importance of the underlying three-part game system that the medium bears, and focus more on understanding TRPGs as complicated systems of interactions between these parts. In particular, the understanding of the TRPG system as a form of liminoid phenomena can allow researchers to more deeply examine how the three-part system exists to enhance and protect the feeling of altered status and social separation that occurs during play. While this thesis has outlined the basic manner in which the rules construct and maintain such an experience, and the roles that both the dungeon master and the rules have inside the game to shape and protect the feelings of altered status and equality among participants generated, there is much room for future studies to examine the depths of the social reconfigurations inherent to these sorts of games, and how the statuses of characters in the TAW can affect the statuses of their players in the AW, or vice-versa, questions which were outside the scope of this thesis. Additionally, the terminology employed by possible worlds theory in chapter two can be of great value in explaining the various states that the game can exist in, and how the rules, dungeon master, and players each generate their own APW, which combine to influence the TAW of the game during play. By acknowledging the multitude of possible worlds held in the imaginations of the participants, and examining their impact on the game, we can begin to shift discussions away from simple notions of in-game and out-of-game, and instead focus on the ways in which individual players' views on reality affect their perception of the game world, and in turn how they act in response to those views.

The second chapter served to outline the three-part system of creation, recitation and arbitration that constitutes the role of the dungeon master in the game. However, in all three roles, the power of the dungeon master is never absolute, and must be shared with either the game designers or the players. When creating, the dungeon master must always create a setting that functions inside the boundaries of the liminoid experience established by the designers, when reciting, the dungeon master must negotiate with the players in order to form the text, and when arbitrating, the rules that the dungeon master creates must always be created in context to the game's existing rules. However, despite this, it is the addition of the dungeon master, and the splitting of the game into three parts, that creates the unique play experience of *Dungeons and Dragons*. The addition of the dungeon master adds a figure who the players can negotiate with within the game system, and who can react to their input, allowing for the players to enact actual, meaningful change over the game's narrative. The addition of the dungeon master also shows that for the field of game

studies, binary systems of player and game are becoming insufficient to explain the full complexities of gaming systems. While TRPGs have existed since the early 1970s, game studies literature has often overlooked the ways in which the three-part game system alters the styles and experiences of play typical to video games. However, these three-part gaming systems are not unique to TRPGs, and while they are most noticeable in games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, these systems exist to a lesser extent in video games as well. If we consider games such as *Garry's Mod*, *Mario Maker*, or even *Minecraft*, games which allow players to construct game experiences for other players within them, then we can see elements similar to TRPG systems. Participants use the power that the game provides to construct a gameplay experience inside the game, and in so doing, they become like the dungeon master, poaching power from the designers to create a pleasurable experience for other players. Even more broadly than that however, we can see this system reflected in emergent practices of counterplay among gaming communities. If we take the example of speedrunning competitions, we can see a clear three-part system between the game, the players, and the rules imposed by the competition to influence and monitor styles of play. Rules that, given the presence of judges, can be negotiated with, in the same manner as a dungeon master. Perhaps due to the rising popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons*, or perhaps simply as a continuing trend of the Web 2.0 era, both player communities and game developers are adapting games to function as three-part systems, marrying computer graphics with the freedom such systems provide to make use of the immersive factors inherent in both. Because of this, it is now more important than ever that game studies move away from implicit binary notions of the player/game relationship, and towards an examination of games as complicated systems of interaction in order to properly examine not just TRPGs, but emerging trends within the video game industry and video game cultures.

The final chapter discussed the players themselves, and how the three-part game system granted them far more power over the events of the game than video game players traditionally have. Most importantly, the ability to negotiate in real-time with the dungeon master allows not just for narrative agency, but for the players to become co-authors of the text. Players are able to co-opt the power of the game system and the dungeon master to overcome their limitations to agency, carving a space out in the game that is uniquely theirs, and from where they can enact meaningful change across the rest of the game system. Because of this, players in TRPGs defy traditional binary conceptions of power, and highlight how important it is to recognise how a shift away from binary conceptions could be beneficial to broader discussions in cultural studies as well. Discussions of power, particularly like the ideas expressed by de Certeau in regards to reading as poaching, and strategies and tactics, are often framed in terms of a binary opposition between those with power



and those without. However, as has been shown through the dungeon master and the players, often the configurations of power are far more complex than this simple binary. Dungeon masters exist in a position where they have power and employ strategies, but the power that they have only exists inside the landscape created by the game designers, who have more power than them, but no way to actively employ it. Players, meanwhile, seem like they should be the most powerless, having to act within frameworks created by both the dungeon master and the game designers, and yet they gain power through continued play, slowly amassing it as they level their characters, until they can enact change on the TAW and TRW. De Certeau's model primarily assumes a dichotomy between those with and without power, and can at times be too simplistic a way of considering power dynamics in media or in society. While he does aim to demonstrate the complexities of how power can function, such as through the powerless repurposing power for their own needs, these theories still posit that there are those with power and those without, who almost exist as quantifiably different entities in regards to their available actions. Instead of these two extremes, it may be more productive to view power as a sliding scale, particularly when, as has been shown, so often these systems of power are interconnected and dynamic, either reinforcing and challenging each other, or being constantly in flux. In a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*, who has power can change from moment to moment based on the context of the situation at hand. It is because of this that more binary models of power dynamics need to be reconsidered, with power itself being viewed as a complicated and ever-shifting system.

Furthermore, the TRPG system demonstrates how play, which has been considered a mostly consumptive act in video games, can be largely productive, with TRPG players taking up an active role in the authorship of the game, creating story elements that would not exist without them. This reflects a broader trend not just in video games, but in many media consumption practises in society. Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organising Without Organisations* (2008) and Axel Bruns' *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (2008), show that increasingly users are becoming producers through the power of social media and the rise of Web 2.0. Binaries such as producer and consumer are being dissolved, and replaced with complicated systems of interlocking power dynamics thanks to new methods of mass communication and broadcast media, which have allowed users to share ideas, voice opinions, or create grand social movements. It is easier now than ever before for users to express authorial power through social media, and given such an era, re-thinking traditional binaries in terms of deeper, more complicated systems is a necessity. No longer can we draw clear divides between readers and authors, creators

and audiences, or games and players. Instead, we must consider how to escape these simple notions, and examine the rich, complex webs of power and social interaction that lie beneath them.

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